**Return to Amestris**

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With the Roma

If you want to change the things around you, you first must change.
If you want peace in the world, first you must be peaceful.
If you want to feed the multitude, first you must feed yourself.
If you want happiness for all living beings, then you first must be a fountainhead of joy.
No worthwhile work can be done by a man who is starving.

-- The Alchemy of Love

“De Develeski, the Mother of us all, has been here since the very beginning of time. She existed before God did. It is She who shelters us, and She who one day will take our bodies back. But She did not make us.

“When God appeared on earth he had the Devil by his side. They played like two young brothers. The Devil made two statues out of clay. They were the first man and the first woman. God said, “You can’t do this, Devil!” He breathed into them and two trees sprung up nearby. They had no fruit. God breathed again and a wind blew. The trees touched, and when they did, the statues were made flesh and the trees were laden with sweet golden pears.”

I.

* Germany, 1924. Older Brother 19, Younger Brother 18 *

The stars hung low over the cold woods. Nothing moved; nothing sang. It was March, and the chill of winter was lingering.

In a clearing some distance off the road and hidden to passersby, a dilapidated truck was parked. Around it, several tents had been pitched. The assorted clutter surrounding them showed that the travellers had been there for some time.

A small group was gathered in the largest tent, sitting around the warmth of a little cast iron cookstove—two men, two women, and three children of varying ages. This was the Patemani familia, but, unusually, there were two outsiders with them.
Uncle ceased his story with a knowing wink at Devi, a young widow who teased him endlessly, and Alphonse Elric blushed a little. Everyone knew that story, but there was more to it, involving divinely-sanctioned sex and the insatiability of women. Uncle’s deliberate omission of the ending was somehow risqué in itself.

Devi giggled, and Al found himself smiling. He was a handsome young man, old enough to be considered an adult in most circles but not here, as he was unmarried. He had large gray eyes and reddish hair pulled back in a ponytail, and he sat hunched forward, holding his hands to the warmth of the stove as he nursed a mild cough. Every now and then he glanced around to see if his older brother had decided to come in from the cold.

The Elrics had been traveling with the Roma since the previous year, when Alphonse had made his desperate leap across the worlds from the land of Amestris, their home, to join his brother here, in a parallel reality. Ed was roaming the land looking for the most powerful mechanical weapon ever devised, and for its creator Huskisson, a criminal who had escaped their homeworld to land here in 1920’s Germany.

But Ed’s quest had been hampered by strange nightmares. They were debilitating, leaving him with migraines that frequently rendered him helpless. Of late they had been striking him more often, and Alphonse now feared he was having another attack.

“Uncle?” ventured Radhika. She was a lively little girl about ten years of age, dressed in a pretty colored blouse and a red layered skirt. Her face was bright. “Tell us how you saved me when I was little.”

“Oh, we’ve heard that a million times before!” scoffed her older brother, Andreas.

Al had heard it too, but not from the dragon’s mouth.

Uncle took a protracted draw on his ornate pipe. “That story starts a long, long time before you were born,” he said. “Young Simionce there—‘he nodded at the tall, stern man who sat still and straight by the tent flap—‘Simionce and Devi are siblings, as you know, and I’m their father’s twin. Old Simionce was a good brother to me—the best brother in the world. We made a promise between us that if something ever happened to one of us, the other would take care of his family. Well, something did happen, and now I’m making good on my promise. When I rescued you from the gadje, Radhika, that was part of it.”

Gadje, Al knew, was the Romani term for all those not Roma, who lived in one place and so often passed judgement on the Gypsy people. It was not unknown for them to seize Roma children, sometimes by trickery but more often by passing cruel laws. These they would raise as their own, until all their love of freedom had been leached from them and they forsook their own kith and kin. Then the Gadje pointed fingers and claimed that the Roma were the child-stealers.

“One day nine years ago, the German police came into our camp to take you away, Radhika. They had guns and dogs. Your father Hans tried to fight back, and you know what they did.”

“They shot him,” said Radhika.

“Yes. They killed him, and they stole you out of your mother’s arms. But I vowed I’d get you back. When I learned where you’d been taken I stole you back again, like a horse thief in the dead of night.” Uncle nodded firmly, rightly, and there was a thoughtful silence. Devi’s eyes were dark now as she tended the stove.

Nodding politely, Al got up from his warm seat and went in search of his brother.
He found him sitting on a fallen tree, watching the stars. Less than five feet tall when out of his shoes, Edward cut a striking figure in the pale light. With a thick braid of blond hair and strange golden eyes, there was an elfin quality to his fine features that had led Uncle to proclaim with a straight face that he was a creature of Faerie. Even more intriguing, his right arm and left leg had both been replaced by functional artificial limbs of unusual design. Devi’s children loved to tease, and it had become a game among them to see who could remove them when he was sleeping.

“Hey, big brother.” Alphonse hoisted himself up to sit beside him. "Are you OK?"

“Yeah. I guess.”

“I was hoping that headache was letting up. Did you have another nightmare?”

"Yeah. It's the same scene over and over."

Al said nothing, but waited for him to continue.

"There are these green islands in a gray sea," Ed said finally. "And two cities with thousands of people. It looks like it would be a happy place if there weren't a huge battle going on. Then the cities and the people are just-- blown away. It's the uranium bomb. I keep seeing it happen, Al. It's like it's trying to tell me something."

"Mm." An eerie feeling had come over Alphonse as Edward described the scene. At last he said, "I'm pretty sure you're turning out to be a Precog, brother. You’re definitely seeing the future.”

Edward regarded him in some surprise. Al had always been a mature soul, but he had never before shown this level of confidence and authority. Ed was still not used to the idea of him being a Spirit Alchemist, though he had to admit the progression had been a logical one.

“And I believe that bomb is here for a reason,” Al continued. “It wanted to be here, or its passage over wouldn’t have been so easy.”

“Bombs don’t want anything, Al,” Ed said tiredly.

Alphonse shrugged. “I think you know what I mean.”

Ed nodded, then winced.

“You’re swimming upstream,” Al said gently.

“You keep telling me that. But what else can I do?”

“Well, I’d try to persuade Noa to read you again. Premonitory stuff is tricky. I don’t usually mess with it. It can do some pretty weird stuff to you if it doesn’t all come out.”

“You know she won’t. The Roma don’t do ‘fortune telling’ for their own people, and she considers us part of the tribe.”

It was true. Since Ed had rescued her at the carnival, Noa had insisted that the Elrics come with her and live with her familia. The rest of the little band had, to put it mildly, not been so keen on letting a couple of outsider boys into their everyday life. Realizing how difficult it would be to be accepted, the brothers, homeless as they were, had correctly surmised that their futures lay in their knowledge. In the course of an afternoon, aided only by items they’d scavenged from a dump, they had put together a carnival-style magic show that had amazed everyone who saw it, Roma and gadje alike. Seeing the brothers’ earning potential, Uncle and Simionce had reluctantly agreed to let them stay for
an unspecified period of time. The Elrics had been thankful, and they worked hard to earn their keep.

Later, upon studying the history of Noa’s people, simple gratitude had turned to a deeper appreciation, for the story of the Roma was the story of racial and religious persecution like no other. Yet Noa trusted the Elrics, strangers to her insular culture, implicitly—even letting them tend her tiny new child, born late that autumn to Simionce.

Al shifted his feet up on the fallen tree, wrapping his arms around his knees. "I wish I had some other ideas, but I don’t. What I can’t figure out is why you didn’t show this precognition gift way before now. It’s very strange."

Ed smiled a little crookedly. "You’re not thinking I’ve cracked or something, are you?"

The direct question caught Alphonse off guard and he stuttered. Edward stared at him, then turned away.

"Brother, no!" Al touched his arm. "No! I don’t. Really. You're just a little different here than you were in our world. I'm only trying to figure it out."

Ed’s voice was a little distant. "Don’t worry. I won’t get mad."

“That’s good. Are you coming to bed?"

“I guess.” Sighing, Ed slid down off the tree, Alphonse following. The camp was quiet as they slipped across the clearing. Simionce, who had the first watch, nodded at them as they passed by.

Though they had their living quarters in one of the tents, the two brothers had taken of late to sleeping in the truck, partly to stop Ed’s automail from disappearing. The kids were only teasing him, but without his artificial limbs Ed was truly helpless and the joke was growing old. Supplying themselves with plenty of warm blankets and a candle or two to heat up the well-enclosed space, the brothers were as happy sleeping in the sturdy, weatherproof protection of the vehicle’s cab as they would have been in a canvas tent, and they had much more privacy. None of their hosts seemed to mind this reclusive behavior in the slightest, perhaps attributing it to Edward’s frequent headaches and his need for silence—or perhaps just glad that the two gadje weren’t occupying their space any more than necessary.

Ed just had set his hand on the truck door when he turned back to glance at his brother, who had begun to laugh softly. Al was ducking a cloud of what looked like unearthly fireflies. "Look, Ed!" he said. “The spirits are out tonight!”

Ed blinked, but he wasn’t hallucinating. As Al extended his hands in a welcoming gesture, the flight of phosphorescent wings flickered around him, each creature appearing briefly out of the darkness only to vanish again. Edward joined his brother in the middle of the vortex, turning slowly around, his face alight with wonder. For a few moments it felt like they were children again as more and more of the mysterious creatures swarmed around them. "I've never seen them this thick before," Al said. "I've never seen anything like this at all."

“These are the souls of the dead. They’ve come to say hello."

“There must be an old graveyard nearby.” Ed shuddered, feeling the cold. Al’s smile was kind and benevolent as he surveyed the mysterious entities, and Ed felt humbled by his brother’s fearlessness.

“Not a graveyard,” Al said. “People don’t die in those. We must be on an old battlefield, or the site
of some natural disaster. I wonder who they were.”

Moments later, a small cloud covered the full moon. As it did, the fireflies became dull brown moths and vanished. Al dropped his coat to the cool, moist grass and flung himself down on it, coughing a little. Ed stretched out beside him, propped on his elbows. "You catching a cold, little brother?"

"Nah. Did you see how they disappeared?"

"Yeah."

"They went back home to the bardo." Al picked at a blade of grass. "I wish we could go back home."

"I know." Edward already knew how the conversation was going to go. He took his duty to protect his younger brother very seriously, and he wished above all that he could find a way to send him safely home again. Still, Al’s presence was a great comfort to him in this strange world where their beloved alchemy had become a failed idea, replaced by a different science.

The innate ability that caused the skilled alchemists of Amestris to be able to shape and control the elements at will was almost nonexistent in the people here, and the two brothers had discovered that their own powers were strangely muted. The only thing that remained (almost) the same was the periodic table, the soothing contents of which Ed and Al would recite to themselves every morning and every night. This was their mantra, given to them by their teacher, and it helped stabilize them in those vertiginous moments when they realized too painfully that this was not their home.

"Ed... I don’t need Noa to read your mind. You’re thinking it all the time. ‘Find the bad guy and save the world.’ But even in Amestris, accomplishing something like that was really hard, and we’re only as good as our tools, right? Without our alchemy, we’re just a couple of kids."

"I know.” Ed drew a deep breath. Then he said it, because his brother deserved the admission. “Al, you’re right. I am different here, and so are you.”

Alphonse blinked in surprise. This was progress.

"We’re not ourselves anymore. And it’s getting worse.”

"I say we get back to our own world as fast as we can, then figure out how to help this one from there,” Al replied. It was an idea he had repeated patiently for months. ‘There's an old saying. 'If you want to help the world, help yourself first.’ It sounds terribly selfish, but it's really true. You just can't do good work if you're sick or unhappy, just like you can't study if you're starving. We need to go back home, to Winry and our friends.”

Edward gazed at the sky. “Al?” he said. “Why do you really think Alchemy works in Amestris, but doesn't here?” It was a question he never tired of asking.

"Truthfully, we can't say that alchemy really doesn't work here,” Al replied. He was also only too willing to rehash this mystery, as they had found no real solution. "First, the Thule Society did open the Gate, even if it took help from the other side. Then, look what I did with the armor. I put my spirit in that armor and sent it through the Gate, and it actually worked over here. Then there's Envy. Uncle says that dragons don't belong in this world at all, but the Thule Society needed a live Ouroborous for their project to work."

"They called him the Great Serpent."

"I don't care what he was. He killed our dad.” Al fell silent. That was the first time he’d cried in this
strange new world-- only moments into it, when he'd learned what had happened to Hohenheim of Light.

"He killed me, too, before he crossed over."

"Yeah. But I fixed that."

Ed squeezed his shoulder. "You sure did, baby brother."

Alphonse looked up. "I fixed your arm and leg, too, with the Philosopher's Stone."

"I know. I lost them again when I crossed the Gate. I guess I just wasn't meant to ever get them back."

"Wasn't 'meant' to get them back? The universe doesn't work that way, silly!"

"But there has to be a reason why I'm still lugging this automail around, Al."

"Maybe it's the same reason that bomb ended up here. See? Things do ‘want’ to happen."

Edward rubbed his eyes. His head was hurting a little less now. "Anyway, I'm still happy, because you did get your body back. That was always my first goal. Maybe my new arm and leg were taken in exchange."

Al’s glance was kind. "Please don't take this wrong, brother, but what you did to bring me back, no one could have possibly survived. You traded your body to get mine back. A life for a life. I can't believe only your arm and leg were taken. By all the laws of alchemy, you shouldn't be here now."

Ed looked away again. "You’re right, of course," he said uncomfortably. "I really shouldn't be here." Then he grunted as Al hugged him. "All the more reason for you to take it easy and just come home with me," Alphonse said gently.

"If it only were that simple. But even if we can't save the two cities, we have to protect our friends in both worlds, Al. I doubt if we dare create another Gate."

Al shook his head violently. "There it is again! I hardly know what to say, except it almost feels like you've given up. The Edward Elric I know, would never give up til he was home again with all his friends. Never." He almost choked on the last word.

"No, you've got that wrong, baby brother," Ed said gently. "I haven't given up. I just don't see a way."

"Then remember what you already know! What one of us can't do alone, we can both achieve together!"

"Well… I suppose we can at least study the Thule Society texts, if we can get hold of them," Ed said, after a considered pause. He flashed his brother a sudden, impish grin.

"The Thule texts?!" Alphonse was astonished. "You know where they are?!"

"I was talking to Noa and she thinks she knows someone who can help us find them."

"She does? Why didn’t you tell me?! Ed, that's the best news we've had in ages!"

"Don’t get your hopes up. Even if we find something useful in those books, the odds are against us ever being able to implement it, and I'm still not sure at all that we should try."
Al got to his feet, giving his brother a hand up. "Sorry, Ed. My hopes are already sky-high, and what's more, I've got enough for two. If yours is gone, well, I'll just have to carry you with me. Either way, we'll get back home. You'll see."

II.

Spirit Alchemists often partnered with undertakers. It was a profession known in Amestris for its black-clad practitioners and dismal overtones, but Alphonse had a different style. His clothes were always brightly colored, and he often arrived at a grieving home surrounded by butterflies. No matter the situations he encountered, he remained cheerful and calm in the face of the most brutal suffering, soothing and guiding his patients as they entered the afterlife, and relaying their messages back to anxious friends and family. Thriving on work that people who hadn’t ‘been there’ considered horrible, Al had quickly gained a reputation beyond that of being the Fullmetal Alchemist’s brother. His inherent wisdom, tremendous capacity for empathy, and expert guidance consistently transformed death into new life. Al was midwife to the spirit world.

There were, of course, drawbacks, the worst of which came from the spirit world itself. Radiating compassion over multiple planes of existence even while asleep, Alphonse attracted all sorts of lost entities from the bardo the way a beacon drew ships from the fog, and not all of them were desirable. Not all of them were even human. In Amestris he had defenses, though he was loathe to use them, but in this new world where he had so suddenly found himself, he had no means of self-protection at all. Which was why one night, not long after the spirit-swarm had visited them, he awoke suddenly to find himself in his brother’s embrace.

Edward was clearly asleep, but he was also all over him, his sonambulent expression needy, empty and wanting. “Alfons,” he murmured, meaning Alfons Heiderich, his deceased lover, and Al, locked away into a corner of his own mind and unable to respond, instantly understood what was going on. They had been possessed.

Left on their own together at a very young age, Ed and Al were as close as two human beings could be. Al loved Edward far too much to be repulsed by his touch, and under less volatile circumstances, a little horseplay between them could have been instructional and fun. But this situation was bizarre, and it was quickly getting out of hand. Al began to feel an uncharacteristic panic. He had never channeled the dead in such a physical way before, and while part of him wanted to laugh at the sheer awkwardness of it, the scene was fast getting sexual.

As long as the ghost was in control of the situation, nothing short of hitting Edward would cause him to wake up. Al wasn’t willing to do that, even to save himself humiliation. Still under assault, he looked within himself and felt the presence and pain of Heiderich.

Alfons? Al sent, projecting kindness as well as firmness. Please let us go. You’re hurting us.

Hurting you? There was the genuine puzzlement of a lost and confused soul.

I’m his brother. ‘I’m his brother!’ he heard himself exclaiming, and Heiderich’s presence fell away in astonishment as Alphonse quickly regained his faculties. Immediately he grasped Edward by the arms, shaking him gently. “Ed. Ed! Wake up, you silly ass.”

Ed blinked, confusion written all over him as he finally focused on Alphonse. “A- Al?”
“Sheesh, brother! You’ve really got to watch those old boyfriends of yours!” Al tried to make light of the situation.

“Alphonse!” Edward was mortified. He tried to scramble to his feet and banged his aching head on the ceiling of the cab. “I’m sorry!” he stuttered. “I’m so sorry! I— I was dreaming of Alfons Heiderich. I don’t know what came over me!”

“Shh.” Al patted the seat beside him, gesturing him down. “It’s OK. I do.”

Edward said nothing but sat down miserably, his arms around drawn up knees, his face flaming.

“It’s OK!” Al repeated reassuringly. “It’s OK. I’m not mad. Alfons just tried to possess me. You felt him here and responded in your sleep.”

“What—?” Ed’s face went blank with astonishment.

“It’s no big deal. My body is identical to his old one, so drawing him to it was like an automatic thing. He might have even done it involuntarily. I’ve felt his presence with us more than once, so I was kind of expecting something to happen.”

Edward looked away. “I don’t know what to say. I would have never imagined him to do something like that. I’m sorry,” he added again, lamely, but his voice cracked. He leaned forward, burying his face in his arms.

“He didn’t mean any harm, and neither did you. He just wanted to be with you.” Al lay a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Ed?” he said in a low voice. “I’m sorry he’s dead. Truly I am.”

“I know,” Ed whispered finally. Recovering a little, he bundled himself up on the driver’s side, facing away from Al.

Alphonse thought for a long moment, then drew a deep breath. The last thing he wanted or needed was to draw a line in the sand between himself and his brother. At the same time, he felt that it was important to preserve his boundaries to prevent the possession from happening again. If Heiderich felt an opportunity, he might take it, and it would be easier for him next time. “Ed?” he said at last, after carefully contemplating what to say.

“Yeah, Al.” Edward’s voice sounded strained and hoarse.

“Please, if Heiderich comes here again, just try to be my brother,” Al ventured gently. “That’s all I need you to be. Just be my very own brother, Ed, the best brother in the whole world. Be my hero like you used to be. That’s all I want,” he finished in a whisper, feeling a strange pang; and held his breath.

“Of course, Al!” Edward was a little offended.

“OK.” Al closed his eyes, turning away to give Edward his privacy. He sighed and curled in on himself as he pulled his blanket up against the cold, starry night, and he lay awake for a long time thinking.

Al was no prude, and he couldn’t pretend he knew it all. Maybe he’d ruined something wonderful before it began. The only thing he knew for certain was that Edward was his brother—never mind that he was also his mentor, parent and constant companion— and common sense would dictate that he needed Edward as his brother. But what did Edward and Heiderich need?

“Alfons?” he murmured under his breath as he finally began to drift. “Don’t be afraid. It’s all right.
Talk to me. Tell me what you need.”

But the starry night rolled on, and Alphonse’s dreams were silent.

The next day, and for days after, everything went just as Al had feared. Ed overreacted to the incident and was afraid to touch him. It wasn’t overt, but his movements were guarded. Though the nights were not yet warming up, Ed took to sleeping by himself. This hurt Alphonse, and it was all he could do to not bring up the ‘Heiderich incident’ again.

III.

Life with the Roma had its ups and downs, but, except for Ed’s headaches and his overall frustration, it was tolerable, and often downright good. Still, the Roma were a highly insular society by necessity, and no matter how hard the two brothers tried to fit in, something always happened to remind them that they ultimately did not.

One bright afternoon during an early spring thaw, Alphonse found a stray cat. They were camped well south of Munich in the wilderness of the Isar valley, where they’d been snowed in, and he had no idea where the sleek black tom could have come from. It was obviously lost, crying persistently and following him. Al was only too happy to pick up his new pet and come hurrying back to camp. As he passed Edward, who was drowsing in the sun in a makeshift hammock, his brother’s eyes grew huge. “Al! Hey Al!” he said, springing to his feet. “Wait!”

Alphonse stuck his tongue out. “You can’t stop me from having one now,” he said, and darted off, the cat clinging to him. Hurrying to Noa’s and Simionce’s tent, he slipped inside. “Hey Noa,” he said, coming to where she was working over the cookstove. “Look what I found!”

Five minutes later Alphonse was running through the woods, searching frantically for the cat as Ed trailed him. “I tried to warn you,” he said. “To the Roma, cats are unclean, and now you’ve gone and contaminated half the camp. When are you going to think before you act?” This last was a line Al usually reserved for him, and Ed had to admit to himself that it gave him some satisfaction to be able to hand it back to his usually wise brother.

“That’s ridiculous,” Al huffed.

“Ridiculous by your standards,” Ed said. “Not by Noa’s! She’s gonna be mad for a week!”

“I wonder where he went,” Al said. The tom had jumped out of Al’s arms when Noa screamed and had made a lightning circuit of the tent, ricocheting off the canvas walls before finding the flap and shooting out like a black streak across the yard. Everyone had been startled and upset. Uncle had pulled Alphonse aside and given him a brief but stern lecture, and Simionce, cursing “Gadje!” had actually cuffed him.

“He had to have come from somewhere nearby,” Edward said, unable to help feeling a twinge of sympathy.

“I bet not. I bet someone took him way out here and dumped him. He was starving, Ed.”
Ed thought about it. If there was one thing he had learned from Al, it was to err on the side of compassion. “You might be right,” he said reluctantly. “How about you save some food for him— if they ever let us back in camp again! Bring it out here in the morning, where you found him. Just don’t say what you’re doing.”

“But what happens when we move on? What then?”

“Maybe he’ll follow us.”

So, for the next few weeks, every morning Alphonse would slip out of the Gypsy camp bearing a little bowl of leftover food. Blackie, as Al called the stray, could always be found waiting just out of sight of the tents. If Simionce and the other Roma were aware of what was going on, Al heard no further complaints from them. Finally, as the one-truck caravan trundled slowly toward the low pass leading to Walchensee, Blackie excused himself from their company, vanishing completely between one day and the next. With no farms or houses near in the wilderness, it was obvious to the brothers that the cat had become a meal for a predator. Edward consoled Alphonse, trying to distract him with an alchemy problem, but Al would have none of it.

* * *

Edward had spent much of his time with the Roma relearning Lesser Alchemy, if only to come up with new tricks they could use to earn money. This was a branch of the art looked down on in his world of Amestris, because only people with no natural alchemic talent practiced it. But in the new world in which he had found himself, Lesser Alchemy was the only alchemy there was. He had applied some of its techniques before, to help Alfons Heiderich develop his rocket fuel, but it had always seemed to him that Heiderich had only been humoring him. Sure in his grasp of the new science, Heiderich had never seen a need for ancient esoterics in his work.

The Roma, on the other hand, were strong at maintaining their ancient ways. Ed's first practical project for them had been to create better waterproofing for their tents, but they had received the formula somewhat coolly, and he’d learned quickly not to boast. Currently he was working on firestarters which would light a campfire in any kind of weather. They were made of matches, pitch and tinder and based on a formula invented by Roy Mustang. It was a far cry from his grand achievements of the past, but at least it was something.

As his mind had become immersed in Lesser studies, Ed found he was losing the Greater Alchemy he’d been raised with, especially the more complicated chemical signatures such as the composition of certain organic compounds. With his brother now at his side, he had tried to maintain his knowledge by having Al question him frequently, but without daily practice of actual alchemy, Al had begun losing ground, too. The mainstay of their talent in Amestris had been their natural ability to visualize the chemical composition of anything they touched, then break it down and rebuild it. It was a sixth sense and much more, but it was nonfunctional in their new reality, giving both of them a strange feeling of blindness as they lay hands to objects only to be met with no information except bare tactile sensation.

IV.
The last day of March went out with a prolonged rainstorm, and in the middle of it there was turmoil in the camp. Al rose while it was still dark, blinking the sleep out of his eyes as he slid open the truck window to see what was wrong. Noa was standing near the ashes of the fire as she addressed her family urgently in Romani. Edward, who’d been sleeping under the truck despite his brother’s pleading to just give up and get in the cab, stood behind the others, listening intently. As Al got out of the vehicle, Ed turned to him. “I think the baby’s sick,” he said.

“Oh, no.” Even in Amestris, Al had seen it happen all too often. The joy of young life turned too quickly to suffering. “Do they know what’s wrong?”

Ed shook his head. “I’m not that good.”

Uncle plucked at his sleeve. “She says Rosa’s ill with a fever.”

Roma belief was that illness was an unnatural state of being. There were strict rules in place dealing with personal hygiene, and while they might not have understood all the nuances of the purity laws, Ed and Al had always admired the care Noa’s family took with their cleanliness. While their ‘yard’ could be a dreadful clutter—the two brothers had given up on trying to pick up after everyone early on-- tables were always scrubbed clean, and drinking water always taken upstream of bathing or any other kind of contamination. “Contamination” was the operative word, Al had observed as he had helped them haul water. But it was a kind of spiritual contamination on which Rosa’s illness was being blamed.

Orderly confusion reigned as a drabengi was summoned from another group of nomads encamped a few miles away. The old woman was an experienced healer and she left Noa with medicine and instructions. Later in the day, Ed got a chance to briefly examine the child. His earnest study of Alchemy had imparted to him a great deal of scientific knowledge and a certain amount of basic medical skill; since he’d been in the new world he’d seen enough suffering that he’d seriously contemplated becoming a doctor. As he left the tent, Al, who had been waiting for him, caught his arm. “Any clues?”

“She’s got a fever, all right, but I’ve no idea why. My best guess is she has some kind of infection.”

“An infection! Ed, that’s serious. Do they have antibiotics here?”

Edward led him away in the direction of the men, who were having a conference by the firepit. “Not like in Amestris. I know they don’t have penicillin yet, because I had to make some for myself a couple of years ago when that cracked tooth of mine was going bad.” He pointed to the empty space where a lower molar was missing. “I tried to tell some scientists at the University about it, but they just treated me like a kid and laughed me off.”

“Well, what are we waiting for? Let’s make some now.”

“Good idea, brother. First we need the right kind of mold, but we don’t have time to grow it. We should go into the next village and look for some moldy bread.”

“And while we’re doing that, we can hunt down a real doctor. They might not have antibiotics here, but they should have other medicines. Febrifuges.”

“Right. Wait here. I’m going to tell Simionce what we want to do.”

* * *
The mountain village at the foot of the pass was tiny, and the townsperson suspicious of the two young men out in the rain. At first the brothers couldn’t figure it out, but they quickly realized it was their Gypsy clothing. “Wow,” Ed said, shaking his head as they pulled up, panting, after running away from a dog. “No matter how long I live here, Al—” (he stopped to breathe, resting his hands on his knees) —“I just can’t get used to how they treat the Roma.”

“I know. Still, in our world they treat the Ishvarlans the same way.”

In the end, there was no doctor in the parochial little town who would treat a Roma baby. Alphonse threw a rare tantrum, swearing profusely and throwing rocks, and Edward, though astonished, couldn’t blame him for his violent reaction. Afterward, still red-faced, Al waited by the door of the only shop in town as his brother purchased aspirin, two small thermometers and some corn syrup. A kindhearted local woman who looked like she might have more than a little Roma blood herself finally supplied them not only with moldy bread, but fresh bread as well, and they scrounged some glass whiskey bottles from a garbage dump. They got back to camp by dusk and got the dregs of a wonderful stew that had been simmering all day on Devi’s little cookstove. The baby was sleeping, but Noa looked exhausted.

“Now we need a lab,” Ed said as they hastily gulped down their meal.

The two brothers set up shop where they slept, in the cab of the truck. It had been a long time since they’d worked together like this, and they were enjoying themselves. The first step was to create an aseptic liquid culture and sterilize the glass bottles and thermometers. This required a pot of heavily boiling water and the use of Noa’s cookstove.

They worked late into the night. Once the culture was made, cooled, and put into the clean bottles along with the thermometers, as much mold as they could scrape off the old bread was introduced into the containers and they were closed. Then, using a candle to warm the bottles, they slept in shifts in the cab, spelling each other off, as the temperature of the solution had to be watched carefully. “I sure hope this is a potent strain,” Al said sleepily as he curled up by his brother.

“Yeah, well, I just hope we’re growing penicillin.” Ed said. With no microscope at their disposal, they’d had to rely only on the blue color and bitter taste of the mold. Still, it had worked for him before. Just as he was settling himself more comfortably to watch over their project, Uncle’s face appeared outside. The old man banged on the window. When Ed rolled it down, he said, “I hear you’re making a medicine.”

“You heard right,” Ed said.

“Well, we’ll see whether your medicine works better than our own,” Uncle said philosophically.

Al stirred, sitting up so quickly he hit Edward in the face with his elbow. “How’s Rosa?” he asked urgently. “Sorry, Ed,” he added under his breath.

“Crying again. I’m going to find a fever-tree.”

“A fever-tree?” Edward said in wonder as he pushed his brother’s arm aside.
Roma medicine was eclectic even by Amestris standards. While some of the traditional cures used herbs, the fever-tree was not to be taken, but shaken. Uncle found a sapling at the edge of the camp and shook it with all his might. Simionce helped as the sleep-deprived brothers watched curiously from a distance.

“I’ve heard of this,” Ed said. “I think it’s supposed to transfer the fever from Rosa into the tree.”

Alphonse muttered something inaudible.

“Go to sleep,” Edward said. “You’re exhausted, little brother. I’ll wake you up in awhile.”

But sleep was hard to come by in the camp that day. By afternoon the *drabengi* had been consulted again and another ritual performed to much chanting as further medicines were administered. When Ed and Al briefly dragged themselves into Noa’s and Simionce’s tent, Edward felt the baby’s forehead. “It’s still hot,” he said. “But it looks like their stuff, whatever it is, is working.” Heartened, the two brothers returned to their makeshift laboratory.

***

The night was cold and very long. Alphonse spent a lot of time gazing out of the truck window, while Ed forgot himself in his exhaustion and fell asleep at his side. Al regarded him with amusement as he began to snore. He had been gearing up to discuss Edward’s newfound idealistic philosophy, elements of which he found very disturbing, but Ed had unknowingly gotten himself off the hook. Alphonse was still smarting from the fallout of his brother’s failed attempt to leave him in Amestris the previous year, and once in awhile, on still nights like this, the memory came back to him too vividly. Still, what hurt him most was the deep and far-reaching change in Edward’s attitude which had become apparent to him over time, and he could not help but want to probe further. It was a feeling that somewhere along the way the “good of the many—” the abstract idea of this—had become more important to Ed than the happiness and wellbeing of his real friends and family. Alphonse was a deeply generous soul, always concerned with the welfare of the individual. But the kind of impractical, abstract group idealism Ed had been displaying of late was not well grounded in reality, and that was not like his brother.

As Alphonse saw it, Ed’s problem was traceable back to the uranium bomb brought from Amestris by Huskisson, the insane Alchemist who had created it. He had disappeared into the fabric of this new world along with his invention, and the issue was clearly still foremost in Edward’s thoughts. It was as though Edward were taking upon his own slight shoulders the full responsibility for the existence of a madman, making it his personal task to set the world right in a way which would have been impossible even in Amestris. It was, to say the least, an overly ambitious thought.

“Oh, Ed,” Al whispered. “What’s the matter with you?”

V.

Next morning, the rain was pounding down harder than ever, and the baby was worse. Simionce woke the brothers by unblocking the wheels of the truck. As Ed checked the culture, Alphonse
glanced back. A tent had been pitched over the truck bed and the women and children were piling inside. Edward slid out of the driver’s seat to sit scrunched up next to his brother as Al hastily moved the culture out of the way. Simionce climbed in and started the vehicle. “We must send for Siegfried,” he said grimly.

“Siegfried?”

“A doctor friend of ours in Munich. He will help.”

“But that’s miles away! The floods--! The roads!”

“I know.” Simionce was grim. “But he might be our last chance.” He leaned out the driver’s door. “Get in, Uncle!” he called. “We’re going now!”

* * *

It was a hellish journey. They were travelling through mountainous backcountry on rutted, mired roads, and the truck got bogged down at every turn. By afternoon, all the adults were exhausted and slathered with mud from having to get out and push. They made only a few mile’s progress that day, while the baby’s crying was constant and shrill. Noa was beside herself. Alphonse remained in the truck’s cab, his arms aching as he steadied the bottles in their makeshift wire holder over the candle flame for hour after hour. He was determined to not let the culture go to waste, and by that afternoon the liquid had finally taken on the yellowish tinge of penicillium toxin.

Exhausted, filthy and soaking wet, Edward climbed into the cab as Simionce got out to check things over. The sun was going down behind the shoulder of the mountain, casting deep shadows over them though it was only afternoon. “Ed, you’re freezing!” Al said. “You need to change your clothes!”

“I already have. Twice,” Ed said grimly, shaking the water out of his hair. He glanced at himself ruefully; he was clad in some of Uncle’s old clothes and they hung on him like flour bags. “How’s the project?” he said.

“I think we’ve got some, but we should try it first. How’s the baby?”

Ed shook his head as he carefully took one of the flasks and uncorked it. “Not good. We don’t have much time, Al.” Tilting his head back, he poured some of the incredibly bitter liquid onto his tongue. “Agh!” He swallowed with difficulty as Al quickly retrieved and closed the bottle. “That’s penicillin all right! Nothing tastes quite like it.”

“I hope she won’t be allergic to it.”

Ed shook his head, clearing his throat. “We don’t have the luxury of worrying about that. If we don’t get going she’s not going to make it, Al.”

“Then we can’t wait any longer. Here—watch this candle and warm yourself up. I’ll go talk to Noa.” Taking the just-opened bottle, Alphonse got out of the cab and made his way in the driving rain to the back of the truck.

The women let him in at once, but when he saw the baby he gasped in dismay. The infant’s spirit remained tied to her body by only a thread. Even in this world, where his spiritual vision was
clouded, this much was clearly apparent to him. Noa looked up at him with hopeless eyes.

“Hi, Noa. Ed and I have made some medicine,” Al said urgently by way of greeting.

“She is no longer eating,” the mother said tonelessly. “Death is coming to take her away from us.”

“Maybe. But this is strong medicine. If you can give her some, it might save her life.”

“I told you. She will not drink.”

“Please, Noa—can’t we just try?”

Noa had fed her infant at her breast, but Devi, a much more experienced mother, quickly volunteered a bottle. Such items were a luxury here. Alphonse was not certain of the strength of the penicillin or of the dose needed, but he felt that in a case like this, too little antibiotic would be worse than too much. Anticipating the child’s rejection of such a bitter substance, he had kept out some of the syrup they’d used to make the culture, and now he produced the flask from his pocket. “OK… A lot of this… And a little of this… All right, give this to her—it’s sweet.”

The baby, with a red face and feverish brow, listlessly drank a small amount of the medicine before stopping. “Let me try,” Al said.

He had a knack with infants, and as he took Rosa lovingly in his arms he was strongly reminded of Rose’s baby back home. All new things were highly vulnerable, their spirits connected to the physical world by the most tenuous of threads. Al’s talent with them had something to do with the situation he’d been locked in for so many years—himself anchored to the physical world by the most delicate of bonds—and it was unique. To everyone’s amazement, the infant began to steadily suckle the bottle, and Al smiled.

A hand landed on his shoulder. It was Ed, having climbed up in back of him. “Good job, Al. I hope this works,” he murmured.

* * *

Thunder rolled and the rain drove down, soaking right through the tent canvas. Even the air was moist. Toward midnight, Rosa began to quiet down, and Noa sent word that her fever was lower.

“We only have enough penicillin for a day or two,” Al said as they hunched miserably together in the cab, still warming the whiskey flasks over the candle flame. “I used nearly half of that bottle on her tonight.”

“And I was so hungry, I ate the rest of the bread, mold and all, after we made the culture.” Edward swore. “I guess I didn’t really have much hope that this stuff would work.”

“Don’t blame yourself. You were starving. We haven’t had a decent meal in days now. Besides, we can set up another batch using what we’ve got left as a starter. I only hope we don’t run out of corn syrup.”

Ed gazed through the window into the featureless blackness. “Damn. I wish we could use some real alchemy and just get her out of here.”
“Well, we can’t,” Al replied tiredly. “We’ve got to work with what we’ve got.”

“I wonder who this Siegfried is they’re talking about?”

“Who knows? But unless this road turns to pavement in the next few miles, we’re probably not going to ever find out. Penicillin or not, Rosa will die if we can’t reach him soon. Can you see her spirit-thread?”

“No. I never could see those.”

“The way you handled mine when I was in the armor, that’s pretty hard to believe, Ed.”

Silence.

“Al? Have you sensed anything from him? Alfons Heiderich?”

“I’d tell you if I did. Right?”

“Right.”

“Don’t worry about him. Go to sleep, Ed.”

“How could anyone sleep in this thunder?” But Ed’s question was rhetorical, for he was nodding off even as he spoke.

VI.

By early morning the next storm was rolling over the horizon, but Rosa was markedly better. Simionce slapped them on the back and Uncle shook their hands in gratitude. Alphonse measured out another dose of penicillin for the infant, emptying the first bottle, and persuaded her to drink it as he had the previous night. “We only have two or three doses left of this. We’re making more from the original culture, but it’ll take a couple of days, and we’re running out of syrup.”

“That’s right,” Ed said. “We’ve got to get to Munich, and soon.”

Devi fed them all porridge before Simionce and the Elrics took their places in the cab. Uncle had poured in the last of the gasoline earlier; enough to get them close to town, he said. Ed rather doubted this, but said nothing. As they started off again, large drops of rain began to fall. A cold wind was blowing down the Isar gorge and the river was rushing brown below them as the battered truck struggled along the nearly impassable road.

Alphonse watched the track as they bumped along, looking for signs of other travellers, but the only thing of interest he saw were a few horse tracks. The ruts, deep as they were in places, were old. No one had driven a vehicle on this road since the previous fall, and as they rounded the shoulder of the mountain, he saw why. A wooden bridge across the river had been broken by a logjam, and the steep road leading down to it was littered with fallen trees.

Simionce swore roundly and applied the brakes at the top of the slope. He piled out of the truck, the Elric brothers, Uncle and Devi following as they surveyed the situation. “Get out the saw,” said Uncle, and Simionce ran for it. In this heavily wooded terrain, travelling without one was unthinkable.
“What’s going on?” Noa said anxiously, climbing down from the truck as her husband unwrapped the saw from its oilcloth. As she saw the ruined bridge, she gasped.

“Don’t worry,” Simionce said shortly. “We’ll find a path—over, under, or around.”

“We can rebuild the bridge if we use these trees!” Uncle said as he hastened around to see what was keeping Simionce. “Come on!”

* * *

While the children and Devi pitched a tent next to the truck, Alphonse and Edward adjusted the crude wire rack which held their culture at the proper temperature, and checked the candle they were using to warm it. Convinced of the setup’s stability, they then took a long turn together at the crosscut, sawing through tree trunks and lopping off limbs until they were too exhausted to stand. At last Noa rescued them, bringing them back to the truck and giving each a hot bowl of bean broth. The little group’s food supplies were becoming more and more scarce, and there had been no real opportunity for them to hunt or scavenge.

Ed and Al sat under the canvas out of the rain as they ate, watching Noa with her baby. Both mother and child looked better. Al wanted to lay a hand on the baby’s forehead, but he was cold and forced himself to refrain. “How’s her fever?”

“She’s cooler,” Noa said, leaning to kiss her. “That is a powerful medicine you make.”

“It is,” Ed said. “Where we come from, it’s well-known.”

“In Faerie?” Her eyes glinted mischieviously and Alphonse glanced up.

Noa knew the truth of who the Elrics were and where they came from. Al had spent much time puzzling over her odd, on-again off-again relationship with his brother, and why she had married Simionce so hastily. It was one of the few subjects on which Edward was not forthcoming.

Al had seen his brother show affection for girls before, though it was a bit unusual for him, as Roy Mustang and Alfons Heiderich were more his type. But sometimes Al felt strongly that Noa and Ed shared a special bond. With that thought, Al always experienced a peculiar blend of elation and jealousy. At other times he was just as sure that they had never been together, and then he felt both sadness and gladness.

These emotions were not just a result of Al’s unusual closeness to his brother. They reflected also his own love for Winry Rockbell back home. Since the restoration of Al’s body had left him so much physically younger than Winry—not able to legally marry her at the time he’d left Amestris— he felt himself to be on precarious footing. Once he and Edward made it back home, would she turn back to her old crush? Ed might rather marry the dashing Roy Mustang than a bossy, parochial country girl, but no one with a conscience could say ‘no’ to Winry Rockbell.

Knowing the nature of Edward’s previous connection to Noa might have helped Al clarify where his own relationship with Winry could be headed. But this was one secret that Ed would never reveal. As he finished his soup, Al reflected that with the menacing-looking Simionce hanging around, he wouldn’t talk much about Noa either. The man looked just like Scar.

“Hey Ed,” Al said. “Looks like the rain’s letting up. Why don’t we scout out the river a little? Maybe...
we can find a ford or something.”

“The water’s running too high for that, little brother.”

“Well, let’s have a look anyway.” Putting down his empty bowl, he nodded to Noa and slipped out of the back of the truck.

Edward followed him resignedly. He would have rather stayed in the truck and had a good rest, but Alphonse was right—there could be another way across.

Thinking a railroad bridge might be a possible find, the two brothers scrambled down the steep and rutted road until they reached the riverbank. The water roared brown through a broad and shallow channel, and they stood at its edge, gazing up and down the gorge. “Not a thing,” Al groaned, squinting against the rain. It had let up a little, turning into a steady grey drizzle.

Edward pointed at the ruined bridge. “Only two pilings are actually broken,” he said. “Just the deck is gone. Uncle’s right. If we had enough time, we could repair it.”

“But we don’t have time. And we don’t have many tools. We do have a hammer,” Al said. “But no spikes or fasteners of any sort.”

“We can make some pegs out of wood. Remember how they used to use those in the outback at home?”

“Right. But that was ironwood. I don’t see any of that here.”

“Let’s get back to camp. If we can borrow a couple of paring knives from Devi, we can whittle some out of fir branches.”

* * *

The two brothers weren’t certain whether their friends were just humoring them or actually interested in their project. Nevertheless, they got the knives from Devi, and after selecting and sawing a dozen fir branches, they sat on the tailgate and whittled for the rest of the daylight hours, chewing bark cambrium as a way to take the edge off their hunger. By the time night fell, the fallen trees had been removed from the path of the vehicle and the brothers had a handful of pegs. At this point, Alphonse stopped what he was doing to check on the baby, dosing her with a slightly smaller quantity of penicillin in order to stretch out the supply.

That night, Edward collapsed in the back of the truck with Noa, Simionce and the baby. Keeping his place in the cab, Alphonse, in a deep sleep, saw Heiderich clearly, but it was only a brief glimpse and he was much too tired to pursue it. Afterwards, the face of Winry appeared in his dreams. Vivid and real, it woke him up, and he spent the rest of the night restless and hungry.

VII.

The next morning dawned without rain, and Simionce was in a better mood. After a skimpy meal of
porridge, everyone but Noa and the baby joined the work crew as they rolled several cut logs down to the river. The logistics of getting the timbers in place was difficult—the bank was steep, the river dangerous.

“Someone’s got to go across first with this rope,” Uncle said, holding up one of their most prized possessions.

“I will,” Edward responded at once. He was by far the most nimble of the company—tiny, acrobatic and quick.

“But you can’t swim!” Alphonse exclaimed. “If you fall in that river, you’re done for. Let me go.”

“No one could swim in that torrent, even you. You’re just a big klutz anyway,” Edward retorted. He grabbed the rope.

It was a half-truth; Al was bigger than Edward, but he did not consider himself clumsy. “Hey!” he said. “At least tie it around yourself or something.”

“I’m not stupid.” Ed proceeded to fasten it around his waist before quickly climbing up onto the remains of the bridge. As Simionce anchored him and the rest of the group looked on, he sprang rapidly from piling to piling, clinging to the wood like a monkey until he reached the opposite bank. “That was easy!” he yelled over the rushing water.

“Tie the rope to that piling,” and Uncle pointed to the timber nearest Ed. Waving, Edward unfastened it from his waist and hitched it over the post, then started to make his way back, holding the rope in one hand as he swung himself over the deadly torrent.

He never could figure out exactly what happened next. One moment he was gaining the near shore, and the next, he was in the water. He went under instantly, pulled to the bottom by his steel limbs. Faintly he heard his brother screaming for him, just before the glacial shock of the Isar’s chill water stopped his heart.

* * *

“EDWARD!!” Alphonse rushed down the high riverbank, throwing off his jacket. Ed’s white shirt could be seen through the murky water-- his brother had been swept downstream and was trapped by the current against the broken bridge deck. Al had almost reached the river’s edge when he was blocked in mid-stride by Simionce’s arm and flung roughly backward to the ground. The big man charged past him and plunged into the water.

Above them, Noa screamed as she saw her husband venture out into the flood. There were several large boulders here and Simionce was using them to climb out to the fallen bridge. Maneuvering on all fours, he reached the wreckage. Straddling one of the timbers, he inched out toward the whiteness in the water. Alphonse held his breath as Simionce leaned down, plunging his arm into the whirlpool. He stretched a little further. Then he hauled Edward’s dead weight to the surface, dragging him by his hair.

Back ing up on the timber, Simionce pulled Edward with him foot by foot until he reached the slick and treacherous rocks. Then he stopped, balancing precariously on the first flat boulder as he glanced around, obviously at a loss. Edward’s small body hung from the crook of his arm like a broken doll.
“I can’t go any farther with him,” Simionce yelled over the rushing of the river.

By this time the entire company had gotten down the bank and was standing clustered around Alphonse. Uncle cupped his hands to his mouth. “Then throw him!” he called.

Hastily everyone arranged themselves. Simionce straightened, steadying himself as he shifted Ed’s weight into both arms. Then he heaved him across, at least twelve feet over the rocks. Alphonse, Uncle, and Andreas caught Ed before he hit the ground.

Alphonse’s knees buckled under the sudden onslaught of his brother’s dead weight and he sat down hard on the gravel. Dimly he heard Noa screaming again and he looked up. Simionce had fallen and was clinging to one of the boulders with one arm, reaching for a tree limb she was extending over the water. As Al watched, he grabbed it. Then Al’s attention skipped that quickly back to Edward and he saw to his horror that his brother was almost dead.

“No! Don’t do it, Edward!” Sliding out from under him, Al grasped him by the arms and hastily dragged him a little farther up the bank. Dropping to his knees, he bent to blow a dozen hard breaths into his brother’s lungs before he was forced to pause, dizzy and hyperventilated. “Ed!” he cried desperately, leaning over him. Edward’s eyes were open, but he was seeing nothing. Alphonse pounded on his chest and shouted in his face. “Brother! Wait! You can’t die here!”

“Out of the way, child!” Al fell back in dismay as Uncle suddenly lifted Edward from his arms and draped him face down over a nearby log. “What are you doing?!” he exclaimed. But the stout old man was vigorously pressing with all his weight on his brother’s shoulder blades and back.

Suddenly Ed started to struggle, choking painfully, and a great gout of frothy water rushed from his nose and mouth. He began to gasp. “There!” Uncle said with satisfaction, lifting him upright. “That was a grand attempt, Alphonse lad, but you should have emptied ‘im first!”

Al helped Uncle bear Edward up the steep incline. Behind them, Noa and the children helped Simionce to follow. “Get some blankets ready,” Uncle ordered as they got Edward to the tent. Noa was sobbing and clinging to her husband’s arm. Standing by the side of the truck as the children hastily wrapped him in blankets, Simionce turned to her with a tired but triumphant smile and was stunned as she slapped him in the face.

Al heard the yelling of husband and wife only dimly; all his attention was on Edward as he was carried into the tent and soon divested of his clothes. “You, too,” Uncle said, and Alphonse hastily complied, then crawled into the cocoon of wrappings now covering his brother. Ed’s skin was so icy that he started with shock before quickly holding him to his own lifesaving warmth.

* * *

Al didn’t know how much time went by. He closed his eyes for awhile, listening to Ed’s rasping breaths and the ongoing uproar between Noa and Simionce. They were shouting at each other in Romani, and Al couldn’t catch a thing that was being said, but he could certainly guess at it. As much as Noa might love Edward, she was furious at Simionce, the father of her babe, risking his life to save him—especially since their own child was already in mortal danger. Alphonse pushed his head into the blankets, trying to shut out all the discord. He felt like weeping.

Radhika darted in and out of the tent, carrying two well-wrapped warming irons. Al thanked her and
placed one at Ed’s feet and the other between their bodies at chest level. The intense warmth soaked sweetly into Al’s bones, and after awhile Edward started to shiver and cough. “Hey, brother!” Al said, welcoming his return to consciousness. Slowly he sat them both up, leaning Edward against him. He began to rub Ed’s back and live limbs briskly under the woolen blankets.

“Al--? Alphonse?” Edward’s teeth were chattering.

“It’s me. The one and only.” Al tried to put his arms around his brother, but Edward resisted his embrace. Hurt, Al gave him a reproachful look. Then he saw the pain and confusion in Ed’s eyes. Relenting immediately, he cradled Edward’s still-damp head gently to his shoulder, rocking him tenderly. “Sheesh. What an imagination. I’m just trying to warm you up. Can’t you tell you’re too cold?”

“What’s going on, Al? What happened? Did he try it again?” Edward was disoriented.

“You fell in the river,” Al said kindly. “Remember?”

“Oh.” Ed’s face took on a distant, searching look, and Al wondered if he did, in fact, remember what had happened. There was a momentary silence. Then Ed whispered, “I saw Alfons.”

“I’m not surprised. You took quite a stroll in the bardo, brother. For a minute I thought you were dead.”

“He wanted me to be.”

“Heiderich?!?”

“Yeah. I remember. He wanted me to die so I could be with him.”

Alphonse was mildly disturbed by this revelation. Still, disembodied spirits could become very confused. It was not his place to judge Heiderich’s behavior, but he found himself saying, “That’s not very good of him, is it?”

Edward frowned. “I—I almost did, Al. I almost went with him.”

“But you didn’t. That’s the only thing that matters.” Al ruthlessly suppressed the pain in his heart.

“How could he? That’s dumb.”

“It could happen. Did he?”

Edward’s eyes were huge in the dark. “No. Al, he would never do that.”

“The bardo is a murky place. Sometimes spirits can become pretty confused there,” Al suggested gently.

“No!”

“OK. OK. I just wanted to make sure.” Noting with satisfaction that his brother was no longer shivering, Al leaned to push aside the tent flap. “Looks like they’ve got a good fire going. We should get you out there.” He glanced back and paused. “Ed! Are you crying?”

“No, I’m not,” Edward said irritably. “Will you please get me some clothes, Al?”

“Sure thing, big brother.” Al paused, reaching out to brush some strands of damp hair from Ed’s
eyes, but he pulled away from Al’s touch. Alphonse let him go at once.

VIII.

The long gray light of afternoon lay on the camp as Edward paced restlessly by the fire. No one would allow him to work, and while understanding their concern, it chafed at him. He had been left tending the baby in her cradle as Noa took his place.

Pausing at the entrance to the tent, he glanced back down the hill. Uncle was directing things as the group tried to lever a long, narrow tree trunk up onto the remaining bridge pilings.

Edward couldn’t see how that was going to change things much. At this rate, they’d never get the truck across the river. If they did manage to open some kind of crossing, it would be a footpath only. They would have to take what they could carry, and leave the vehicle behind.

Simionce and Uncle already realized the scenario, and probably the others, too. But no one was willing to state the obvious. It would take days for the little group to get the rest of the way to Munich.

As if sensing his thoughts, the baby began to cry again. Edward went into the tent and knelt by the cradle, rocking it gently. “Hush. Hush, little one.” She’d been a little more restless since Alphonse had cut her penicillin in half, but Ed had agreed with him that they could do nothing else.

As he sat by the cradle, continuing to rock it, he remembered his brother’s concern for him and kicked himself mentally. The wounded look Al had given him was sticking in his memory, but Al’s innocent hugs were not the issue— that was how they’d always functioned as close and caring brothers. The issue was Heiderich.

Ed bowed his head, wondering for the thousandth time if he were going mad, for it seemed to him that he had seen his lover in the bardo, and the look he’d cast Ed’s way had been exactly the same as his brother’s. “Alfons,” Ed murmured aloud. “Please don’t do this to me. Please don’t ask me to die. Because I can’t. I have things to do, and things to see. People to take care of. People who need me just as much as you do.”

As night fell and Uncle’s family returned exhausted to the camp, Edward still knelt by the cradle, head down, eyes closed. Al came in and sat down next to him without comment, but when Simionce began to speak, he looked up, blinking against the lantern-light.

The man seemed indestructible, having required only a change of clothes before going back to work after rescuing Ed, but now he looked downcast. “We can’t rebuild the bridge well enough to get the truck across. We’re going to have to hike out of here.”

“I thought as much,” Ed said. “How far’s the next town?”

“Ten miles,” Uncle replied. “We’re going to set out first thing tomorrow, and we’ll go in two groups. Simionce, Noa and I will go ahead with the baby. You, Ed, your brother, Devi and the children will follow as fast as you can.”

Ed nodded. “All right.”

Al spoke up. His eyes were smudged with exhaustion and Ed noted that he was splattered with mud.
“Ed and I are good at making packs. Want us to start dividing things up?”

Uncle’s glance was kind. “Not tonight. Devi and I will determine what goes and what stays. You and Edward get some rest—you need it. Tomorrow you can help make the packs.”


Al smiled tiredly, curling up to sleep right where he had sat down. Simionce said nothing, but merely nodded in his matter-of-fact way. Then Radhika leaned forward and said mischeviously, “You needed a bath anyway!”

* * *

The next day dawned clear, with a stiff wind coming round the mountain’s looming shoulder. The familia were up before the sun, dividing their belongings into neat piles. Rested if not refreshed, Edward was feeling better. He and Alphonse worked at transforming their friends’ meager possessions into bundles that could be carried comfortably for a long distance.

Al had continued to culture the remaining batch of penicillin until he’d run out of syrup and candles. During their hasty preparations, he and Noa had paused to try to feed the baby some of her medicine, but even Alphonse couldn’t induce her to eat today, and her crying had been constant since the early hours of the night. Though he said nothing, Al knew she was quickly failing, and in his heart he harbored a quiet, heavy dread.

Hiding the truck in the trees and camouflaging it with fallen branches took another half hour. Uncle patted the battered vehicle fondly. “We’ll come back for you,” he said. “That’s a promise.”

The sun had risen slowly over the mountainside before they were finally ready to go. Rosa was fretful despite her comfortable basket. Noa and Simionce had suspended it between them on a pole, and it rocked gently from side to side as they walked, just like the cradle they’d had to leave behind. On his back, Simionce bore the largest tent, neatly folded and tied with cords. Noa had the cooking utensils, while the children carried miscellaneous articles and Uncle bore the weight of the little cast-iron stove. Ed and Al were amazed at the old man’s wiry strength.

Much had been accomplished the previous day. Two logs now spanned the river, fastened with the pegs Ed and Al had whittled, and long strips of green bark. It would be a precarious crossing, but well within even the childrens’ abilities.

Edward went first, with Al right behind him, hanging onto his coat, and Radhika and Andreas just behind them. They kept their eyes on the farther shore and it all went smoothly, but Al stumbled just as he jumped off the log at the other end. Ed grinned at him as he helped him up, and Radhika couldn’t stop giggling. Al gave them a sour look, turning to give Noa a hand down, and the rest of the group went uneventfully across except for Simionce. Burdened as he was with the bulk of the tent, he was caught at the center of the span in a strong gust of wind. To everyone’s horror, he staggered, his arms windmilling. Then he regained himself and pushed forward until he was off the bridge. “Whew!” he said, flashing a rare and sheepish grin. “I had not counted on the mountain’s breath!”

Uncle looked up at the sky. “It’s getting darker,” he said. “We’d best try to find some shelter before
They were wise words. Before the *familia* had gotten a mile further down the mountain, another great gust did knock Simionce off his feet, and with it came a pounding rain. The murmuring of the trees, which had been distantly audible for some time, increased quickly to a roar.

Uncle pulled Simionce up as Noa lifted the baby’s basket and opened it. Rosa was crying loudly. “Is she hurt?!” Devi said. Noa shook her head.

Edward ducked a flying branch. “We’ve got to find some shelter quick, or we’re going to get pulverized!”

The little group stumbled forward, keeping close together. Airborne debris whipped past them. On all sides, the trees were cracking, and behind them came the splintering groan of a large fir crashing down across the track. Simionce cursed and swore. “Death himself is after us today!”

Leading the group, Alphonse fell back so abruptly that Edward ran into him as another tree came down across the road, just missing them both. “Watch yourself, Al!” he said sharply.

“Damnit, Ed! There has to be a safe place around here somewhere!” Al crouched down where he was, hunkering into himself. He might have only been looking for tracks in the gravel; but Ed knew that he was desperately seeking for spiritual help from the bardo.

“Hey!” yelled Uncle, pointing. “Up there, on the mountain!”

Leaning with his hands on his brother’s bent shoulders, Edward squinted into the wind. Then he saw what Uncle had spotted. Far away, a mile or more, there was a manmade shape on the mountainside, difficult to see under the gray and shifting light. “It looks like a hunting lodge!” said Simionce.

“Your eyes are like a hawk’s!” Ed exclaimed to Uncle. “It’s a long way, but let’s go for it. Come on, Al!” Giving his brother a hand up, Ed helped him over the fallen tree, then assisted Radhika and Devi as Uncle and Simionce aided Noa and her baby. Ed noted that the child’s incessant wailing was getting weaker.

They headed cross-country, in a straight line for the lodge. Uncle now led, arms crossed in front of him to shield his face. A flurry of old and tattered leaves swirled around them, and the voice of the wind was like a ghost’s low moan. As another gust ripped through they paused, taking shelter against a huge boulder.

“I’m scared,” said Radhika, hunkering against Devi, who put her arms around her.

As the wind died down momentarily, Edward darted away from the group. “He’s scouting for the best way out of here,” Al said. He leaned to put his hand on Rosa’s basket. “She’s worse, isn’t she?” Noa said nothing, but her too-bright eyes told the tale.

“Hey! Hey!” Edward was back already, waving them on vigorously. “There’s a road just past this grove! It leads right to the lodge!”

Only fugitives like themselves would be this high in the mountains this early in spring, so the little
company approached the hunting lodge with a fair amount of confidence. As they had thought, no one else was there. A rain had started which was quickly turning to sleet, and the temperature was dropping fast, so Simionce exclaimed in gladness when he spotted a cord of wood, neatly chopped and stacked and standing under a shed next to the main building. As Uncle let them inside, Ed, Al, Radhika and Devi each grabbed some of the fuel, and Simionce carried in an armload of cedar kindling. Only a few minutes passed before they had a good fire roaring in the great stone hearth.

Alphonse’s forehead was creased with stress as he pulled his brother aside. “Ed. The penicillin’s not working any more,” he whispered. “Rosa’s dying.”

“Do they know?” Edward glanced back. Noa sat with her swaddled infant on her lap, staring steadily into the fire as though in a trance. Simionce stood over them protectively.

“Noa does. I think they all do.”

“How long? Can you tell?”

“From the spirit-thread, I’d say she’s got till tonight. But it’s hard to guess.”

“Thanks.” Ed put a comforting hand on his shoulder before going to Noa and Simionce. “Hey,” he said gently. “How’s it going?”

Noa stirred, coming out of her daze enough to shake her head slowly.

“How can I see her?” Having won Noa’s trust a long time ago, Ed did not wait for an answer but leaned to push aside the swaddling clothes. For a moment he was almost shocked; the infant’s face was no longer red, and she was not crying at all, but appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Then he noted the strange chill that lay on her tiny limbs, and the waxen color of her little feet and hands. Al had been right, as usual. “Oh, damn,” he said, his throat closing painfully. “Noa. I’m so sorry. She’s not going to make it.”

IX.

The sleet turned to snow, and daylight turned to darkness. A pan of water was warmed on the hearth. Still moving as if in a trance, Noa gave her baby the ritual final bath, dressing her again in a scrap of cloth-of-gold as Devi silently assisted and the rest looked on. Radhika’s eyes were huge and dark with fear; it was her first view of human death, and everyone went out of their way to try to comfort her as the evening progressed. But to the Roma, the Grim Reaper (they called him The Night) was a very real entity come to steal away the living, and nothing could remove Radhika’s terror.

By late evening, Rosa’s breathing was rapid and labored, and the skin on her back looked mottled. Uncle conducted a loud, ritual chanting to scare away The Night. Their eyes met across the circle as they sang—Simionce and Uncle, Devi and Noa, Edward and Alphonse.

Midway through the night, Rosa began to breathe in strange, rattling gasps. Noa moaned and wept, clutching her to her breast in a last-ditch attempt to fend off Death as Simionce embraced them both. Radhika, unable to bear the sound, began to shriek and cry. Edward hugged her tightly, but she wouldn’t stop screaming. Then, in the midst of the confusion, he was startled to hear his brother’s voice rising above the noise. “Everyone, everyone! Please, just calm down! This is no way to attend to a Crossing!”
Alphonse never raised his voice, and the effect was that everyone, even Radhika, stopped what they were doing and stared at him.

“Death is a scary thing,” he offered. “Especially if you’re watching it happen. But Ed and I have both been through it, and it’s really not so bad. Right, brother?”

“That’s right,” Ed said. “Al and I have both died and been brought back to life. It’s not fun, but it’s not painful for long.”

“That’s what they all say once it’s over,” Al continued. “See, I’m a Spirit Alchemist. Helping people make this Crossing is a big part of what I do. I can even talk to them afterward, to make sure they’re all right. So please… let me help Rosa.”

Noa glanced at Simionce. After a moment the rawboned man nodded grimly.

Alphonse leaned to carefully gather the infant up in his arms. Though there were tears in his eyes, he remained calm and relaxed as he cradled the distressed and dying child. “I know,” he murmured softly. “It hurts so bad! But it’ll be better soon.” He looked up. “Her spirit is separating from her body. I can see it.”

Noa gave him a panicked look, but Simionce lay his hands on her shoulders.

“Where’s Night?” Uncle said. “Do you see him too?”

“No. There is no such creature,” Al said. “I know you think otherwise, but believe me, there are no monsters here.”

“What is death if not a monster?!?” cried Noa, bursting into fresh tears.

“It’s a process,” Al replied, guiding her hand to lay it on Rosa’s breast. The desperate fluttering of the child’s heart felt like a bird’s. “We inhabit bodies so we can operate within this world. When we die, we leave the body behind so we can travel on. It’s not an evil thing.”

“It IS evil, it is!!” Noa rocked back and forth on her heels, her face in her hands. It seemed to all present that the poor mother was beyond reach.

Al waited patiently until she subsided, then eased the baby back into her arms. “She wants you to hold her while she leaves. It hurts, just like being born.” Tears flowed freely down his cheeks. “She wants me to tell you she loves you,” he whispered. “She says she made a mistake. She needs to be somewhere else right now. Will you let her go?”

“No, no! I won’t! I won’t let her go!” Noa subsided into inarticulate sobs.

“She’s leaving now.” Al lay his hand soothingly on the infant’s forehead. “Goodbye, Rosa,” he whispered tenderly. “I love you.” He murmured something else under his breath before he slowly stepped back. As he did, the baby stopped breathing.

Silence fell suddenly.

“What did you do?” said Simionce dangerously. The big man tended to suppress his emotions, and that could be very unhealthy at a time like this, Edward thought. He slipped quietly in front of his brother.

“Nothing,” Al said, not even noticing Ed’s defensive move as he listened intently to the bardo for something only he could hear.
“Rosa?” Noa gasped, gently shifting her bundle. “Rosa!” But the child lay lifeless on her heaving breast. As they all stared in horror, the infant gave a little hiccup, then another.

“That’s normal,” Al said softly. “Don’t be afraid. That’s just the body. She’s left.” There was a pause. “She wants me to thank you for all of your love. She says she feels better now,” he added quietly.

“Get out,” said Simionce, his eyes blazing. Alphonse started, then retreated quickly, his face scarlet with sudden emotion as he belatedly realized he’d been interfering with the customs of his hosts. Edward followed him out of the room quickly and without comment. As the door shut behind them, a great wailing started.

X.

The snow was falling thick and fast, and the two brothers watched it from an upstairs window. They were in the bedroom next to the chimney, but without rugs or linens of any sort, the room was chill. Al rested his chin on his hands and gazed out at the dark mass of the mountain. “It’s depressing, Ed,” he said at last. “Every time I feel myself getting close to these people, something happens and I’m on the outside again.”

“Yeah, well, I guess that’s to be expected,” Edward replied. “We might be travellers too, but we’ll never fit into their world, Al.”

There was a long silence. From below them still came the faint sound of weeping.

“You really were something back there, brother,” Ed continued after a long moment. “If I didn’t believe you were a full-fledged Spirit Alchemist before, I certainly do now.”

Alphonse did not reply.

“You’ve grown so much, Al. I knew you were pretty mature before, but now I feel like I’m the one with the catching up to do.”

A spasm of pain crossed Al’s face. “I gave her permission to leave when her mother wouldn’t. Was that wrong, Ed?”

“You did your best, brother.”

“I know. But was I wrong?”

“I don’t think so, Al. Rosa would have died with or without permission. You might have sped up the process by a few seconds in the end, but if you did, it just shaved that much off her suffering.” Ed put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it tightly. “I hope you’re with me when I die,” he said earnestly.

For some reason those words brought up all of Al’s grief and he began to weep, putting his hands over his face as all the emotion of Rosa’s death finally found its outlet. It was always this way for a Spirit Alchemist after a Crossing—they tended to absorb the emotions of the moment and release them later—but this was the first time Al had had his brother by his side to ease the pain.

Edward led him slowly away to the warmest corner of the room, by the chimney. There he spread
out their coats and blankets and quietly made him lay down; and they slept that night together without comment or fear.
Chapter Summary

Ed and Al meet Siegfried, an eccentric scientist living in Munich, who wants to find the sacred texts of the Thule Society.

Chapter Notes

This chapter introduces Siggy, and I feel it's a better reflection of his personality than anything else I've ever written-- even though I'm currently writing my third volume of an original fic in which he is the star!

I.

It was still snowing the next morning, and Ed and Al rose ravenous and cold.

When the brothers came downstairs bundled in their coats, the atmosphere had changed subtly. Noaa was quietly busy burning all of Rosa’s articles—her blanket and her swaddling clothes, even her basket. Simionce was helping her. Radhika and Devi were tending a pot of thin porridge, and Uncle had gone outside, to dig a hidden grave with his knife. No one wanted to speak to the Elric brothers.

Sizing up the situation quickly, Ed grasped Al by the arm. “Let’s go piss.”

“But I don’t have to! Ed, I’m starving!”

Edward steered his brother outside and closed the door quietly. “Look, Al,” he began. “I’m sorry. There’s something I should have told you yesterday, but I forgot.”

Al groaned. “Oh, no. What did I do this time?”

Ed drew a deep breath before explaining. “It’s like this. All spirits and disembodied souls are malevolent by nature, and everything associated with them, like Rosa’s things, has to be cast off. So when you told our friends you were a Spirit Alchemist, and talked to ghosts—”

“Crap!” Al kicked the air. “I noticed they were scared, but I didn’t realize why. Half the people in Amestris are scared of spirits, too—but all of them are scared of dying!”

“I’m sorry, Al.”

“It’s not your fault. Now what do we do?”

Ed patted the pocket of his coat. “Let’s go hunting and make them a food offering. I’ve got my pistol—and I’m starving too!”
It was difficult to hunt with the snow still falling, but the wind had died down, and Ed and Al slipped into a nearby grove of evergreen trees. Here the needle-carpeted earth still lay bare in some places, while the thick covering of snow on the canopy far above cast the world into perpetual gloom. But there were signs of life—small birds flitting silently here and there in the branches, and the chattering of a large gray squirrel. Edward positioned himself carefully under the tree and took the animal on his second shot, but after that had no more luck. Al trailed listlessly behind his brother, shivering and coughing, and after a couple of otherwise unsuccessful hours, they made their way back to the lodge.

Looking nothing so much like a wayward child attempting a peace offering, Edward wordlessly offered the dead squirrel at the lodge door, and Uncle took it. Radhika perked up as she saw what he had, and the two went off to consult with Devi. “Give me the offal and I’ll use it to bait a trap,” Ed called after them. Then Devi gestured to them, and they came eagerly to get two cups of porridge.

With Rosa’s things disposed of and her burial complete, Noaa and Simionce were sitting by themselves, huddled near the fire. After a lot of hesitation, Alphonse approached them diffidently. “I’m very sorry if I offended you,” he said quietly.

“It’s all right, little lad,” Simionce replied. “How could you, a gadjie, know our ways?” Nothing more was said; Alphonse drifted back to Edward’s side, and the day dragged on.

That night, Ed did as he had promised and rigged a trap. The snow had let up and the moon was shining through the clouds as he waited outside behind the woodpile with his pistol at the ready. Before midnight he bagged a large wild dog—enough to feed them all for several days, if the animal could be made edible. Ed suspected that Devi knew how. He skinned and gutted it, and when he hauled the carcass to the door, Radhika squealed in excitement.

Cacheing the offal for future use, Edward cleaned himself up and went to bed. Alphonse had turned in some hours before, and as Ed lay down beside him he stirred, coughing a little. Ed frowned with concern, but his brother showed no sign of fever. He smiled in his sleep as Edward’s fingers touched his brow, and a great love and protectiveness welled up in Ed’s heart.

He lay awake by Al for some time, watching him sleep. His brother had risked everything to be with him, leaping between the worlds unprotected except for a suit of armor which had been worthless against the forces of the Gate. Hundreds of hardened, armored soldiers had died in that same crossing, and Ed had no idea how the gentle Alphonse had survived. He deserved better than to be forever wandering in the wilderness on some quixotic mission.

Al was right, Ed thought. Al was always right. Without alchemy, they were just a couple of kids.

His head twinged and he groaned, recognizing the signs of an impending migraine, and his moment of lucidity vanished, replaced by the old frustration. It was such a big world out there, and he was accomplishing nothing.
Ed and Al spent the next week sick. They did everything together, Al joked between coughs, as they sat bundled in blankets by the roaring hearth. He had contracted a cold. Meanwhile, Ed fought a migraine that would not quit. It came and went, sometimes almost disappearing only to return with a vengeance as he suffered a series of intense visions that, at a couple of points, had him on the floor writhing in agony and their Roma hosts in a panic, fearing that he might die, too.

When he recounted his newest dreams, Al listened with intent concern. Something was trying to get through, he said, something urgent, but none of it seemed to make sense. Foremost in Ed’s mind was a female voice—Winry, he thought—saying over and over again, “No! Don’t make me do this! No! Don’t make me!”—until he’d been ready to scream. Simultaneously he’d had visions of Huskisson and the bioalchemist Shou Tucker, with three dragons—one green, one gold, and one a celestial mother-of-pearl—overarching everything until it was all a jumbled mess, and he was reduced at last to weeping in agony and frustration.

Al was commiserating. “You never had the precognitive Gift before,” he said, “But you sure have it now! Maybe your being near Noaa for so long has set it off—you two might act like tuning forks or something. Don’t you agree that your symptoms are typical?”

Ed tried to nod and winced. “The symptoms are typical. I used to think Precogs were sissies, Al—always lolling around and whining about their heads. But, oh, damn, this really hurts!”

“That’s how Precognition works, but it’ll pass, brother. I just wish we could figure out what all of this means.”

With the brothers sick, the relations between them and their Roma friends quickly normalized. Devi and Radhika scrambled to take care of them, supplying Alphonse with clean hankies and warm blankets, and Edward with cold packs for his head. Noaa, who was slowly recovering from her shock and grief, tried to Read him, but came up with little of use. Afterward, however, Ed’s headache began to subside, and by the next morning it was gone completely, along with the nightmares. Strangely, during Ed’s week-long ordeal, Alfons Heiderich never appeared to him, though his brother told him privately that he still sensed him around.

With the storm behind them and Ed and Al recovered, the familia ventured back on the road. In two days they had wended their way down to Walchensee, and from there they hitched a ride toward Munich with friends, sending the grim Simionce ahead as a messenger. Evidently Siegfried was still on the agenda. Al noted that Edward looked pensive and nervous, as he always did when contemplating something behind his back.

They camped that night outside a small village only a few miles away from the city. Sleeping by the fire, Alphonse felt Edward slide carefully out from beneath their shared blanket. When he looked up a few minutes later, he could just pick out his silhouette inside the nearest tent, and Uncle’s facing
him. Their soft voices rippled from under the canvas flap, but he couldn’t make out what they were saying.

Al rolled over into the warm space Ed had left empty, and curled up into himself. There was no need to eavesdrop. Whatever Ed had seen fit to discuss without him, he’d find out about it soon enough.

II.

“We’ve been what?!” Al cried in dismay, stumbling last off the truck after Uncle, Devi and Edward. Noaa’s familia seemed to know every other one around, and a distant relative—a loud and happy old woman with beautiful adornments and a wide smile—had driven them to the outskirts of Munich in her ornate, heavily decorated vehicle. As she turned the engine off and settled down to wait, Al found himself standing in the middle of a well-travelled thoroughfare, his face blank with shock. Devi shook her head and tsk’d as Edward grabbed his arm and hauled him out of harm’s way.

“Ed! Is this true? I don’t believe it!”

“It’s kind of true,” said Edward. “It’s true money’s changed hands for us, but the deal isn’t for real.”

Alphonse stopped again, still struggling to digest the information. “But—this just can’t happen!”

“People are bought and sold all the time, even in lands where there is no slavery,” Noaa said. “I should know,” she added, referring to the unfortunate incident with the Thule Society which had introduced her to Edward.

“But—we have rights! We’re free people!”

“And free you will remain,” Uncle said over his shoulder as he led the way on foot along the highway. The Isar River ran nearby, and there was an open marsh by this section of the road, stretching for a mile between them and the city. He was glancing at it frequently. “No one intends for you to be a slave, lad. Consider your buy price just a finder’s fee. Siegfried will be very interested in what you have to say.”

“I’m beginning to be afraid of him,” Al said honestly. He was feeling more and more miserable the more he thought about the situation. “What kind of person would buy another human being? This is all because I’m a Spirit Alchemist, right? I just don’t fit in and so you have to get rid of me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Al!” Edward said. “This Siegfried fellow is rich, and he buys all kinds of curiosities from Uncle. He likes to help the Roma. This is a way for our friends to provide for us and make money at the same time. It was a rough winter.”

“So you don’t mind being sold as a curiosity?”

“Al, listen to me. I had a little talk with Noaa. I told her we were going to have to leave, and between us, we came up with this idea. It made the rounds, and they asked me if it would be OK. I agreed to it last night, and the funds changed hands this morning. I didn’t tell you beforehand because I knew you’d go all indignant, and I didn’t want to sour things. But I knew all the time that this was going down.”

Al frowned.
Ed’s glance was affectionate. Alphonse was so like the way he remembered their mother. “Come on down off your high horse, Al. They get money. We get a place to stay.”

“But—how did they ‘sell’ a couple of ordinary kids to this guy, if he didn’t want slaves or something worse? Something’s actually being traded here.”

“We know about Shambala,” Ed replied simply. “And for reasons known only to himself, he wants that information very badly. Badly enough to pay good money for it. But how much he learns is up to us. Right?”

His face red with emotion, Al pondered what Ed had said as they hurried down the roadside. When viewed in the light of helping friends, a little money changing hands didn’t really seem so bad. But Edward had always had an outrageous, sometimes even frightening, way of thinking. It was why he had tried to resurrect their mother, and what had gotten him, Al, stuck for five years as a ghost in a suit of armor. On the other hand, it had also gotten them out of countless scrapes. Al decided he didn’t know whether to be furious or pleased at his brother’s latest escapade. As for his Roma friends, he was realizing belatedly that he harbored different standards for them. Their way of life was too unlike his own to make any snap judgements.

“There’s his car,” Uncle said, pointing down the road at a well-appointed Audi. “And there is he—right where he’d said he’d be!” The little group halted, looking off across the moor.

Ed peered curiously at a short, nearly square, curly-haired figure hopping from hummock to hummock in the middle of the swamp. The little man had small round glasses and was dressed in a khaki-colored safari outfit, with a wide-brimmed hat and high boots that ended above the knee. He was carrying a burlap sack. Every so often he would pounce on some unsuspecting creature, depositing it in the sack with a roar of laughter.

"That’s him, all right. Siegfried Schauer,” Uncle said. He crossed his arms. "There is none other! You’ll like him, lads. He respects the Roma and has often helped us."

"He can’t spend all of his time chasing frogs in the swamp!" Al said. "I know he’s rich, but does he really do anything for a living?"

“He doctors the Roma. But mainly he runs an inn on the edge of town. We’ve arranged for you to work for him.”

“What kind of work?” replied Al suspiciously, and everyone laughed. He blushed scarlet. Ed put a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Al,” he said seriously. “You know I’d never get you into something like that.”

“But would Siegfried?"

"Siegfried Schauer? He’s a much more respectable sort than that," Uncle said kindly. “Books and all that. Reading and writing. He has some talents that might surprise you.”

“Uncle?” Al said desperately. “Why did you go along with my brother’s crazy scheme?”

“For the very reasons he said. And others.”

“What others?”

“It’s the same old story, lad,” the old man said honestly. “The Gypsy hunts never go away, and there are plenty of rumblings. A new book has just been made. It’s by a psychiatrist.” He spat the term in contempt.
Uncle was literate. He had learned to read from his brother—who had taught himself as a child using a cast-off Bible—and quickly realized its worth. He continued intensely: "I hear that this book recommends the wholesale destruction of our race, and the Jews, too, and it’s spreading this marime notion throughout the whole of Germany.

"If push comes to shove, we may have to sell ourselves as slaves just to get out of this land. Do you want to be a real slave? Being with us at the wrong time could be a death sentence, lad. You need to leave us—and I know Siegfried will take good care of you."

Al could say nothing, but only gaped at him, the shock of being 'sold' trivialized in the face of this greater revelation.

"There’s another angle, Al," Ed put in. “I’ve been worried about it for some time. In Amestris, we're highly respected alchemists. Here, we're a liability, and we obviously don't belong to this family. It looks like we were adopted, or maybe even kidnapped as children like the gadje legend.” Uncle’s lips twitched in a smile as Ed unconsciously used the Roma term. “If we stay with the Roma, the wrong idea could get the whole familia killed.” Ed turned back to Uncle and Devi. "How can we get in touch with you if we need you?"

"Just tell Siegfried. He has ways."

"All right." Ed put a hand on his brother's arm. "Say goodbye to our friends, Al," he murmured.

"Don’t be too woebegone, lads. We'll meet again before this is all over," the old man said sagely. "But you must always remember-- tis from Faerie you are, and to Faerie you must return." As he said the last, he raised his hand in the air, and from the swamp the little man doffed his hat and waved back vigorously.

“That’s the signal. Go, lads!” Uncle said. “Devi and I will wait here for half an hour in Renata’s truck. If you want to come back, you may—but Siegfried will be most unhappy!"

The Elrics started off slowly, Edward leading. Both boys cast many glances back as they walked down the little hill and waded into the tall grass that bordered the swamp.

III.

Golden eyes met blazing blue ones over a tufted clump of grass. At any other time, Edward would have choked with laughter.

“Siegfried Schauer,” the naturalist whispered urgently, then held up a large grayish-brown frog. “And this is Rana Arvalis. The Swedish swamp frog!”

"Edward Elric," Ed responded. “This is my brother Alphonse.” He gestured to Al, who was not looking very amused.

Siegfried took his first good look at Al and froze in astonishment, the frog still wriggling in his grasp. Then he began to stutter in earnest. “J-j-just like Al Heiderich, you look!”

“Alfons Heiderich? You knew him?” Al said, equally shocked.

"Yes. I knew him. We worked together."
The two parties stared at each other. Siegfried looked like the type of person Heiderich might have worked with, Ed thought, while Al just gaped.

After an awkward moment, the strange little man broke the silence. "My friends. The Roma. I’m glad they sent you. I am a naturalist. Philosopher. Doctor." The frog went in the bag, and a muddy paw was stuck out in Edward's general direction.

Ed shook it gingerly. "Glad to meet you. I understand we'll be working at your inn."

Siegfried stuttered again. Whether he had an actual speech impediment, or whether the trait was from excitement was hard to tell. His eyes were as bright as two little stars and his hand harbored a fine tremor. "Yes. But I need help right now. C-catch me one hundred frogs!"

* * *

By the time Ed and Al had the sack full of frogs, it was growing near evening. Covered with mud, they trudged across the moor following their new acquaintance. Seemingly tireless, Siegfried led the way out of the swamp and onto the road. Putting the sack in the back seat of his car, he gestured them both into the front. "Come along. Back to the inn. Baths await. And food." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

"Not frogs!" Alphonse groaned.

"Oh no. They're for my experiments." And he hopped into the driver's seat, moving like a frog himself. As they drove off toward Munich at a patently dangerous pace, he began to recite, from memory, the menu of the Golden Toad Inn.

The Golden Toad was an ancient and dilapidated three-storey building tucked inconspicuously on Einhorn Street, a few minutes into town. It was heavily timbered and featured ancient stone outer walls which were six feet thick on the ground floor. Siegfried mumbled something about it having been built in the 1600's. When they arrived at the building he parked the car in a side lot, then led the way in through the ornately carven front doors, leaving the brothers to carry the dripping sack.

"Upstairs, upstairs," he said, gesticulating wildly. "First right. Then left. Then right. T-t-to the end. Of the hall. Right again. In the tub!"

Ed and Al were a little dizzied by his rapid-fire instructions, but nevertheless found their way to the bathtub in question. "Does he want them left in the sack, or what?" Al said. Edward backtracked down the stairs and returned a minute later, puffing. "He wants them loose," Ed said.

"But they'll get out!"

"Loose he wants them, and loose it is!" Ed upended the sack in the tub, and all the frogs swarmed out. They began escaping immediately.

"Let's shut the door," Alphonse suggested. Leaving the sack behind, they scooted out, slamming the door behind them, then paused. The soft sound of the frogs hopping on the other side sounded like large raindrops.

"I wonder if he does this often," Al said, looking down at the both of them. They were filthy, leaving tracks of mud on the tile floor.
"Need a bath? Of course!" Siegfried's voice boomed out around the nearest corner and they jumped. His bespectacled face peered around at them. With his hat off, his curly red hair stood up all over his head.

"Not with the frogs, I hope," Ed said cheerfully.

"Oh no. Though it would. Be fun, perhaps! In there." He pointed back down the hallway. "You first. Me later. I have to inspect. The catch."

"What is your experiment?" Edward asked with genuine interest.

"The Experiment? Amphibian communication." He shrugged expressively.

"You've got to be pulling my leg!" Edward said doubtfully. The man was just daft enough to be serious.

"What do they communicate about?" asked Al.

"They sing about many things. Mating. Weather. Even food. In the beergarden. I have a frog pond. I will take them there."

"Why didn't you have us take them there to begin with?" Al couldn't see the sense in the whole affair.

"I must. Inspect them first! Strange things are happening. Th-there are frogs with spare legs. I found one with two heads." Siegfried scratched his forehead. "I do not know why. But is not your problem. Go now. Take your baths!"

"Okaayy. Let's go, Al." Edward smiled politely as they brushed past the mad scientist and wended their way down the hall in the direction he had indicated.

At the head of the stairs on the right, there was another bath. The door in the opposite wall led onto a very pleasant large room with two small beds and a great window facing east, where it would catch the sunrise. Al halted in surprise. "You don't suppose this is our room, do you?!"

"You like?" Siegfried was suddenly behind them and they jumped again.

"Oh, yes!" Edward said appreciatively.

"Good. It's yours. Have your bath. Th-then we'll eat. Excuse me now. I have to scrutinize my frogs."

He turned and trundled back up the hallway again.

"Sheesh!" Al said once the door was shut. "That man is certifiable!"

But Ed was already headed for the bathroom, leaving his clothes scattered everywhere as he went. Al followed, automatically picking them up and tossing them in a corner to handwash later. It wasn't long before both brothers were in the large tub, and the warm water seemed the greatest of luxuries after the days on the road.

They didn't talk much, just scrubbed, but Edward noted his brother's continued downcast look. Finally he reached to touch his face gently. "Al," he said.

At his caress, Al began to weep. His warm tears ran over Ed's hand into the bathwater. "Alphonse," Ed whispered. "What's wrong?"

"Every time I make a friend in this world, they leave me. First it was Blackie. Then Rosa. Now
everyone else.”

“That may be. But you won't lose me again. I promise,” Ed said sympathetically. “Okay?”


“Don’t be.” Ed reached for a towel. "Now let's get out of here and go see what kind of dinner old Siegfried's cooking up."

“I think I’m afraid to look,” Al said honestly.

* * *

Ed and Al had each brought one change of clothes in their knapsacks. Clean and neat, they soon found their way downstairs to the kitchen. Much to their relief, it wasn't Siegfried who was cooking--he was evidently still inspecting his frogs-- but a tall young man who was humming busily over the great gas stove, juggling skillets. The aroma of fried liver and onions was mouthwatering to the brothers and they approached with eagerness. "Hello?" Edward said.

The cook turned and they nearly fell over. "Russell!" Al stuttered. "Russell Tringham?!"

The young man smiled. "You've got it half right. Russell Hansford. Do we know each other?"

"Uh, no, I guess," Al said sheepishly. "But you sure look like another Russell we used to know."

"Really? That's interesting." He turned briefly to tend the still-cooking food. "Looks like dinner's about done. You would be the boys Siggy told me about?"

"Yes. I'm Edward. He's Alphonse."

"Nice to meet you. We could certainly use some extra help around here. Siegfried works me to the bone, what with his experiments on the one side and the inn on the other!" Russell swept his arm across his brow dramatically before turning again to pull the skillets off the heat. "You can learn to bus tables tonight, since there are only the four of us here. Help me dish up."

Ed and Al were quick to comply. Russell was friendly and talkative and it became quickly apparent he would be a good person to work for. "So," Ed said as he carried two of the plates out into the dining room and set them at a table, "Does Siegfried often conduct, uh, experiments?"

"All the time," Russell said. "By the way, where is he?"

"Upstairs," Al put in. "He's inspecting his frogs."

Russell paused, clearly dismayed. "Frogs? Upstairs? Did he put frogs in the bath again?"


"A hundred?!" Russell dropped the silverware. Edward caught the knives in his prosthetic hand, leaving Al to juggle the forks and spoons as Russell ran for the stairs. The brothers paused, staring at one another as they heard the young cook's footsteps pounding the hallway floor above their heads. The light fixtures in the ceiling were jarred a little from the impact and dust came drifting down. Distant shouting ensued. Ed and Al could barely make out the words, but some of them seemed a bit
harsh to be traded between employee and employer. Suddenly a great wail rose up that pierced right through the walls. Ed and Al glanced at each other and ran up the stairs.

Siegfried was standing by the frog bathroom in tears, his chubby hands balled up against his face. Russell loomed over him, hands on hips. "No, no, no, no!!" sobbed Siegfried. "Not my experiment! D-d-do not ruin my experiment!!"

"Now Siggy," Russell said, trying to lower his voice a bit, "You know what happened last time you tried this! The frogs got loose in the walls, remember? They croaked for months."

"Yes, I remember!" Siegfried said. "It was very good. Nice for study."

"You thought so. Some of the guests didn't."

"This b-building does not belong to the guests. I want frogs. I have frogs!" Siegfried looked up. His glasses were steaming over and he doffed them, wiping his tears with his sleeve. "You!" he pointed at Edward, who flinched. "Tell him."

"Uh," said Edward. "Well, Russell, from what I understand, it is his inn."

"Ah hah! Got you!" Siegfried shook his finger in Russell's face. "Even perfect strangers know this!"

Russell sighed, slumping a little. "Oh, Siggy. I should know better than to try and stop you. It's just--"

"The wind was knocked out of him as Siegfried suddenly grabbed him in a bear hug and kissed him vigorously on both cheeks. "That's right. My dear Russell. The experiment continues. No hard feelings. No dissension. No problems!"

Somewhat embarrassed, Alphonse and a grinning Edward turned to go, but Siegfried's commanding voice rang out behind them. "Stop!"

In unison, they turned back like soldiers. Siegfried waved them closer. "This," he said conspiratorially, gesturing to his cook, "Is Lazybones. My. Significant. Other. Yes?"

"Yes, we've met him already," Edward said, reaching nevertheless to shake Russell's hand. "Good to meet you," he said. Behind him, Al waved timidly.

"Good. It is understood." Siegfried glanced back in unconscious nervousness at the bathroom door.

"Why don't you just leave them for now," said Russell. "Dinner's ready. You can check on the frogs later."

"No. Can't leave now." Siegfried was adamant, crossing his arms and planting his feet firmly.

"You can't eat while you're inspecting frogs!" Russell said plaintively. "Come on downstairs, Siggy. Just for a few minutes?"

But Siegfried looked uncomfortable, shifting from foot to foot, hemming and hawing.

"If he's insecure without his frogs, why don't we just bring the food up here?" Edward suggested helpfully. "After all, the place is already a mess." He gestured at the muddy tracks on the floor.

"Yes. Good idea," Siegfried said. "Bring it then. Lazybones, get us a table."

With a long-suffering sigh, Russell left. Ed and Al followed him back down the stairs, where they retrieved the still-steaming plates, making themselves at home as only experienced travelers could do. Ed tapped himself a glass of beer at the darkened bar while Alphonse got some milk from the large
zinc kitchen cooler. Russell meanwhile fetched a small portable table and chair set. "We use this a lot on our excursions," he said as he lugged it back up to the landing.

"Excursions?"

"Siggy does more than hunt frogs!" The procession wended its way back down the hall to where Siegfried still stood like a sentinel. "OK," Russell said, unfolding the table in the middle of the passage. "Dinner is served!"

The liver and onions was excellent and Ed and Al wolfed it down with appreciation. Russell and Siegfried dug into their portions with no less gusto, although Siegfried was jumping up every two minutes or so to put his ear to the bathroom door.

When he could finally slow down enough to speak politely between bites, Edward asked, "So Siegfried, what are the terms of our employment? The Gypsies didn't say."

Siegfried sat down again at the table with a thump. "They are not Gypsies!" he said emphatically. "They are the Roma! Travellers from India long ago."

"Right. Sorry."

Siegfried doffed his glasses and lay them on the table, rubbing his forehead with his palm. “The Roma and I go way back. When I was young. They saved my life. But that is a story for another time.” He sighed. “Now. We w-were talking. Of your employment. Hansford here is overworked. No time for fun. You boys are to help him. Yes?"

"We gathered that," Al said.

"In exchange. You get the room you like. By the landing. You get food. You get a little money. And knowledge."

"Room, board and spending money. That's more than fair," Edward said. "But what's this knowledge you're talking about?"

"Siegfried has a library second to none," Russell interjected. "And he hears from the Roma that you're interested in a certain book."

"Yes. Yes. The Thule volumes." Siegfried waved his fork about nervously before stabbing a piece of liver.

Edward leaned forward on both elbows and the table shifted a little. "So you know about the Thule Society? From Alfons Heiderich?"

"From my brother. Heinrich Schauer."

“Heinrich Schauer!” In his weariness, Ed made the horrified exclamation without thinking, and Siegfried’s sharp blue eyes blinked once in recognition of this acknowledgement.

“Who’s he?” said Alphonse. “You never mentioned anyone by that name before.”

Ed half-turned to him. Al could clearly tell he was disgusted with himself for his reaction, but he put a good face on it and said: “You know for awhile I was helping Alfons develop his rocket fuel. Well, Heinrich oversaw his department. The man was a terror. Everyone hated him.” He glanced back to Siegfried. “No offense.”
None taken. My b-brother is. Shall we say?—a character.” Siegfried waved it off as Alphonse choked on his milk.

“I heard much from my brother about the Thule Experiment. A disaster. A triumph.” The little scientist paused to swallow before looking squarely in their faces. Edward noted his tremor was a little worse. "You are f-f-from Shambala. The Secret Land. Do not deny this!"

Ed and Al looked at each other, pretending dismay. "Shambala is a myth!" Ed said.

"Ah! You are trying to protect it! Good. Uncle would not lie. Not to me." He glared at them for a moment, then leaned forward. "You are from Shambala. I can prove it to you!"

"How's that?" Ed glared back.

"Like this!" The naturalist’s hand shot out, grabbing Ed by the right wrist, and before he could react, Siegfried had hauled him halfway across the table and had stripped off his glove, revealing the automail beneath. "Hah!" he roared triumphantly.

"Hey! Let go of my brother!" Al stood up abruptly and as he did, the rickety portable table collapsed under Edward’s weight. Russell's plate landed in his lap and Edward landed on top of Siegfried. A brief tussle ensued. When it was over, Russell was restraining Al and Siegfried was sitting on Edward's chest. Ed's right sleeve was rolled back to the elbow and the naturalist was extending the sophisticated steel arm for all to view. "See?" he said mildly. "Highly advanced prosthesis. In this world we cannot make. Comes from Shambala."

Alphonse kicked Russell in the shins, then bit him in the hand. "What are you doing?! Get off of my brother!" Russell yelped but did not let go.

"Can't-- breathe!" gasped Edward.

Siegfried studiously ignored both of them, still examining the arm as Edward wheezed. "Very lovely," he muttered. "Very tragic." He got up slowly and solemnly bent to offer his victim a hand up.

Russell released Al as Edward staggered to his feet. "I'm really sorry!" the blond man said hastily, holding both hands up and stepping back quickly as Al turned on him with a snarl. "I just didn't want you to hurt Siggy!"

"Whew!" Ed said, brushing himself off and pulling his sleeve back into place. He waved off his anxious brother's ministrations with a sheepish smile. "It's all right, Al. I'm not hurt, but boy, Siggy there is a whole lot heavier than he looks!"

"Now the truth is out!" said Siegfried. "You are from Shambala. You cannot deny it! I want to know about it. The people. The places. The things."

Al gripped Edward's arm, shaking his head, but Ed sighed tiredly. "I guess there really is no denying it. We are from a different world, Siegfried, but it's not called Shambala."

"Just how much did Uncle tell you about us?" Al asked suddenly.

“He said only that you. Were from. That place."

"But that was enough, wasn't it?" Edward said. “Because you bought us sight unseen!”

"No. Not just for that. You boys. Need a different kind of home. Than what the Roma can provide.”
“So he said we were ‘different?’” Al remarked as he helped Russell pick up the tableware.


"I get it! You want us to help you get those texts?” Edward almost laughed as Siegfried nodded vigorously.

“If you do not know. What they contained. Then we should learn together.” Siegfried turned nervously to the frog door, then revolved back again. "I know where the texts are hidden. I help you get them. Then we share, like good scientists."

"We have to think about this," Ed said.

"Ah. Boys not as quick as frogs!"

* * *

After they had helped Russell clean up the hall and Siegfried had gone to look at his frogs, the brothers retreated to their room and made sure the door was bolted before sitting down side by side on the bed by the window.

"Well, what do you think, Al?"

"Things are going way too fast. I'm kind of dizzy." Al looked up sheepishly. "I still can't believe you and Uncle came up with such a crazy scheme!"

"You call that crazy? It's been crazy ever since I landed here two years ago!"

They sat for a moment in silence. Then Al continued. "I still think Siegfried is certifiable."

"And I think he's great, but I wonder how much of his behavior is an act. Whatever you do, Alphonse, don't underestimate him." Ed drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "One thing's for sure-- we can't let anyone else in this world get their hands on the method to make a Gate."

"Right. But we need those texts to get home and this is our chance to get them." Al frowned thoughtfully. "I wonder how he learned their location?"

“I’m not sure. But it probably wasn’t Heinrich. He would never betray the Thules.” Ed was silent for a moment before continuing. "I never saw those books. I wasn’t even aware there was a Greater Alchemical aspect to the Thule project until the day it was ready to go. But given what I have studied of this world's alchemy, a lot of what's in those books is most likely garbage. It's probably just a paragraph or two that contains the real secret. Assuming we get the books, if we can read them first, we can just tear out that page."

"Siegfried is pretty forceful. If he gets it in his head he wants first grabs, it'll be hard to stop him.”

"We won't help him unless he agrees to our conditions. Right?"

"Agrees is one thing. Look at the way he got you down, there in the hall."
"Yeah, well, he caught me by surprise." It was Edward's turn to look sheepish. He flexed his prosthetic wrist uncomfortably. "He recognizes automail as a foreign technology, too."

Al shook his head. "Do you think we're even safe here? I mean, what if he wants your arm or leg?"

"Hah! Just let him try and get them!"

"Radbhika and Andreas got them more than once." Al got up, dragging a nearby chair to lodge it firmly under the doorknob. "There. You can bet he has a skeleton key."

"At least Russell seems to be pretty normal," Edward conceded.

"Yeah, he's OK. I can’t believe they’re married."

"Guys can’t marry each other in this world, Alphonse. You know that. But it looks like they do have some kind of equivalent exchange!"

"I wonder if the Roma know that?" Al had the feeling that their Roma friends, requiring as they did that everyone in their tribe get married and produce children—no exceptions—would not condone any kind of joining that would not also deliver plenty of offspring to continue the clan. He wondered briefly what people like his brother did—did they leave the familia to be assimilated among the gadje if they were lucky, and meet with imprisonment or death if they were not? Or did they live a double life? Did they suppress their natural love until nothing was left of themselves and they became a mere cog in the tribal machine? Or did they somehow sublimate it all?

Ed yawned, stretching. "Whatever. I do know you’re right as usual, Al. Things have been going way too fast. I say we sleep on this."

"OK. I guess there’s really nothing else we can do."

The two brothers sat for a few minutes longer, glancing around the room and out the window. It would be a clear night. Al pulled the casing shut and slid the latch in place. "This is a really good room," he said thoughtfully.

"It is. Uncle wouldn’t have set up this deal if it wasn’t good for us, Al."

"I guess."

"So which bed do you want, Alphonse? These are really too cramped to share."

"I'll take the one by the window," Al said, a little wistfully. "Just promise you won't leave the building or anything like that without telling me first, OK?" The way he said it warmed Ed’s heart.

"I promise. Good night, baby brother. Sleep well—and don’t worry." Edward kissed his cheek and was kissed in return. Turning down the gas light, he got up, doffed his outerwear and fell exhausted on the opposite bed. It was very comfortable, with good quality linens and a fine blanket and pillow, and after so long sleeping on the ground and in truck cabs, just stretching out on such a thing was a wonder.

He was almost asleep when one of Siegfried’s frogs began to croak shrilly. It was inside the wood-and-plaster wall by his head. He stirred, rolling onto his right side and bunching part of the blanket over his exposed ear. Sleep was just coming again when a second frog started. This one was a baritone and it sang arrhythmically. Ed groaned. So this, he thought, was what Russell Hansford had meant about loose frogs getting in the walls.
An hour later, Al woke up. The frogs had multiplied until the room resounded with them, but they
didn't bother him. Rather, the moonlight coming brightly through the window had gotten in his eyes.
He sat, glancing to his brother's bed. Ed was lying very still and silent and he wondered if he was
asleep. Al turned to look out over the town. To his left, a wing of the building revealed all dark
rooms except for one. Dimly lit, it was on the main floor. A figure stood on the small balcony,
looking out at the stars. Al squinted. It was Siegfried, listening to the frogs.

### IV.

"Brother. Brother?"

"Don't talk to me, Al." Ed was lying facedown with his rear in the air and his prosthetic arm hanging
over the side of his bed. His head, shoulders and left arm were buried under his blanket, with his
pillow on top of the pile. The rest of him was uncovered except for his underwear.

"Hey! Wake up!" Al couldn't resist swatting his buttocks sharply and Edward yelled, erupting from
under the pillow. "You little--" he snarled, snagging Al by the braid. Alphonse laughed. "You
wouldn't pull it," he said.

"Wanna bet?" Ed gave his brother's hair a good yank and Al squealed. It was the beginning of a wild
tussle that rolled all over the room. Edward ended up pinning Al to the floor, tickling him madly with
his cold steel fingers in his armpits as they both roared with laughter. "That's what you get for
tickling me when you were just a suit of armor!"

"Stop, stop!" Al gasped painfully, coughing. Edward stopped at once and Al pushed him off, then
rolled back to lay spreadeagled on the floor. "Whew! There's something great about this place this
morning. I feel so much better. Like something wonderful's about to happen."

"I don't really." Ed ran his hand through his tangled blond hair. "I hardly got any sleep at all. I'm
with Russell. Those frogs have got to go."

Al sobered a little as he remembered the conversation of the night before. "So do we work for
Siegfried, or not?"

"We work for him, but we add our own terms to the contract," Ed said firmly. "We get first dibs on
those books."

* * *

"Very well," Siegfried said over breakfast. He was eating alone with Edward; Alphonse had already
gone off with Russell to learn his kitchen duties. "And very good! I would like to add another term
of my own, however."

"What's that?" asked Edward.
"I study you. Your arm. Your leg. Your brain. Yes?"

"Arm and leg, yes. Brain, no."

"No brain?" Siegfried was disappointed.

"Well... I'll think about it."

"Fine. You think. That's what brains are for." The bespectacled scientist stood up. "It's settled, then." And he looked pleased.

"Good," said Edward, grinning. He reached out with his left hand. As they shook on it, he noted Siegfried's covetous glance toward his other arm. "I'll let you check out my automail after we get the books. I don't want to foul it up beforehand."

"Beforehand? Beforehand!" Siegfried laughed. "He has sense of humor too! Yes, yes, go to kitchen. Talk to Little Brother. Come back before noon! You will begin your training today!"

Edward got up and headed for the door. As he came round the corner into the spacious kitchen, he heard Al swearing profusely. This was a little unusual and he sped up. "Al! Everything OK?"

Alphonse appeared from the direction of the sink. "Oh, just!" he growled. "There are frogs in the dishwater. I can't keep them out!"

"You're kidding me. I have to see this!"

Al was not exaggerating. There were frogs everywhere, jumping around the kitchen and landing in the sink. "Where are they coming from?" Ed said in confusion.

Russell appeared with a broom, looking exhausted. "They're falling out of the ceiling," he said. "I've caught a dozen already this morning."

"So Siegfried didn't take them to the pond?"

"Of course he did. The ones that hadn't already gotten away. The walls in that bathroom are only half-finished," Russell added, in case Edward hadn't observed this.

"They're getting under the floor joists," Al said. "They must have free reign in those walls."

"It's just like last time, but so much worse!" Russell stood banging his forehead on the doorjamb. "Why can't I learn to say 'no'?"

"I have the feeling it's pretty hard to say 'no' to Siegfried," Ed said, with some sympathy. "I just agreed to let him study my arm, my leg, and my brain."

"Your brain?!" Al was horrified.

"Just to measure it." Ed smiled at his brother's reaction. "I've got an idea, Al. You do the dishes, and I'll catch the frogs."

"I'll help," said Russell. He and Edward promptly took up stances at either end of the sink while Al finished up the small stack of dishes. Only two more frogs attempted to invade the dishwater; one was captured by Russell, and Edward caught the other.

"There," Al said, now in a better mood. "I'm done. Now what, Russell?"
"Now you take a break," Russell said. "We'll be opening for business soon, but in the meantime why don't you go ask Siegfried to show you his study. I think you'll get a better idea of why I tolerate Siggy's excesses once you see what he's really got to offer in return!"

"See? I told you," Edward said as he and Al headed back to the dining room. "It's equivalent exchange!"

But the joke was on Edward, as he realized the moment Siegfried led them into his study. The room was actually all three guest rooms on the main floor's L-wing, with one wall knocked out and several windows and one door opening onto the beer garden-- and it was everything he'd been looking for since fate had thrown him into this strange world two years before.

Al rushed to the massive bookcases lining one wall, running his fingers over the spines of countless antique volumes. "Ed! Come here!" Edward came up behind him and Al pointed excitedly. "Look. Paracelsus. Hermes Trismegistus. Basilius Valentinus. They're all here!"

"They sure are!" Edward scanned the next row down. "And a lot we've never heard of. Andreas Libau. Michael Sendivogius. Jean D'Espagnet." Eyes glowing brightly, he turned back to Siegfried. "This is incredible, Siegfried! You're an alchemist!"

"No. Not alchemist. Naturalist. Alchemy books are only a small part of my library," Siegfried, arms crossed, was grinning from ear to ear at having found someone who appreciated his collection. "So it is true. You. Are also. Young scientists!"

"Not scientists," Ed said, returning the grin. He put both hands on Siegfried's sturdy shoulders. "Where we come from, we're Alchemists!"

"Yes," Al said, coming up to them with two books already in hand. "My brother here is one of the most accomplished Greater Alchemists who ever lived. He can transmute just about anything!"

"Al here is a Spirit Alchemist." Ed put a hand on his brother's arm. "And he did the impossible. You wouldn't believe it if I told you, Siegfried." Ed's voice was lowered now, in respect to Alphonse's legendary Deed of Resurrection. Al smiled affectionately at him before returning his attention to one of the books. "You did the same for me," he said softly as he turned the pages.

"Oh, but tell me!" Siegfried gripped Ed's arm.

Edward controlled himself with effort. It took all his discipline to do so, as the little man before him was so obviously eager to hear. "Really, you wouldn't believe it. In this world, it wouldn't make any sense."

The study was filled with amazing things. There was a box of lodestones, a stuffed cinnamon bear, a bucket of garnets in matrix, three live tadpoles in a tank, some tree fungus, surgical instruments, two alembics, a dried-up bat, medicinal herbs, a collection of animal hair, a seashell display, part of a whale skeleton, fossils, and a lab with several workbenches, customized lighting and magnification, temperature controlled test tube racks and some sophisticated electronic equipment. Siegfried pointed out a particular machine. "Hans Berger's new invention," he said. "Maps brain waves."

"Sweet." Ed gave the device a cursory examination.
Siegfried took them into another room where several lighted aquariums were bubbling. In the smallest marine tank were several tiny, fanciful fish with long tails and snouts like dragons. Ed and Al had never seen such creatures before, and Siegfried said that they were seahorses. “The most amazing thing. About them. Is that it is the male. Which gives birth to the fry!”

Edward’s eyes grew huge as he stared at the little creatures. “You’re kidding me,” he said, a little weakly. “There’s got to be some mistake!” But Siegfried shook his head adamantly. Alphonse laughed and dug his brother with his elbow. “Better be careful, Ed!” he couldn’t resist whispering. Edward pretended not to hear.

In the smallest of the three rooms there was a large globe suspended from the ceiling. Al turned it slowly, curiously examining the countries and continents of Earth. ”That's so odd. It looks just like our world, but the names of the countries are so different and a lot of the borders are too. See?” He put his finger on a highlighted area. ”That's where we come from. We call it Amestris.”

"And that's where we are now. Germany," Ed said. He turned the globe a little, tapping Siberia. "In our world there was a huge blast over this area here, a few years ago. The theory is that a dragon in a metabolic fury must have drunk too much cold water and exploded."


Ed smiled. "Not very many of them, any more," he said. "A lot of them got taken out by chasing freight trains. There's a group in Amestris that's fighting for the survival of the remaining few. It’s led by Johnny Windwalker, the Dragon Doctor. He’s quite a guy. I know you’d like him."

Siegfried blinked.

The two brothers spent several hours looking at all the things in the study. Understanding their thirst for some time alone with the books, Siegfried postponed their training and went to help Russell himself.

Al had settled on a small shelf of volumes tucked away in a corner by the window. "Hey Ed," he said in a strange tone of voice. "Listen to this:

‘There is a place beyond love, beyond hate and all such base emotions. It is an admirable place, suffused with emotion of a different kind— a joy constant and unshakeable by the whims of worldly fate. This is the plane of highly advanced souls. By regarding every living thing with equal affection, yet being attached to none, they move through this world without being of it. It must be admitted that when a soul reaches this level it can hardly be called human, yet that is the place toward which we all must strive if this world is to ever reach its human potential.’

Al looked up. “Siegfried wrote that. These are all books he’s written.” He gestured to a row of leatherbound volumes. “He doesn’t write like he talks at all.” His eyes were bright with a mixture of emotions; he made as if to ask something, then hesitated.

Edward looked at him kindly. “It’s true, Al.”

“But— I can’t stand it.” Al drew his spine straighter. “I can’t imagine living like that. Not attached to anything.”

“Alphonse, for all your wisdom, you’re still very young. You’re supposed to be that way. Loving, hating, and thoroughly attached. That’s why you can’t see things any differently.”

“And you can? Is that why you were able to do what you did, and leave Amestris? What suddenly
made you so much older than me?”

“Al,” Edward said gently. “Both times I left, it was to save and protect you. End of story. Now give me that book.”

As Ed flipped through the pages, he was struck by Siegfried’s perceptiveness. The man seemed to know something about almost all observable aspects of the natural world, and while the maxim “All is One, One is All,” didn’t show up verbatim in his works, the spirit of it was certainly there. Eventually Edward and Alphonse settled down on either end of the study couch with two of the scientist’s works. Both of them were fascinated at being able to see Siegfried’s thoughts flowing like song lyrics, no longer physically constrained by stuttering, chopped-off sentences.

“Wow,” Edward said. “He’s been to Arabia, and China too! ‘Her eyes, huge and dark and doleful, were set in a face too long and sorrowful, but the grace of her limbs made up for her lack of other handsomeness. She moved about uttering low moans, reclining often; but notwithstanding that she was a member of the fairer sex, she shouldered her share of the load to my complete satisfaction. Would that I could have brought her back with me to my home in the fair city of Munich, but to substitute a mere German courtyard for the vastnesses of the Mongolian desert would have been to do her an inhuman disservice.’”

“What? Did he have a girlfriend before he met Russell?”

Ed laughed. “Al, he’s talking about a camel.”

Alphonse glanced up and smiled. “I’m liking him more and more now that I’m reading his stuff. At first I was kind of scared of him. Maybe I was just thinking of Shou Tucker and some of those other other alchemical crazies. It seems like most of the time, when we encounter a scientist as intense as Siegfried is, they turn out to be either a villain or just plain nuts.”

“Well, I’m not completely ruling out either possibility so soon, but they’re certainly becoming more and more remote.”

Al picked up his book again. “Listen. This is a letter he actually sent to Einstein!—

“‘The addition of a “Cosmological Constant” to an otherwise elegant theory solely in the prejudicial interest of preserving a static universe, is like finishing the Mona Lisa or some other pleasant work by pushing insects into the paint. Except that these insects are not insects, but rather the thoughts of little men, bent on focusing the world so that their own faulty eyesight may see clearly. I do not believe in Comological Constants. I do not believe in pushing insects into the paint. We can do more than guess at the underlying Mystery, working all of our lives for those salutory moments when the fog clears and the sun comes out and that grand landscape, which we had previously only brief glimpses of, lies gloriously revealed before us; but such is not achieved by working on assumption, and Vesto Slipher’s spectral ‘redshifts’ give some indication that the universe may not, in fact, be a static entity.’”

Edward shook his head slowly. “Wow. Oh, wow. In our world, we know that the universe is expanding. They don’t realize that here yet, but Siegfried knows something’s up!”

“Should we tell him?” Al asked, a little anxiously.

“Nah. Let’s see if he discovers it!”
Siegfried had no family except for his brother Heinrich, with whom he was currently not speaking, and their aunt, now deceased, who had left them the inn and a fortune between them. Although no one recognized their relationship, Russell Hansford was his closest family member. Russell had started out as a handyman doing repairs on the Golden Toad to earn college money, and he coincidentally also had an interest in biology. When the two had started going out on excursions into the countryside collecting plants, insects and animals, it hadn’t taken long for them to learn just how deep their mutual love of biology went. The story of their discovery was amusing, involving a warm summer evening, a pair of mallard drakes behaving strangely, dropped binoculars, and an old rotten dock.

When pressed for more details about his brother, Siegfried described Heinrich as a thoroughly practical man who had no time to spare for Siegfried’s scientific detours, and even less time for his friends, who included obscure Jewish scientists and, of course, the Roma. Heinrich did, however, possess a powerful talent in the realm of mechanical engineering, and on hearing this Edward was not surprised that he had become a member of the secretive Thule Society. Heinrich had overseen the project for which Alfons Heiderich’s rockets were designed. Siegfried was not forthcoming about any more details except to say that two of his most treasured items, his car, and the “Beast--” the modified locomotive engine boiler which now heated the Golden Toad—were both artifacts of happier days, when he and his brother had still enjoyed each other’s company. He and Heinrich had had a great deal of fun working together on these projects during their college years.

Further inquiry revealed that Siegfried was an alumnus of the University of Munich. While to the eyes of the Elrics he appeared to be an excellent scientist and a formidable author, academic politics and the pressure to conform had kept him from being able to continue his career in an official capacity. While his future had been assured as long as he kept to ‘reasonable’ projects-- such as the one he happened to be most talented at, the study of human enzymatic function-- other topics which captivated him included the unexplained flying discs which sometimes appeared in the sky, cryptozoology, and a fascination which he shared with his brother regarding the location of the lost land of Thule. When he began to apply his scientific mind to try to shed some light on these esoteric subjects, his academic peers immediately rebuked him to save their own reputations, and he had fled the fold in despair.

“This, I still d-do not understand,” he complained to Edward and Alphonse as they sat eating lunch in the beer garden. Several of his Swedish swamp frogs were croaking nearby in the pond. The sky was blue with white clouds, and a dragonfly zipped back and forth above their heads. “I never said I knew. What the flying discs were. I never said I knew. Whether Thule was real or not. I never said I had ever discovered. Some beast unknown. All these things, I never claimed any of them. B-b-but I was ridiculed. For merely asking: What is this phenomenon? Does it really exist? Could it b-be something wonderful? These questions only, I asked. And out of the University I went!”

“You’re better off without them, Siegfried,” Alphonse said. “I know those bores from my own alchemical studies back home. See, I was looking for a way to find my brother. I could feel him calling me.”

Edward blushed and snorted. “Al, I don’t remember doing any such thing. I talked to you, yeah, in my mind. ‘Are you OK, little brother?’ I dreamed about you a lot. But I didn’t know for certain that you were even still alive.” He looked at his feet. “Dad kept telling me things would work out.”

Al shook his head. “Ed, the truth is, you were calling me the whole time. You weren’t just calling, you were crying for me, and I was crying for you, too. I heard you constantly in my sleep. It about drove me crazy!
“Anyway, Siegfried, everyone said I was wasting my time and that Edward was dead. After I learned all I could from our Teacher and she’d let me go, the other alchemists wanted to team up with me to do various projects. But I sent them all away. If they didn’t want me to keep looking for my brother, then I didn’t want them around. Only Winry stuck with me.” He leaned sideways against Edward. “I’m glad I found you,” he said contentedly.

Edward put an arm around him. “I’m glad you did too.” He grinned at Siegfried, who smiled back. “So when are we going to go after the books?”

“I tried already. Not long ago.” Siegfried shook his head in frustration as he stuttered badly. Then he recovered himself. “There is a need. For s-s-specialized equipment. I am designing now. When it is made. We will go.”

VI.

Over the course of the next few weeks, Edward and Alphonse settled as comfortably into the Golden Toad as though it had always been their home, and life was good to them. They worked hard and played hard, resting their minds from the nightmare of the past. Better still, Ed’s strange dreams and migraines began to fade, though he still had occasional bouts, and Al gradually began to feel more secure, letting Edward go off on errands without him.

Siegfried and Russell quickly learned that the Elrics were excellent and intelligent workers. Al progressed rapidly from dishwasher to chef, and surprised them all—including himself—with his cooking talent. His best were pies and pastries, but he made a good pot roast, as well as excellent batter-fried onions, and he knew just how to saute portabellas, button mushrooms, and the big wild boletus as well. Meanwhile, his brother became a bartender for the Hopping Frog Lounge; after all, in his world, mixology and Alchemy were sister studies.

Edward realized early on that the Golden Toad was, in some respects at least, Siegfried’s homage to the world-famous Western-themed gay bars of Berlin, but there was more substance to Siegfried’s clientele. Here gathered the ‘antisocials’ of the scientific world—and there were many—as well as others: students of language and history and math, and their hangers-on.

Before Ed took over the bartending fulltime, Siegfried had Russell raise the floor behind the counter nearly a foot, as he did not want his clients towering over his barkeep. Ed felt he should have resented that, but strangely, he did not. After all, the truth was he’d grown only a little since his days in Amestris, and there was scant hope of him gaining any more height. But his attention was not on himself—as he wiped down the bar or simply stood polishing glass, his eyes and ears were always focused on the conversations taking place in the murk. After a time, emboldened, he began to gently probe for information, knowing that if Huskisson were still in the country, he had a better chance of finding him now than he had since his quest began. At the same time, despite his brother’s repeated cautions, he found himself thoroughly enjoying the atmosphere—and turning heads as well.

The only incident in Ed’s new life which gave him pause, was when his pistol mysteriously disappeared. He suspected that Siegfried had confiscated it, but when queried, the little scientist only shook his head and muttered something unintelligible.

Siegfried was a furiously busy man. His projects were so diverse and manifold that Ed and Al wondered how he managed to do them all, but somehow, in between everything else (and sometimes at the strangest hours) he would get one or the other of them cornered, and then he would interrogate
them about their homeworld. He had said he wanted to know all about it, and he had meant just that—the flora, fauna, people, weather—even the rocks. He didn’t seem surprised that much of what Ed and Al reported to him reflected things existing right there in Germany. It was easy to trust him, and it didn’t take long for the brothers to let their guards down and tell him much of what there was to know about ‘Shamballah.’

Edward and Alphonse spent much of their spare time just as Russell did, haunting Siegfried’s study, lab, and library. Alphonse was deeply immersed in researching prospective methods of building another Gate, but Edward, having already studied doggedly for two years seeing no results other than the Thule disaster, had other things more pressing on his mind—and some of these were still unknown to his brother. Early one morning when Alphonse was busy in the kitchen with Russell, Edward came to the study to talk to Siegfried. The rogue scientist was typing up the finished manuscript for his next book, a tract on human biochemistry. His bright eyes twinkled as Edward sat down on the other side of the desk, and though he did not stop typing, Ed knew he was listening intently.

“Siggy, I’ve had something bothering me for a long time now,” Edward said. “I was wondering—is there a way to tell for certain whether I’m human or not?”

The typewriter stopped abruptly. Siegfried stared. He let fall a slip of paper to the floor unnoticed. They regarded each other.

At last Siegfried began to struggle for words. It took him a moment. “B-b-but Edward! What else would you b-b-be?!”

Ed shook his head slowly. “I have some reasons to believe that I might not be completely normal. I’ve thought about it for a long time and decided I really need to know. Because in my world, there are things that look human even though they’re not. Would you be able to find out for certain?”

“What about Little Brother?”

“Let’s just leave him out of this for now. Okay? Don’t tell him why we’re doing the study. I don’t want him to get upset for no reason.”

“All right.” Siegfried bent to retrieve the paper. “As you know. Since you are from Shamballah. I had intended to study you anyway. After we retrieved the texts. W-we will just begin. Sooner rather than later. Thus modifying our contract. Yes?”

“OK.” They shook hands. “Thanks, Siggy,” Ed said. “Now I have another favor to ask. It’s a biggie, so I don’t really expect you to say yes.”

Siegfried harumphed, looking at him over the rims of his glasses. “Well? What is it?”

“Can I borrow your car?”

* * *

That Sunday (their only full day off) Edward fulfilled a promise made long ago and taught his brother how to drive. Al was a natural, and in the course of that day he was soon driving better than Edward ever had. As they bounced down the uneven streets and dirt roads, Al noted that Ed was observing his surroundings keenly. “What are you looking for, brother?”
“Just getting the lay of the land.”

Al snorted, not taking his eyes off the road. “You’re looking for something. Ed, you’re being secretive again.”

“What do you mean, ‘again?’”

“Oh come on!” Al carefully pulled off on a wide shoulder, parking the vehicle in the shade of an overhanging building. It was the height of May; the sun was shining too warmly for comfort. Al turned to his brother, putting his arm over the back of the seat. “Edward. This has got to stop. Why aren’t you trusting me? Are you trying to protect me from something?”

Ed stuttered. “Al! I do trust you! You know I do!”

“Look. I don’t really care what you do with your spare time. But if you’re looking for somebody’s house, you could at least tell me. Maybe I could help.”

Ed blinked, suddenly realizing the source of Al’s annoyance. His brother thought he had taken a lover, and, whether he knew it or not, was jealous. “Al, it’s not that. Someone told me the other day about a strange man. The way he described him, it sounded like Huskisson. He was seen in this neighborhood, and he walks with a golden cane.”

“Oh.” Al brightened immediately, then frowned. “But Huskisson didn’t have a cane.”

“My point is that it was a golden cane, Al. What if he made his sale? What if he’s living here as a rich man?”

“I suppose it could happen. But I wish you would tell me about these things, Ed.”

Edward smiled sheepishly. “I’m sorry. I thought you’d be sick of my prattling about him by now, so I just didn’t.”

“Ed. I’m never sick of your ‘prattling,’ OK?” Al started the car, seamlessly put it in gear, and pulled out again onto the sleepy road. “Honestly, brother,” he continued, “You’ve changed so much!”

“You have too, Al. And now you can drive! Congratulations!” Ed slapped him on the back and he jumped, swerving them across the center line. He cursed, abruptly correcting the vehicle, and Edward chuckled. No one else was on the road.

VII.

Siegfried started his investigation of Edward the very next morning. The first steps involved a series of psychological interviews featuring some keen observations of Edward’s behavior, and some equally well-placed questions. It dragged on for a week, and Ed got more and more uncomfortable as the sessions progressed. It seemed to him that Siegfried was seeing places of his soul that were best left hidden, ferreting out the most invisible parts of him and hanging them up for both of them to inspect. The little scientist was very professional—detached and insightful—and on the last day Edward spilled his private pain all in a rush.

Siegfried’s main interest was why he was so afraid he wasn’t human, and he shook himself with his own explanation. His father, he had replied, wasn’t human, but a thing that had taken possession of
multiple bodies during the course of a lifespan that had lasted hundreds of years... and destroyed thousands of lives. All this rested like a lead weight on Ed’s shoulders—and his brother, with whom he shared all his pains and joys, could not help. In fact, he thought Al had missed something, and had not fully realized the situation. Alphonse should not have to bear even a fraction of that dreadful weight, and so Edward, refusing to enlighten him, continued to suffer in silence.

Edward’s confession sent Siegfried’s eyebrows into his hairline. When it was over, Ed sat with his face in his hands, knowing that the little man was about to label him stark raving mad, but at the same time feeling oddly better at finally having found someone, anyone, with whom he could share the horror that had dogged him day and night since the moment he had learned the truth of the matter.

“Edward,” Siegfried said at last, very gently. “Can you produce. Any proof of this? Any proof at all?”

“No. My father is dead.”

“You keep saying ‘your’ father. What are you hoping. In regards to Little Brother?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m hoping that even if I’m not human, Alphonse is. I’m hoping his father isn’t mine. It’s possible, isn’t it? We’re so different, Siegfried.”

“That you are. But there are also similarities.” Siegfried finally got up, putting his notebook aside. His glance was kind but not condescending. “Because I know Shamballah is real. Because I have seen things. That most people have not. I acknowledge that your story is possible.”

“You believe me?”

“I did not say that. I merely said it is possible. We will find out more about you. When we begin your physical examination.”

They stood facing one another awkwardly for a long moment. “You know,” Edward said at last, “maybe there’s something to this psychotherapy crap. Uncle wouldn’t have any of it.”

“It all depends on the d-doctor,” Siegfried replied.

“Well, maybe you’ll know what he was talking about, then. I’ve been wondering. See, he was telling Al about some really evil-sounding new book, but it sounds too awful to be real. It encourages—”

Siegfried had held up his hand. “I know the one. I warned him of it. Last summer.”

“Oh!” Edward followed Siegfried as he shuffled his way to his library. After a moment’s searching, the scientist pulled a small volume from the shelf. “‘The Granting of Permission for the Destruction of Worthless Life.’” Siegfried looked up. “Karl Binding and his cronies.”

Ed’s eyes went wide with disbelief. Siegfried snapped the book shut in disgust and tossed it into an easychair. “I keep it for reference only.”

“It must have been written for those Gypsy-baiting thugs in the National Socialist Worker’s Party.”

“You know them?”

“Oh, yes! I don’t know if Noaa filled you in on how I rescued her, but I sure got an eyeful when it came to what they think of the Roma.”
“It is not only the Roma. It is the Jews. And the ‘anti-socials.’ And others. And the idea is spreading. Becoming political.” Siegfried sighed. “I am part Jew, and all ‘anti-social!’”

“Why don’t you write a tract to debunk this crap?”

“I already am. It is nearly finished. Let us hope I can find a p-publisher soon.”

“You mean the scientific journals won’t accept it?”

Siegfried shrugged. “Who knows? It is all p-p-political these days.” He pulled out his pocketwatch and checked it. “Time to work now, my friend.”

“OK. Thanks.” And Edward darted out the door.

Siegfried stood in his library for a long time, thoughtfully looking after him.
Winry backed the bit out of her project and turned off the drill press, absently sweeping the metal shavings into the bin. She was finding it increasingly hard to concentrate; her heart was not in her work, and, to her chagrin, it was beginning to show. Pinako had rebuked her twice in the last week. She was the first to admit that while her workmanship was not exactly turning shoddy, something was missing. There was no guesswork as to the cause.

“When are you going to face it?” Pinako had said. “Wherever they are, they aren’t coming back now. Get on with your life, Winry.” But her words sounded hollow. After all, she had helped raise the two boys after their mother died.

Alphonse had finally left to follow his brother, and Winry had tried to get on with it. She had long realized that Al’s first loyalty was to Edward, and she knew he had had no intention of staying with her as long as his brother was lost out there somewhere. Still, with Al finally gone, she had started to think that perhaps she had no place left in their little universe at all. Everything was about them, she had thought bitterly, almost as though they had been born conjoined twins, or spoke a secret language. Sometimes it had felt like they were actually conspiring against her, and she could remember moments when she had almost given into a kind of paranoia.

She’d tried to use this feeling to her own advantage by letting it stir her into anger, but in the end she could never maintain it—she would wake up at night out of a dream where the three of them were playing by the Rain River, or catch herself suddenly thinking she heard familiar voices in the yard, and it would all crash into heartache and loss. Things had been getting worse lately. Some mornings, she didn’t even want to get up. She had lost interest in making designs for the upcoming summer automail competitions, and her plans to visit her friend Sciezka at the Central Library were on hold. Russell Tringham had stopped by to see if she’d heard anything about the Elrics, and she knew that if she weren’t heartsick, she would have been captivated by this striking and talented young alchemist. His younger brother, Fletcher, who was a
plant alchemist, was a dead ringer for Alphonse in the personality department. She could practically feel Pinako holding her breath, and the old woman’s silent disappointment when nothing came of the meeting.

Winry sat on her bed and gazed out the window, over the fields and across the Rain River. The way the sun fell in the late afternoon, turning the trees and the grasses golden against the far purple clouds, made her feel very lonely. There was an urgent feeling, too, in her heart, but it was not frustration—at least, not exactly. She wasn’t certain what it was.

“Well, one thing’s for sure,” she said out loud to herself. “Something’s got to be done. I can’t go on like this.” She sighed, looking again out over the river into the distance. “I wonder where they are right now. I wonder what they’re doing.”

II.

Even though the Elric brothers had only been at the Golden Toad for a couple of months, by the end of June it was hard for them to believe they’d ever lived elsewhere. It had become their home. Siegfried had them well tucked under his protective wing and they were growing closer to him by the day. They enjoyed their jobs and had no desire to be anywhere else, unless it were back in Amestris.

Migraines were no longer a major obstacle to Edward. He still had them, as well as the precognitive dreams that came with them. But Siegfried had supplied him with a medicine which made them much less painful and shortened their duration. He still wasn’t able to work or read during an attack, but Russell would always cheerfully fill in for him while he recuperated. Meanwhile, through conversations with the clientele, Ed had come into several possible leads regarding Huskisson. Much of his free time was taken up with trying to locate the elusive man, and most of the rest was devoted to Siegfried’s ongoing experiment.

Siegfried had started testing Edward’s physical makeup the week after he completed his psychological evaluation. The first experiment was simple—Edward merely donated some skin cells which were then examined under high magnification—but the results were enough to galvanize Siegfried and create considerable concern for Ed. There were specialized cells embedded among the normal-looking cells in his skin. Siegfried’s skin, viewed in comparison, did not possess anything like them. He observed that they looked like some kind of nerve cell, and he wondered aloud if they might have a connection with the alchemic ability Edward kept speaking of.

Ed found it difficult to keep this news from his brother, but he managed it. Alphonse was immersed in his duties, as well as a thorough study of Siegfried’s alchemy books, and Edward surmised that he was distracted enough by this to not inquire as to their project.

In this, he was not entirely correct. Al had noted Edward’s bonding to Siegfried with interest. While Al liked the little scientist and admired his work, Siegfried did not hold quite the same level of fascination for him that he did for Ed, and he realized what Edward still had not—that his brother had fallen in love. This should be a good thing, despite the prohibitive presence of Russell, he kept telling himself silently. Even if nothing ever came of it, it showed that he was recovering from the tragic death of Alfons Heiderich.
Still, there was something about Ed’s and Siegfried’s easy camaraderie that made Al feel a bit like he was on the outside looking in. The two huddled together over the microscope like a pair of conspirators, and their mutual glances seemed to speak volumes. Alphonse suspected that they were plotting some secret scientific escapade, though why they should want to conduct something like that behind his back remained a mystery. Taken together with Edward’s and Uncle’s ‘financial arrangements,’ it hinted at a disturbing pattern that Alphonse fervently hoped was just all in his head.

* * *

To say that Siegfried was fascinated with Edward’s biological makeup would have been a gross understatement, but he said little as the days progressed, only making observation after observation with meticulous care.

Making him a bed in the study, Siegfried persuaded him to sleep by the new electroencephalograph, and spent many hours poring over the slow undulations of his sleeping brainwaves. Alphonse was anxious about this until he was convinced that none of the electrical wires fastened to Edward could harm him in any way.

During the day, Siegfried studied many other aspects of his subject. Most interesting to him were the psychic tests, at which Edward was very proficient. Alphonse got in on these, too, and the threesome spent several enjoyable mornings studying the very real Elric psychic talents. Al proved much the stronger of the two despite Edward’s newfound precognitive skills, but even having discovered this, Siegfried did not deviate from his path—it was Edward he was studying, and once Alphonse had played his part he soon went back to the kitchen.

But his exile was not permanent. When it came time to study Edward’s blood, Siegfried became strangely reticent to speak of his findings. For two days Edward persisted, getting no response other than, “It is good blood,” or, “Patience! This is taking time.”

Finding himself on the cusp of a headache and consequently spelled off at the bar by Russell, Ed came through the study door the next evening to find Alphonse taking an unscheduled break. Siegfried was just removing a needle from his arm and there was a small glass vial of his blood on the coffee table. Edward did not wait for explanations but exploded in a rage, startling Siegfried and frightening Al, and Siegfried quickly learned the hard way that Alphonse and his blood were off-limits, even to science. What Al thought about the situation seemed immaterial.

Siegfried weathered the storm with his usual philosophic nature, but Al caught the full force of Edward’s wrath in a way that had rarely happened in their lives. He ran upstairs and went to bed in tears, abandoning all of his kitchen work to Siegfried, and Edward did not apologize.

* * *

Around midnight Al got up again, wandering downstairs for a little bread and milk to soothe his upset stomach. The Toad had been closed early, and he found Siegfried seated thoughtfully at his little table in a corner of the kitchen, studying his notes. Russell was working silently at the sink, washing the last of the glassware.
“Has he come to his senses yet?” Siegfried asked, as Al sat down wearily opposite him, biting into a slice of rye.

“I don’t know. I’m so sorry about this, Siegfried. That outburst was so strange. I mean, he does have a terrible temper, but I’ve never seen him behave like that before. It almost felt like he hated me.”

“Love and hate. Both possessive,” the scientist mused.

“Too possessive. I could’ve smacked him,” Al replied. “After all, it’s my blood! I can give it to whoever I want.”

Siegfried leaned back, taking off his glasses and laying them on top of his papers. “Big Brother is not entirely rational. In some ways, in fact, he is delusional.” He watched Al’s reaction keenly.

“You noticed it too, huh?” Al sighed. “He never used to be that way.” He leaned forward on his elbows, speaking in a lower tone of voice. “I think crossing over multiple times from our world to this one has affected his mind or something.”

“This is not the first time?” Siegfried was surprised.

“This would be the third.”

“Ah! That could explain much. I have been wondering. Whether Shamballa might feature a different physical environment. Not major. Just very small differences. Enough to affect the fine workings of the mind.” Siegfried folded his hands together across his paunch. “Big Brother’s brainwaves are most strange.”

“I bet you’ve already learned quite a bit from him.”

Siegfried shrugged. “Not so much as I would like. But if he truly was not that way b-b-before he came to this place?-- Then I would not take his anger to heart, Alphonse. He is ill. Sick in the mind. Were he to go home. The sickness might vanish.”

“I sure hope so. He just hasn’t been himself since I came here.”

“How is he different now? Can you tell me exactly?”

Al put both feet on the floor and thought hard for a moment. “Well, for one thing, he’s turned precognitive. He didn’t used to have that talent at all. But that’s the least of it. It’s hard to explain, Siggy. Ed’s always been a practical thinker.

“We had a pretty rough childhood after Mom died. Maybe he’s already told you about that?”

“A little, yes.”

Al nodded slowly. “We had some major problems back then, but he took care of me really well. He never let anything interfere with that. I never saw him with his priorities messed up, and I never saw him buying into anyone else’s ideology. He used to be a real independent thinker, Siegfried.”

“And he’s not anymore?”

“Not like he was. He’s into stuff now that I would have never imagined him doing. Like trying to save the world singlehandedly.”

Siegfried blinked.
“There’s this guy he’s after, Siggy. I don’t know if he’s mentioned him to you at all, but he’s always asking after him at the bar.”

“It is an obsession?”

“Of a sort, but not what you might think. He thinks this guy is going to destroy the world, and he’s the one Fate has chosen to stop him.”

“Ah. Delusional, yes.”

“Don’t get me wrong. The man he’s after really is a dangerous criminal. But this isn’t our homeworld, and it’s like Ed is completely forgetting that. You already know that back in Amestris, Ed and I were Greater Alchemists, and he was a military officer. That’s a pretty powerful combination. We had a lot of talent and a lot of people to back us up, and even then, we got ourselves into some really serious trouble. Here, we don’t have our alchemy and we don’t have the military at our beck and call, but he’s still acting like we do.

“But you know what hurts the worst? He’s got us messed up, Siggy. Where I stand, and he stands, and everyone else stands. He thinks he’s so good just because he’ll run to rescue strangers, and now, well, I guess he thinks that our being brothers is some kind of self-indulgence.”

Siegfried held up a hand. “Wait. You have lost me. He is saying that your b-brotherly love. Is something he does not need?”

Al squirmed a little. “Not exactly. It’s hard for me articulate this, Sig. Let me put it this way: If he had to make a choice right now between saving me and a stranger, I’m pretty sure he would still save me first, but I think he’d kick himself afterward. Does that make sense?”

Siegfried slowly leaned back in his chair, resting his chin on his hand. “I think I understand. And because of this. You feel unloved.”

“No. My brother loves me for real. But I don’t think he’s being practical. No matter what kind of high, transhuman philosophy a person might want to subscribe to, the people you’ve known personally will always mean the most to you. Denying that is just plain idiocy. Ed has lived his whole life trying to protect me. He of all people should know better than that!”

Siegfried nodded vigorously. “I concur. Edward is travelling the wrong path.” He held up an admonishing finger. “It is good. To want to help strangers, this much is always right. But not at the expense of Little Brother!”

Al sighed heavily, puffing out his cheeks. “I’m glad you said that, Siegfried. I was beginning to think I was being too selfish or something.”

“It is also good to be a little selfish. Selfishness is natural. So is altruism. It is the balance of the two that Edward must regain. Please have patience with him.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Al said, a little wearily. “I’ll always forgive him, Siegfried. Even if he really were to hate me.”

“He will never do that, Little Brother. Indeed, the opposite is true. What I saw here tonight. Was pure jealous rage. Quite the opposite behavior. Of this high and mighty discipline of which he boasts to you.”
III.

Alphonse might have been hurt and confused by Edward’s behavior, but by the next week it was his turn to be possessive as Siegfried pursued a profile of his brother’s gut enzymes. Ed required considerable persuasion before he finally relented, but then startled Siegfried by appropriating his job—intubating himself and drawing the necessary sample quickly, efficiently, and without assistance, revealing some of his extensive training in Lesser Alchemy. Most students in his world tended to skip this part of the course.

While Siegfried was suitably impressed with his skills, Alphonse fled the scene white-faced. Afterward Siegfried patted Ed’s shoulder and trundled carefully away with his prize as Edward sat unconcernedly looking after him; in a moment Al came back with a glass of water. “Here. I thought you might need this,” he said, offering it to his brother. His face was red.

Grabbing it, Ed slid off the bench. “Thanks. Are you all right?”

“No, Ed, how did you do that? I thought you were going to kill yourself.”

“It’s all in Alchemy 101, you slacker. ’Collection of Natural Hydrochloric Acid.’ Sheesh!” Edward snorted. “And you call yourself an alchemist.”

“I am an alchemist!” Al was genuinely offended.

“Big Brother!” Siegfried called. “Be kind. I only wish my b-brother was like yours.”

“Would you rather I didn’t care?” Al added, a little sharply. “At least I didn’t dance around and wave my arms and yell the way you did last week.”

Ed flushed, glancing away uncomfortably as he realized Al was still smarting from the blood-drawing episode. Alphonse was satisfied to see him reacting to his statement.

“You two!” Siegfried said. “Go away! Make peace! You are disturbing my work!”

“Go away! You are disturbing my work!” Edward repeated under his breath. He sighed heavily and gave up, making a mock swipe at Alphonse as he led him out of the lab.

“And wake up Lazybones sometime this morning!” was Siegfried’s parting shot.

They wended their way into the study, where Edward flopped down wearily in an overstuffed chair. Al rested his elbows on the back of it. “So what’s he doing anyway?”

“They haven’t discovered DNA here yet, right? But humans have twenty-two different digestive enzymes, and there are subtle variations between ethnic groups. I doubt if we got samples of many of them because most of them are lower in the gut, but if he can get a clue as to my digestive profile, he might be able to determine what populations in this world we’re related to. That’s the field he’s the expert in—the enzymatic idiosyncracies of indigenous populations. He’s done this same experiment hundreds of times.” Edward belched gratuitously. “Actually, I think we just resemble the people right here in Germany. But Siggy’s a thorough scientist.”

“Ed,” said Al suddenly. Edward glanced backward and up at him. Alphonse’s face had turned white. “What is it? Al?” He moved to get up, but Al’s hand descended to his shoulder and gripped it firmly.
“Edward. I just remembered something Teacher told me during my second round of study, when I was training to find you. There were some new Army scientists in Central, she said. They were studying to make something called ‘ethnic weapons.’”

Edward’s eyes went wide as the implication sank in. “Come on, Alphonse,” he said after a long moment. “Let’s take the long way to Russell, OK?”

They went out of the room through the garden door, taking surreptitious glances behind and around to make certain Siegfried was nowhere near. He had the most uncanny way of knowing what was spoken around the Golden Toad.

The brothers paused once they were around the corner of the building and out of sight. Edward leaned against Alphonse, pulling him down to speak quietly in his ear. “Al, enzymes run the whole body. If the wrong enzyme is affected, a person can be paralyzed or even killed. That’s how some of the worst poisons in the world work!”

“Right. I know that. And Siegfried’s the expert on enzymes and race!”

“That’s got to be why he was hired by the Thule Society. They must have been secretly working on an ethnic weapon.”

“And he quit when he realized what he was helping them do? Is that it?”

“Let’s find out.” Taking his brother by the arm, Edward turned him around with a grim face and marched them both back to Siegfried’s lair. Russell, forgotten, slept on.

* * *

“It was Heinrich of course. Who introduced me. To the Society,” Siegfried said. He was still working busily, placing dozens of various substances into temperature-controlled test tubes prior to adding the digestive fluid. “We were still speaking at the time. He felt they were too pagan. But perhaps good for me—the family pagan! Their philosophy. Their ambitions. It might convert me.”

“Did it?” Edward said.

The little scientist cast an irritated glance their way. “Am I still working for them? Am I speaking to my brother?”

“I did not at first fully comprehend their motives. I was given to understand. That their mission. Was simply to find the country of Shamballa. To conduct interesting studies. Of strange p-p-peoples and races. And they offered. A seductive laboratory and-- Other scientists. Jules Pfieffer. Marco Rosellini….”

“…Alfons Heiderich.” The name slipped involuntarily from Edward’s lips. Siegfried stopped what he was doing to turn and scrutinize him with bright blue eyes above the rims of his glasses. Ed looked away.

“You knew him well. He was your good friend? Ah.” Siegfried put down what he was doing, removed his gloves and took one brother by each arm, steering them down the length of the room and back into his study. “Sit here. We will talk. Alfons was a favorite of mine. Though he did not work in my field. So bright and beautiful. So young. So terribly sick.”
“He’s gone now,” Ed said tonelessly.

Siegfried nodded sympathetically. “I knew he would not last.”

Ed shook his head. “He didn’t just die, Siggy. He was shot dead trying to help me escape back to my world.”

Long silence. Siegfried’s normally animated self had become very still. Al looked at his feet. No matter how many times Edward told him it wasn’t his fault, that Alfons would have died anyway, he remained acutely aware that his forcing himself into this world had precipitated Heiderich’s abrupt demise.

“Edward. I am so sorry.”

Alphonse looked up again and was startled to see tears glistening in the corners of Siegfried’s eyes. The man’s violent emotions reminded him of Alex Armstrong’s, back home.

“It’s OK, Siggy. Please tell us how you left the Society.” Ed’s voice was tired.

Siegfried sighed. “It did not take me long. To understand the true picture. The motive. The Aryan biochemistry. My study of the biochemistry of other races. Could reveal a way to destroy them.”

Edward nodded.

“I stayed for a little while. I was fearful. Mostly of my brother. And I was curious. What makes them live, these people who know so much? They do not look. They do not listen. They have no respect for man. No humility in the face of nature. And yet they purport to live by natural law.” Contempt simmered beneath his usually placid surface. “What natural law is that? Lions kill other beasts from hunger. Not from hate.”

“What did you learn?” Alphonse asked quietly, but Siegfried shook his head. “No more than I had already learned. From my own brother. P-power is good. Might is right. The weak, the different, the agnostic, they are always inferior.” He paused, rubbing his forehead with the back of his hand. “At last I could stand no more. I had done my duty by my older brother. But I left them a parting gift.”

“What was that?” said Edward.


Alphonse grinned. “I bet they’re still trying to make sense of it.”

“I sincerely hope. I have seriously impeded their progress.” Then Siegfried leaned forward, so he was eye to eye with Ed. “But I know they were right about one thing. Shamballa does exist. And I want to see it. It’s time to get those books.”

IV.

Early that afternoon, when he was done setting up his experiment, Siegfried got out his car. Russell, who had unwittingly slept until one o’clock, was still blinking sleepily when the little scientist kissed
him goodbye in the kitchen, admonishing him to leave the inn closed, but to open the bar at the usual
time, and to have a good meal waiting for them on their return. Russell appeared resigned to him
going, but Edward thought he seemed a little listless.

Siegfried then brought out two sacks of equipment, and he and the Elric brothers piled into the Fiat
with Al riding in the back, studying a map Siegfried had made of the Thule Society’s underground
complex near the Botanical Gardens.

As they drove, Siegfried and Edward compared notes. The Thule Society had only about fifteen
hundred members across Bavaria, and of those, less than three hundred were locals. Rudolf von
Sebottendorff, the group’s founder, had left in 1919, but Johannes Hering, who kept the Society
minutes, also maintained the small library, and it was here that Siegfried knew that the core scientific
findings of the Society were kept. They were said to be bound in three large black leather volumes,
with the emblem of the Black Sun stamped on the covers.

“Well, at least you won’t have any trouble recognizing the books if they’re there,” Al interjected,
leaning over the seat between the two. “This is in a private house, right?”

“It is beneath a private building,” Siegfried said, glancing sideways as he negotiated an intersection.
“Haley Hall. Near the Botanical Gardens.”

Ten minutes later, he pulled the car off to the side of the road half a block below the structure. Built
of red brick in three storeys, it was a forbidding building even viewed from a distance, and it didn’t
help that the windows were blacked out. Siegfried pulled one of his bags from the car. “Alphonse.
Carry this.”

“What’s in here? It feels like a bunch of bottles.”

“You will find out. Now come. There is a lower entrance on the other side.”

As they approached the building, Al crossed the sidewalk to his brother. “I have a strange feeling
about this,” he said in a low voice.

Edward was flexing and rotating his automail arm, loosening the metal joints. “There’s something
he’s not telling us,” he said grimly. He spoke a little loudly. Al hushed him, but Siegfried replied
over his shoulder. “You are quite correct, Edward. But it is something that must be seen. To be
believed.”

Making certain they were not observed, Siegfried led them quickly up an empty side alley next to the
abandoned-looking structure and stopped by a sunken entranceway. Above the door, sculpted into
concrete, was the sun symbol that both he and Edward were familiar with. A casual passerby would
never have realized its significance. Siegfried gave Edward a meaningful look.

“This isn’t a cellar door. It’s an entrance to the Underground!” Edward exclaimed.

“Less well known. Less likely to be guarded.” Siegfried made a magical gesture with one hand and a
key appeared in his fingers.

“Pick up your jaw, Alphonse, it’s on the ground,” Edward said, and pushed past his startled brother
to grab the key and put it in the lock.

“Wow, you’re good!” Al said. Siegfried nodded vigorously and gestured to Edward, who was
slowly opening the door to reveal steps leading down into the dark.

The brothers left the door ajar an inch, blocking it with a small stone, and all three of them got out the
small electric torches which Siegfried had equipped them with. He led the way. “The Society is not what it once was. There is much less chance. Of us getting caught. Than there would have been two or three years ago.”

They reached a landing in another twenty steps. Here the passage branched in two directions. Siegfried led them down the righthand tunnel. The cobwebs were thick, and he followed close behind Siegfried, letting the other take the brunt of it. Twice the scientist stopped to exclaim softly at insects, and once he reacted with delight at a huge hobo spider, made even bigger by its own shadow. Edward hastily looked the other way. Behind him, he heard Alphonse snort. Al caught up to give his brother a superior look and Edward scowled at him. Ever since the morning’s unpleasantness, the two of them had been a little out of sorts with each other.

“You two!” Siegfried said sharply, as if he had eyes in the back of his head. Predictably, they both jumped. “Put it aside. We must work seamlessly. Together now. No fighting.” He glanced back, frowning.

“We’re not fighting.” Al said. “If we were really fighting, I’d thrash him good!”

Ed sighed, then dredged up an apology. “Look, Al. I’m sorry I scoffed at you this morning, OK? I know you just didn’t want me to get hurt or anything.”

“Thank you!” Al responded immediately. “For my part, I’m sorry I embarrassed you. I’ll try to not do it again.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll find a way.” As Siegfried beamed and chuckled over this exchange, Edward clapped Alphonse on the back. “Now come on. Let’s see what kind of monsters are guarding the library today.” His words were prescient.

* * *

Al leaned to cautiously peer around the last corner. Then he retreated, suddenly gasping for breath, his back to the wall. “Wow. Oh, wow,” he said faintly.

Edward blinked. “Something serious?”

Alphonse nodded, one hand on his chest as he struggled to not cough. “Dragon!” he managed in a squeaky whisper.

“Hah!” Ed said. “You had me going there for a minute!” He leaned past his brother for a quick glimpse. “The only dragon I know is—”

“Envy!” Al finished for him. Edward fell back, his eyes huge. Coiled up in the darkness was the Great Serpent.

He was even larger than Edward remembered him, but dragons grew fast and he was obviously well fed. His chin was resting across his back and his wing fins were flattened as he slept quietly outside the library door. As Ed swept the beam of the flashlight over him, a long chain was revealed, fastening him to a steel post nearby. Piles of scat and refuse lay scattered here and there. Envy’s lair was well suited for him; it reeked of death and spite.

“But I thought he was dead!” Edward leaned to take another look. Then he rounded on Siegfried.
“What were you thinking? You could have warned us!” he whispered savagely through clenched teeth.

Siegfried was beaming. “And spoil the surprise? I was down here. Trying to get the books. Just before you two arrived on my doorstep. And I saw, Yes! There are dragons. That was when I knew conclusively. Books or no b-books, Shamballa is no myth.”

Alphonse pulled himself away from the wall. Acting as one, the two brothers grabbed Siegfried by either arm, dragging him a full fifty yards back the way they had come before stopping. “Siggy,” admonished Edward grimly. “You are a brilliant scientist, but you have no idea what you’re dealing with this time!”

Alphonse cut in quickly to simplify the explanation. “Siegfried, this dragon killed our dad.”

Siegfried gaped in mortal dismay, glancing from one to the other. “Your father was here? And this beast destroyed him? Oh, boys. I did not know!” He slid slowly down the wall to sit on his haunches. Ed and Al crouched beside him.

“The dragon’s name is Envy,” Ed began. “Delinda and the Society used him as the Ouroboros in their alchemical array. I thought Envy died during that transmutation, but obviously he did not.”

“Once he realizes we’re still here, he’ll be looking to kill us the same as he killed Dad,” Al added darkly.

“But why?” asked Siegfried. “Why kill two bright young boys? Why kill their father so heartlessly?”

“It’s too long a story to tell right now,” Edward said. “But I will tell you something just to see your face. Envy is our half brother—or what’s left of him.”

“And, he’s a homunculus,” Al added. “He can never be a real human again.”

Ed and Al sat watching Siegfried for several minutes while he digested the information. He was not as expressive as they would have expected, only frowning into the blackness of the tunnel’s eternal night. Eventually he began muttering to himself.

“Hey Siggy,” Edward said, tempted to knock on the scientist’s forehead. “What’s going on in there?”

“Oh.” Siegfried shook himself and blinked. “I was thinking.”

“So what do we do now?” Al asked. “Do we still go after the books?”

“I think we have to try,” Ed said. “Those books are our best chance at getting you home.”

Al stared at him. “Getting me home? Is that what this is about? What about yourself?”

“That’s what I meant. Getting home.”

“Edward Elric, if you try to bail out on me again like you did before, I will make you regret it til the day you die,” Al said grimly. “I guarantee that will not work again. We have to stick together. You got that?”

“Yeah, yeah, all right already!”

Al leaned to pick up the sack. It clinked faintly as he undid the drawstring and peered in. “Oh.” He pulled out a jar, holding it up. “Ether! I can smell it now.”


“Sounds like something Granny Pinako would cook up,” Al said wistfully.

“I wished for bodies more spry than mine to throw them, but if you show yourselves the dragon will surely recognize you. It is up to me to make certain he is unconscious.”

“OK,” Edward said simply. “I’ll go for that.” He looked to both of them in turn. “So the plan’s still on?”

“Yes, for my part.” Siegfried raised both eyebrows at Al, who nodded.

“Then let’s get those books and get the hell out of here.”

V.

Al gave Siegfried the sack of bombs, reserving one for himself and one for Ed in event of a mishap. As they crept back toward Envy’s lair, the brothers noticed him chuckle under his breath.

“What?” said Edward.

“My name!” Siegfried said cryptically.

Envy was still fast asleep when they reached their previous vantage point. Edward and Alphonse remained hidden behind the corner in the passage while Siegfried ventured out by himself, two of the jars tucked in the crook of his left arm and one ready in his hand. It was unclear how long Envy’s chain was, but the scattered refuse on the floor had a wide radius. Siegfried advanced silently just to the edge of it while Ed and Al watched, holding their breaths. He bounced the ether bomb lightly in his right palm, gauging his distance. Then he threw it.

The bottle bounced off Envy’s nose and clattered to the floor, but somehow it didn’t break. The dragon, however, sprang to life like a jack-in-the-box, leaping and slithering backward and huffing in surprise. “Hey Fafner!” yelled Siegfried, and threw another one. This bomb burst directly under Envy’s belly and he writhed to escape it, while his great eyes finally fixed on his unlikely tormentor. Then the fumes caught him and he began to cough—short, sharp barking sounds. Siegfried fell back, avoiding the ether as the creature slithered in his direction, still coughing. Envy’s head began to sway; his snout touched the ground; his coils stopped writhing. Siegfried paused, staring in rapt fascination at the quiescent dragon. Then he started to approach him, as if drawn by a string.

“His wing fins are still up,” Al whispered urgently. “He’s still awake!”

“Oh no,” breathed Edward. Drawing a deep breath, he leaned around the corner. “Siggy!” he yelled. “Stop!!”

At the sound of his voice, Envy’s head shot up and Siegfried staggered backward. He tripped over a
bone and sat down abruptly as Edward ran out into the open with Al behind. “Hey slime breath!” Ed yelled, trying to draw the dragon away from Siegfried as the scientist scrambled to his feet with Al assisting him.

“Edward Elric!” Envy barked, his voice cutting sharp and shrill through the darkness. “I thought you were dead!”

“Fat chance, you slug.” Ed had darted in to hide behind the steel post to which Envy was chained. Leaning out, he taunted him. “I thought you were, too, but now I’m really disappointed.” He ducked as the dragon hissed and spat venom. It spattered over the chain. Ed began to scramble away. Envy’s huge head overshadowed him. “Siggy!” he yelled, hearing Al call his name in alarm. Ed dropped to the floor and rolled, just avoiding another burst of fiery venom. “Do something quick!”

Siegfried lobbed his third bomb. It exploded roughly in the center of Envy’s living space, releasing a strong wave of noxious fumes. Envy flinched, briefly distracted, but Edward did not move. When he had dropped, he’d landed on his own ether bomb and broken it under himself. He lay unconscious, face down on the floor beneath the dragon’s coils.

Alphonse’s eyes grew huge and he yelled, pointing. Siegfried was staggering drunkenly and was in no shape to perform a rescue. Al lunged to grab Envy’s tail and began to twist it savagely as the dragon stooped over his brother. Envy snorted, swinging his head briefly around to glare at whoever had his tail.

Coughing hard, Al found his movements were slowing down. Then Envy stopped moving completely. Alphonse dropped his tail and dragged himself across the intervening space to his brother. “Ed? Ed!” But Edward did not respond. He lay, smiling beatifically, less than three feet from Envy’s open jaws. The bottle he’d broken had delivered the final blow; when Envy had bent to devour him, he’d gotten a cloud of Siegfried’s special compound full in the face.

Alphonse paused. For a moment, to his startled vision, he thought he glimpsed not one, but two separate spirits in the dragon’s body. It was disorienting and he swayed, feeling himself going dizzy and faint. Then he was startled as a hand came into his narrowing range of vision, grabbing Edward by the collar and dragging him away. He felt himself being dragged as well. It was Siegfried, red in the face, laughing and gasping. “We sure showed him, eh?!”

Al coughed again, feeling his consciousness slowly starting to return as Siegfried hauled them both to fresher air. “Ed’s not moving, Siegfried!”

“He’s breathing. Just out for awhile. He got the dragon’s dose!” Siegfried laughed again. It was a tickled sound, high pitched and rapid-fire.

Al was not amused. “We got lucky we didn’t all get eaten or suffocated,” he growled. “Did it ever occur to you, Siegfried, that ether might not work on a dragon?”

“Oh yes,” Siegfried said. “However, ether does work. On most other animals.” He slapped Ed’s cheeks lightly with open palms. “Still unconscious. But we have to hurry.” He bent to lift Ed and slung his weight over his right shoulder as though he were carrying a sack of flour. Ed hung limp and unresponsive, his hands swinging loosely as Siegfried started for the library. “The dragon might not sleep for long. We must find the books. And get out.”

When they reached the library door, Siegfried paused thoughtfully. “I was going to rely. On your brother’s steel arm. To open this lock. Alphonse, please produce Plan B.”

Alphonse rummaged wordlessly in the sack, coming up with a short crowbar wrapped in a thick
towel. Unbundling it, he dropped the bag on the floor and applied the bar to the door as Siegfried looked on. “There’s bound to be an alarm of some sort,” he grunted as he strained, putting his weight behind it.

“All the more reason for us to hurry.” Siegfried glanced back over his shoulder at Envy, but the dragon had not moved. “I only wish I had more time. To study this amazing creature. Did you hear him speak?”

“All—dragons—do that.” Al gave one more shove and the lock popped. “That was pretty easy,” he said, ducking out of the dust cloud as Siegfried opened the door, shining his torch inside.

The room was surprisingly small and dingey, and the modest shelving had a thin layer of dust. “This is weird,” Al said. “For a library, there’s not that many books, and they haven’t been looked at in ages.” He turned back, reaching to check on his brother, who was still hanging over Siegfried’s sturdy shoulder. “Shouldn’t Ed be waking up pretty soon?”

“He will wake up. On his own good time.” Siegfried was rapidly scanning the shelves. “Ah!” he said, snatching up a matching pair of volumes. “That was pretty easy,” he said, ducking out of the dust cloud as Siegfried opened the door, shining his torch inside.

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“He will wake up. On his own good time.” Siegfried was rapidly scanning the shelves. “Ah!” He snatched up a matching pair of volumes. “That’s two out of three,” Al said, stuffing them into the sack along with several other interesting-looking tomes. “But where’s the third?”

“Maybe someone took it.”

Al leaned to blow off the dust from the last shelf and began to rummage through it. “Here’s a bunch of stuff by a Madame Blavatsky.”

“Yes, the Society was inspired. By her and by—hah!” Siegfried, triumphant, held up the last volume. “It had fallen.”

“Siegfried. There’s your own books!” Al pointed to several volumes on the second shelf.

The little scientist opened his mouth to reply when he was interrupted by the rattling of a chain outside. He rushed to the door. “The dragon is waking up! Come, Little Brother! Hurry out!”

“You and Ed first, Siggy! Go, go!”

Siegfried rushed past the dragon. Envy was rolling and thrashing, tangled in his chain, but as his nostrils caught the fresh scent of Siegfried and Edward passing by, his eyes cleared instantly and his head shot up, wing fins fanning stiffly out. Alphonse, lugging the heavy books, was stopped in his tracks by the fearsome obstacle. As Siegfried turned to see Al’s predicament, Edward, still hanging over the scientist’s shoulder, began to stir and complain. “Not now, not now!” Siegfried said. “We have a big problem!”

Al thought fast. “Envy!” he said loudly, gripping his spare ether bomb tightly in his hand. “I just wanted to introduce myself. I’m Alphonse Elric, and I’m going to kill you.” Siegfried’s jaw dropped as Edward’s gentle younger brother delivered this ultimatum point-blank to the dragon’s face.

But Envy only laughed. “I didn’t think there could be anyone more pathetic than that puny little Edward Elric, but here you are!” he said. “Bigger than your brother, but more stupid!” Envy turned his head sharply back on his neck, snapped quickly at the chain, and it fell off, clattering to the floor. Uncoiling himself, he slid a bit nearer. “They thought they were holding me prisoner for their next grand experiment. But I knew that Edward would come snooping here sooner or later. I’ve been waiting for him.”

“No one messes with my brother,” growled Alphonse. “Someone was bound to take you out and it might as well be me!”
“Hey!” Edward’s voice rang out indignantly in the shocked silence. “Alphonse, that’s not fair! I get first dibs!” Siegfried, surprised, glanced backward at his suddenly animated burden.

“I don’t think so, Ed,” Al shot back, falling back as Envy advanced on him steadily. “You couldn’t even walk straight right now. But Envy killed you and he killed our dad too, and someone has to make him pay.”

Siegfried gaped and stuttered, blinking at this unexpected development, and stood there with Edward pounding uselessly on his back. “Put me down!” Ed yelled, but when Siegfried did so absently, he fell over.

“Go on, you two!” Al said warningly. “Hurry!”

Ed pulled himself up on Siegfried’s arm. “What’s he got in mind, anyway?” he said in a low voice, swaying. Siegfried said nothing, but suddenly grabbed him around the waist and lifted him, kicking and protesting, back over his shoulder as he started rapidly off down the tunnel.

“So,” Al said almost conversationally, still facing the dragon with his ether at the ready. “I can see you changing into a dragon when you went through the Gate. After all, you probably didn’t know exactly where you were going, and you needed the strongest body possible just in case. What I can’t figure out is how you screwed it up so bad. I mean, you’re a shape-changer, so you’re supposed to know what you’re doing.”

Envy’s eyes glittered in the dark. “I don’t know what you’re up to, but I seriously doubt you’re concerned with my aesthetics,” he sniffed. “Why don’t I just eat you and you can see what I look like from the inside out?”

“Not likely.” Al backed up farther as the huge head loomed nearer. “It’s only that you might as well be just a huge snake, or a worm or something. I mean, with no legs you can’t do much but slither. You’ve got shit all over your belly.”

The dragon growled dangerously, but said nothing. Again Alphonse thought he glimpsed a second spirit in the creature and he squinted, wondering if his vision had been affected by the ether. “I bet you can’t fly, either.” He backed off another step or two, but Envy remained where he was.

“Think again, young alchemist. I can fly with the best of them.”

Al snorted in derision. The vanity of dragons was well known, as were their short tempers and relatively low intellects, and it looked like Envy was no exception. “I’ll believe it when I see it. You’re not a real dragon. I know you can’t breathe fire, or you would have fried my brother and me when you had the chance. Now you’ll never catch us!” Al turned as if to run.

Envy huffed, his eyes reddening with rage. Whipping himself into a coil and drawing back his head, he spat a bright blue chemical flame. It sprayed over everything in the vicinity, leaving several piles of refuse burning almost underneath him. Al spun on his heel to hurl his ether bomb into the flames, and it exploded. Envy fell back involuntarily, leaving an opening. Al rushed across it, clearing Envy’s thrashing tail with a great leap, and caught up to Siegfried and Edward, urging them on. A quick glance back showed the writhing dragon aflame and in pursuit.

“Go! Go!” Al shoved Siefried, stumbling, along the passage, but as their shadows suddenly fell across the floor in front of them he pushed the scientist sideways through an old doorway. Ed swore as his head banged into the wall. A sheet of fire rushed past them. Al shut the door and braced it with some debris.
“He’s gonna set the whole underground on fire!” Edward said. Siegfried had put him down again and was solicitously brushing him off.

Al couldn’t reply. He had sunk to his knees, hands to his face to muffle the sound as his body was wracked by a sudden paroxysm of coughing.

Siegfried came quickly to his side, with Ed following more slowly as he got his equilibrium back. “That cough,” the scientist said aside to Edward. “Is normal for him? Once in awhile I hear it.”

“He’s had it for awhile now,” Ed replied. “I think he got it when we were sleeping in Uncle’s truck.”

“It does not sound good.”

Al finally got his breath back enough to speak. “Sorry, sorry,” he gasped. “I hope Envy didn’t hear me.”

Edward grasped him by the arms and helped him up. “You were really brave back there, little brother. Now come on. We’ve got to find a way out of here before we get ourselves trapped.”

Siegfried lay his hands on the door. “It’s not hot,” he announced.

“Be careful,” Edward admonished as the scientist cautiously opened it. It was dark again on the other side. Peering out, Ed could see a flicker of flame in the distance. Then he heard the echoes of voices coming from the other direction. He ducked back inside. “They’re onto us,” he said breathlessly. “It’s now or never. We’ve got to run for it.”

“I will lead the way. And protect you,” Siegfried said. He was wielding his crowbar like a weapon. Edward ducked involuntarily as the scientist turned to his brother. “Alphonse. Do you still have the books?”

Al nodded, slinging the sack over his back.

“Then follow me.”

* * *

Siegfried was huffing like a locomotive engine as he strode quickly along the tunnel in Envy’s sulfurous wake. There was a thin sheet of smoke in the stagnant air; here and there small fires were burning. Ed tried to put out the ones he could reach with his jacket as he hurried along, but the farther they progressed, the thicker the smoke became. Alphonse got coughing again and couldn’t stop. Ed paused to fish for his handkerchief. “Here. Tie this over your face.” He took the bag of books from his brother.

“It’s getting hot!” Siegfried exclaimed. His face was running with sweat, reflecting an orange sheen from the light ahead.

“If we don’t do something quick, we’re gonna die down here,” Edward said desperately.

“There should be a door just ahead,” Siegfried said. “It leads onto the rocket hangar. Underneath the Botanical Gardens.”

“I see it. I see it!” Ed sprang forward, dragging the sack with one hand and Al with the other, but
when he reached the door, it was secured with a padlock. He broke it with his automail and they pushed inside, into brighter light and cleaner air—and a newly evacuated lab.

The fire alarms were sounding as the three thieves rushed past the abandoned benches. Edward tried to catch a glimpse of what was being built as he hurried by. It looked like nothing he’d ever seen—two half-finished, crescent-shaped pieces of machine architecture, each several stories high, parked side by side in an immense envelope of scaffolding. He paused. “Wait! Is that a Gate?”

“I have no idea,” Siegfried panted. “Please, hurry along!”

Alphonse skidded to a stop and stared. “No! Wait! This is really important! It is a Gate. See the Ouroborous inscribed along the edge?”

“Don’t these people ever give up?” groaned Edward. “This completely changes our plans, Al.”

“No it doesn’t. You know their alchemy is crappy.” Al coughed a little, pulling down the kerchief. “Even if it works, and they send another army through, they won’t last half an hour when they meet our alchemists on the other side. Remember what happened before? Besides, a purely mechanical Gate is a preposterous idea. There’s got to be some kind of living spirit in it, or it just won’t work.”

“Alphonse, we can’t assume their alchemy will always be bad, or that this Gate won’t work.” Ed started quickly forward, dropping the bag of books and scrambling up on the scaffolding to lean over the railing. The machine was emanating a power he could feel. As he looked into the center, between the two separated halves, he was aware of something becoming clear—something he didn’t want to see. He turned his head away quickly. The fine hair on the back of his neck was standing straight up as he stretched to touch the reddish-golden scales of the inlaid dragon pattern that ran around the entirety of the device. Then he jerked his hand back abruptly.

“Wait! It’s not just mechanical, Al. This is Orichalcum! I can feel it!”

“You’re kidding me.” Al ran up to the structure and Edward bent to give him a hand up. Alphonse turned to the uncompleted Gate. He was taller than Ed and had less trouble leaning to reach the metal in question. Pressing both hands to the shining surface, he gave a startled exclamation. “It’s alive all right!”

“Alive, but is it structured?” Ed said. “Do they know how to make it sentient?”

They stared at each other in awe. “Where did they get this stuff?” Al wondered. “Siegfried. Do you know what’s going on here?”

“This project is new. Since I was here. Interdimensional travel, obviously.” Siegfried was rifling the drawers in a nearby desk.

Edward glanced back at the Gate. “What I do know, Al, is that they’ve got a whole network of these labs. They’re working on those flying discs that sometimes appear in the sky, and talking about sending expeditions to Tibet. This might not be the only Gate they’re building. Al? Al!”

Alphonse had paused. He was holding his breath, staring fixedly into the machine’s core. Edward put a hand on his arm. “Alphonse? Better not look in there.”

“Oh,” Al said suddenly, startled.

“What is it?!”

“I just got a real vivid picture of Winry!”
“Look, up there.” Ed pointed at the crest of the arch. “Someone left in the activation key!”

“We’ve got to get that,” Alphonse said immediately.

“Right. But there’s no time to move the scaffold. Can you boost me up there?”

“I hope so.” Al bent, joining his hands in a stirrup, and Edward quickly stepped into it. “One—two—"

“—Three!” With a grunt, Al tossed his diminutive brother as high as he could. Scrambling in the air, Ed snatched at the key, wrenching it from the lock as he fell. He missed the scaffolding completely on the way down, but was caught unexpectedly in Siegfried’s arms. As they both tumbled to the ground from the impact, a door slammed open at the far end of the vast cavern. “Ed! Siggy!” yelled Alphonse. “Run!”

Two men were approaching, drawing guns as they came. Siegfried and Edward got to their feet. Al leaped from the scaffolding and was caught by them. Ed grabbed the bag of books and they headed for the opposite door, running low and trying to keep the benches between themselves and their pursuers.

Siegfried fell back as they reached the door and the brothers rushed out and up a narrow flight of stairs ahead of him. As they reached the top of the stairs and rounded a corner, they ran right into a man who was coming down. Siegfried, behind Alphonse, almost fell in surprise, waving his crowbar ineffectually, but Edward snarled, knocking the astonished stranger to the floor with one blow of his steel arm. “This is what we get for your taking away my gun, Siggy!” They ran for a hundred feet along a level hallway before coming to a T. Siegfried guided them to the left, where they paused in an alcove.

“So you know where you’re going then?” Al wheezed.

“I was here once or twice,” Siegfried said. “But I have forgotten.”

“Well, I was here a lot with Alfons Heiderich,” Edward said, surprising them both. He pointed. “The way out is over there!”

* * *

They came out in a cinder block building situated on the edge of the Gardens. Edward had spent many a peaceful afternoon here with Alfons Heiderich in years past, and he felt a pang as he paused at the outer doorway, looking left and right. Above the treetops, in the direction of Haley Hall, a thick cloud of smoke obscured the sky, and they heard fire bells ringing.

“I wonder if Envy made it out of there,” Al said as they ran out into the open. “If he did, he’s probably looking for another lair.”

Both Edward and Siegfried knew the streets immediately surrounding the Munich Botanical Gardens, but by the time they made it back to the vicinity of Haley Hall it was growing dusk. The forbidding old building was in flames, and an assortment of firefighting wagons and police vehicles was gathered at the scene. Siegfried’s Fiat sat in the middle of the conglomeration, blocked in by firefighters.
Siegfried pointed immediately at Alphonse. “You look most innocent. Go get the car.”

“What if they question me?”

“Just say you’re a tourist. It wouldn’t be far wrong.”

Alphonse left Edward with Siegfried in the alley and trotted down to get the car. Some tense minutes passed as Siegfried and Ed watched various officials questioning Alphonse. At last the firefighters obligingly moved their rig and he pulled the Fiat around the block. “Hurry up and get in!” he said, leaning to throw open the passenger door. Siegfried scrambled into the front seat as Edward piled in the back with the books. In his nervousness Alphonse let the clutch go a little too quickly and they took off with a violent lurch and a squeal of tires that made Edward and Siegfried both protest and drew the immediate attention of law enforcement.

“What do you think you’re doing, you moron?!” Edward yelled, pointing back to two police vehicles following close behind. “The way you took off they must think we set the fire!”

“Don’t look at me. You taught me how to drive!” Al snapped, following Siegfried’s pointing finger down another alley and along a back street that was largely empty. “Are they still following us?”

“Look in the mirror!” said Siegfried. Al looked and stepped on the gas, sending the car careening. “Ed,” he said. “Maybe you should jump out somewhere along the way and take the books with you.”

“What, and get run over by those maniacs? They’re driving worse than you!”

“I can take us through the Botanical Gardens. It could provide cover.”

“No!” Siegfried said. “Those quarters are too cramped. We would be caught.” As they rolled through a four-way intersection without stopping, he added, “Head north!”

“Which way’s north?”

“Left!” Edward yelled. “Head left at the next intersection!”

Al turned left as instructed at the next intersection. “Uh-oh!” he yelled, dodging a car which was coming at them head-on. “It’s a one-way street!”

“I didn’t mean for you to turn left like that, you idiot!” Edward bawled.

Al’s face was flaming as he dodged another honking vehicle. “Call me one more name and you’re walking home, Edward Elric!”

“Brothers! This is no time to be fighting!”

Edward and Siegfried both screamed as Alphonse suddenly took the initiative, coming out of the one-way street into another intersection and swerving left again, bouncing over a curb. He braked suddenly to avoid a bicyclist, throwing his passengers violently forward. “Where the hell you are going?!” Siegfried said.

“I’m doubling back. It’s the last thing they’ll expect.”

Ed turned to peer out the rear window just in time to see the two police cars shoot straight through the intersection behind them. “OK! Good thinking, Al.”

They had proceeded less than a block when Siegfried suddenly lunged up in his seat, his head
banging the roof. “STOP! Stop, stop!”

Al pulled quickly to the curb, glancing wildly backwards and forwards. “What, Siegfried?!”

“There! In the road! Look! Dead cat, dead cat! Is fresh!”

“Dead cat?!” snarled Edward. “Of all the frickin’—“

“You. Edward. Out! Now! I must have this cat!”

“We’re trying to escape here, Siggy,” said Edward grimly.

Siegfried folded his arms. “We go nowhere. Without that cat. Now go get!”

With a long-suffering sigh, Edward slid out of the rear seat, slamming the door unnecessarily hard behind him. Making a point to look both ways, he trotted out into the street and retrieved the cat, carrying it gingerly by its tail back to the car. It was a fresh kill, as Siegfried had said, most likely run over by one of the fire engines. “Here,” he said in disgust, dropping it squarely in Siegfried’s lap. “Now can we go?”

“Yes, yes!” the scientist said gleefully. “Now we go home. Alphonse, go! Take us back to the Golden Toad! Quickly!”

* * *

By the time they reached Einhorn Street they were clipping along at a very fast pace. When they reached the inn, Al pulled the car around back where it would be hidden. Siegfried grabbed the dead cat rather than the Thule texts and took off at a run for the back door of his lab, leaving Ed and Al staring after him. “He must’ve been waiting years for that poor cat,” Edward said, picking up the sack containing the books.

“Alphonse!” Siegfried had paused at the door. “Come here! You must help!”

“I don’t want to help,” Al said. “Besides, we might not be safe yet. I still hear sirens.”

“Hey you! Come here right now!” Siegfried’s tone brooked no argument and Al sighed heavily, shrugging. He turned to Edward. “Better find a safe place to hide the books,” he said, and Ed nodded.

Al took off at a trot, reaching Siegfried’s side quickly. “All right. What is it with this dead cat?”

Siegfried gave no answer, but continued into the building. In moments he had the unfortunate victim on a dissecting bench. He picked up a pair of surgical scissors and Alphonse cringed, hiding his eyes behind his fingers as Siegfried made a swift incision in the belly. “Eww! Siegfried! That’s horrible!”

“Here. Here. Help me now.” As Al looked up in shock, Siegfried placed a small, squirming bundle in the palm of his hand. “Take off the sac. Rub his face clean.”

Al gasped. Laying in his hand was a living newborn kitten. Immediately he did as Siegfried ordered, carefully breaking the membrane and wiping it away from the wet fur. It was a white kitten and as he cleaned it up, it began to mew piteously.
Al shrugged quickly out of his shirt and made a nest of it on the bench as Siegfried retrieved two more kittens. These were both black with white bibs and paws and both of them were alive and healthy. Al exclaimed wordlessly as he received each one. His eyes were huge. Siegfried stepped back with a grin. “Good magic trick, eh? Three is all. I felt them. In the car. They are yours now. But you will have to work hard to keep them alive.”

Al could hardly speak. “Oh, Siegfried. Thank you for saving them.”

Siegfried winked and bent to speak conspiratorially. “I w-would have saved them anyway. But this was the easy part. Now they must be kept warm. They must have an incubator. They must have tiny bottles!” He chuckled.

“Poor momma cat,” Al said. “I’m sorry she died.”

“She was lucky,” the scientist said seriously. “She died quick. And her children survived her.”

“I guess you could look at it that way.” Al solicitously rearranged his shirt around the newborns. “OK, Siegfried. Will you help me build the incubator?”

“I already have one,” he said smugly. “We will set it up in here immediately. They do not need milk tonight. Tomorrow I will help you. With their bottles. And show you how to make their food. Now I will put Momma in the cooler.”

It took Alphonse and Siegfried half an hour to set up the incubator. It was ingeniously held at a steady temperature by a tiny candle flame. Siegfried indicated the proper mark on the glass thermometer inside. “Kittens are red,” he said. “Chicks purple, chicken eggs black. Don’t let the temperature deviate.”

It was midnight before Al felt the temperature was stable enough for him to leave his charges for more than a minute. Exhausted, he made his way up to his and Ed’s room. Edward was sound asleep on his bed with one of the Thule volumes laying open over his face.

It was tempting to wake his brother and ask if he would spell him off, but Edward had had an unusually taxing day. Alphonse carefully extracted the book from his sleeping hands and tucked it under his own arm. “Dear Ed. Sleep well.” He sighed. “At least we got what we were after.” He made his way back down the stairs to the study. “Looks like I’m not going to get much shut-eye,” he said to himself. “I might as well put my time to good use.”

VI.

The next afternoon, after Ed was well rested and Siegfried had shown Alphonse how to feed his newborn kittens, they held a victory party. Siegfried bought beer and wine, fruit, sardines, olives, cheese and crackers, and got out the phonograph. They drank and danced for hours. The inn was closed early and Russell joined in the fun. He and Siegfried demonstrated a variety of Tyrolean folk dances. Siegfried was surprisingly good at it, and the brothers ended up singing and clapping as they watched his capering. Then it was their turn to demonstrate some traditional dances from Amestris. Edward took the girl’s role, and he and Alphonse spun about the room. These dances involved much hand clapping and bowing and some very fine rapid footwork, and Siegfried and Russell were amazed to hear that such intricate patterns were commonly learned even by little children.

After the last dance, Alphonse deliberately sent his brother spinning right into Siegfried’s arms and
they all laughed. “There’s a secret to this,” Edward said, breathless and grinning, as Siegfried set him down on his chair with a thump. He leaned to whisper something in his ear and the scientist’s eyes widened. “Oh!” he exclaimed. “Fascinating!”


“Big Brother says. That there are alchemical formulas. Coded right into these folk dances. For cultural preservation. Of basic alchemical techniques. And that most people in his world. D-do not know anything about this.”

Finally they all sat down together in the study, inebriated and content. Siegfried sat with Russell on the couch. They were only allowing Alphonse to drink beer, but he was still extremely relaxed, flopping back over his chair with a broad sweet smile, and Edward sat on the floor, leaning forward with his elbows on the coffee table.

"Do you have girlfriends. Where you come from?" Siegfried patted Russell’s hand.

Edward grinned at Al. "We do have a very good friend who's known us all our lives, but I don't know if she classifies as a girlfriend!"

"She's his surgeon mechanic," Al said by way of explanation. "She hits us with her wrench and plays chicken with locomotives."

"She's crazy," Ed said nostalgically. "But she's more like a sister to me than a girlfriend, at least since I hooked up with Roy. Still, I never quite know what she's thinking. Sometimes she can be a real flirt!"

"You already have boyfriend, then, Edward?" Siegfried was not surprised.

"Uh, yeah," Edward admitted a little shyly. His cheeks turned a pretty shade of crimson.

“In your country? This happens a lot?”

“I wouldn’t say a lot, no. But it’s not rare.”

"All the more luck for me," Al said. "It’s nice having a brother who’s not so interested in girls, because we never interfere with each other that way. But I really don't know how it might be, having Winry for a wife." He rested his chin on his hands and spoke dreamily. "She lives in a little house on a hill in Resembool, near where ours used to stand."

"Ah. In the land of dragons, she must be a princess!"

Edward choked on his wine, spraying it out his nose and then digging hastily for his handkerchief.

"Sorry, Sig," Al said. "She’s no princess. She lost both her parents in the war, before we came to live with her and her granny."

"The war?"

"On the Eastern front." Edward sighed. "I was a dog of the military. That's how I met Roy Mustang, the Flame Alchemist."

"You? A soldier?" Siegfried gaped, then recovered himself. “I can see you have an epic story. Please, tell it.”

“All right. I think it’s time.”
The two brothers talked for hours, and as they retraced their own history, from their first alchemical disaster to their arrival in Siegfried's world, they found themselves a little surprised at all they had survived.

As the hours grew late and the world became quiet and still, both Russell and Alphonse fell asleep. But Edward continued on, finally coming to the final chapter of the story, his great duel with Envy in the Grand Ballroom. His voice dropped to a near-whisper as he recounted what had happened next.

"And then-- I felt Envy's blade go right through my heart. It was the most horrible feeling you can possibly imagine. I could feel the sharp edge cutting into me. It felt almost like paper tearing, and for a split second, it didn't hurt. I remember turning in the air as I fell. All I wanted was to tell Al how sorry I was. I-- I wanted--" Ed shook his head miserably. "I'd failed him."

Siegfried nodded a little in rapt understanding. "Yes," he said softly. "Go on."

Ed looked up again. There were tears in his eyes. He was struggling. "Then Al did it. He did the impossible, Siegfried," he said shakily, through a constricted throat. "The Deed of Resurrection. He brought me back to life."

Siegfried did nothing and said nothing for the longest of moments. Then he slowly and solemnly moved to sit down by Edward and opened his arms to him. Childlike, Edward leaned into them. Somehow he did not weep, but held tightly to him, breathing deeply and slowly to calm his racing heart. Siegfried's white shirt smelled good, comforting, of lavender and sage. They sat quietly together for a long while.

"A lot of people think Al is the new Messiah," Edward said finally. "He says that now and then he has to send off folks who want to be his disciples. Even though I disappeared from Amestris, and there's no remaining proof of what he did."

"I have only the one brother, Heinrich, as you know," Siegfried said finally. "He hates me. He would not cry to see me dead."

Edward sat up. "Siegfried..."

"It is true. 'Siegfried is ungrateful.' 'Siegfried is un-Christian.' Heinrich does not mince words." The sturdy little man adjusted his glasses, then folded his hands across his paunch thoughtfully. "I envy you much. Two dear brothers. Please take my advice, Edward. Do not. Ever. Let the world get between you. As happened to my brother and me."

"Oh, we had plenty of problems, just like any other brothers. Just not since-- since I died." Ed turned. "Right, Alphonse?"

Siegfried blinked, unaware that Al had woken up several minutes before. "Right. We will never really fight again, no matter what," Alphonse said, getting up from his armchair and bending down between them, with beer on his breath and a sweet smile for his brother. "That's why I didn't fight back when Ed was so mad just because I gave you my blood. But what Ed didn't say about the Deed of Resurrection is that he did the same for me. See, Siegfried, I had a crutch. I used the Philosopher's Stone to bring him back, but I died doing it. My armor was destroyed."
Siegfried stared at him with an open mouth. There was no question that he believed every word of what they had been telling him. Al circled the coffee table and sat down opposite them, leaning in on his elbows to finish the story. He spoke in a hushed whisper, his eyes wide as he recalled the miracle.

"Once I'd brought him back to life, my brother resurrected me. But he didn’t need the Stone to do it. He used just the right alchemical array, and the power of his love for me. Once in awhile, in our world, we hear of it-- the Alchemy of Love. It’s the rarest kind of Alchemy there is—and the most powerful.

“I’ll never forget it as long as I live, Siegfried. Ed cast aside death itself. He walked between the worlds all golden and shining like something out of heaven. He was so beautiful at that moment, and he took me by the hand so kindly, that I still cry sometimes when I think of it. Then he led me out into the light and disappeared, and I woke up in my original body like it had all been a dream.” Al sighed deeply, looking at his brother with absolute worship.

Edward was blushing profoundly, hanging his head.

"See, Siegfried, the most important thing to remember about our story is that we never needed the Philosopher's Stone. All we needed was each other. Right, brother?"

His face still red, Edward nodded slowly and silently.

Siegfried's eyes spilled over with tears and he bit his lip. Suddenly he lunged to hug both of them, an arm around each neck. "What perfectly beautiful boys," he said thickly. "I must help you get home to your princess. I will work day and night to accomplish this!"

* * *

Al was asleep again on the sofa and Russell was sprawled over Siegfried’s favorite chair, mumbling to himself. Edward grasped Siegfried’s arm and pulled him quietly aside. “How’s it going?” he whispered meaningfully.

Siegfried nodded, understanding. “Not enough time yet for conclusions to be certain. But you may hear what I suspect. It should be no surprise.”

“OK.”

"Edward Elric is not human as we know it. He is something other. Something wonderful. Definitely not of this world. There are too many little changes. Too many quirks." He began to count them off. "The eyes. Highly unusual color with oval pupils. The brain. Strange waves. Unlike any seen before. The skin. Special sensor cells throughout. And the digestive enzymes. No discernible pattern. Amazing. Of course all this information should be published. In the scientific journals which will still print me. But for your sake, no. You are Top Secret!” Siegfried giggled a little and patted Ed’s shoulder clumsily.

“Well, what about Al?”

The scientist shrugged. “What can I tell? Without exact same testing? I have only his blood. Which is different.”

“Wait a minute. Al’s blood is Earth human?”
“Earthly or not, it is not identical to yours.”

Edward gasped out loud, then glanced quickly to make certain his brother was still sleeping.

“One more thing I know from this,” Siegfried said. “Is most important.”

“What’s that?” Edward was still reeling from the news.

“Your brother is sick. And you are unstable in the head.”

“Hey! Only Al gets to call me crazy!”

Siegfried ignored him, talking over him. “You did not evolve here. This is why the sickness. This is why the instability. The Earth itself—its magnetic fields, perhaps. Its electrical pulse. Whatever. You are incompatible with her. You do not belong. If you do not get home within a year. Perhaps two more. You will most likely die.” He grasped Edward’s arm, leaning close. His bloodshot eyes were earnest. “But Little Brother, who resurrects your soul each d-day? He is not so strong. Edward. You must read the books. Decipher the code. Find a way home quickly. Or you will lose him.”
The next day passed uneventfully; the Elrics, still reeling a little from their retrieval of the Thule volumes and of the resultant partying, didn’t get much worthwhile done. Alphonse cared for his kittens and worked a busy kitchen, and Edward had a long nap before taking over the bar.

It was a lively evening at the Toad; a popular local band had played the Hopping Frog, attracting a crowd, and Alphonse was exhausted. After midnight, he had placed a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel beneath his kittens—he had discovered this was a less capricious heat source than the incubator—and had just climbed into bed for a two-hour nap when Edward, having closed the bar, brought someone to their room.

Their voices were low but lively, with a great deal of soft laughter and no little drunkenness, and Al surmised correctly that his brother was looking to have a little fun despite Siegfried’s prohibition on sleeping with the guests. All the rooms in the small inn had been hired for the night, and it was clear that this was the best remaining option.

Al burrowed deeper under the blankets as Edward and friend spilled through the door still laughing, their footsteps thumping and staggering as they brushed past his bed in the dark.

“Al? Al!” Ed’s sudden hoarse whisper near his ear almost made him jump. He lay still, breathing regularly, and did not reply.

“He’s asleep. Hurry up, I’ve got a really good one here.”

“You had a good one half an hour ago, you little prick!”

There was a protracted rustling of clothes and several crude comments; Edward gasped and swore. Alphonse flinched—his brother’s raw, foul-mouthed sexuality clashed impossibly with his own romantic ideals. Nevertheless, he listened to it all with acute interest and was trying to spy from
beneath the covers when the conversation took a turn that changed everything.

“Oh my God. Edward. You didn’t tell me.”

“I—You didn’t notice? Come on.”

“No. You hide them really well.”

“Do you have a problem with it?”

“I don’t know—Oh good God, those scars!”

There was a very long silence. Then: “I’m sorry, Ed. I can’t do this.”

Edward said nothing. Al’s stomach twisted as he heard someone move slowly across the room. The bedroom door opened and closed again, softly.

He lay for a long time without moving, almost without breathing. Edward was so silent Al wondered if he was still there, or if he’d gone after him.

At last Al stirred, rolling over slowly to open one eye. Ed was sitting naked on the edge of his bed, staring at the floor. His golden hair was spilling loose over his shoulders. It glinted in the candlelight, and his eyes were huge and dark; he looked fragile.

Alphonse made a decision, sitting up and stretching before climbing out of bed. “Hey, Ed,” he said casually. “What are you doing up so late? Are you OK?”

Edward wasn’t fooled. “You heard?”

Alphonse blinked, taken aback. Then he leaned impulsively to place a kiss on top of his brother’s bowed head. “You don’t want someone like that anyway,” he said softly. “Besides,” he added cheerfully over his shoulder as he headed to the bathroom, “For whatever it’s worth, I still love you.”

From the corner of his eye he saw Edward break into a smile despite himself. When Al returned, Ed had curled up peacefully in bed, still wearing his arm and leg.

Alphonse finally went to sleep with a heart both warm and sad, reminded once again that his brother needed his special understanding.

* * *

Morning again, and a warm rain was falling. Siegfried came up to the Elrics’ room early. He was carrying a small brown bottle and a spoon. “Little Brother! Wake up, my fellow scientist! I have something for you!”

There was no reply. Siegfried knocked on the door. “Hey!” he called. “Alphonse! Your children are crying!”

Immediately there was a rustle and Alphonse opened the door. He was wearing only his underwear, and he was blinking and squinting in the most comical way. His long cherry-wood hair was out of its ponytail and falling all over, and he had one of the Thule volumes in his hands. “My kittens!” he said, dismayed. “Oh no! I overslept!”
“Hah. I knew that would get you. Here.” Siegfried poured a spoonful out of the bottle and thrust it toward his charge.

“Ew. What’s that?” Al said, sniffing it cautiously.

“This is an elixir. Made by my friend Kristoph at the pharmacy. Strengthened by my own ingredients. It should help your cough. Yes?”

“OK, I guess.” Al opened his mouth and Siegfried deposited the medicine within, then stood back, arms crossed, as Alphonse spluttered and gagged. “Wow!” Al finally gasped. “That burns all the way down!”

“Here is the bottle.” Siegfried handed it to him. “Take one dose in the morning. Upon rising. On an empty stomach. Another d-dose at midnight. Two hours after the last meal.”

“Thanks, Siegfried.”

“What’s going on?” Edward called from behind the door. “Is that you, Siggy? Come in!”

“Yeah,” Al seconded, ushering him through the door. “Are my kittens OK?” he asked again anxiously.

“They are fine, they are fine!” Siegfried grinned. “Lazybones f-fed them once already.”

“Really? I’ll have to thank him!” Al said.

Siegfried and Alphonse sat on Al’s bed directly across from Edward. Ed had been up and studying their new books since five o’clock, and in comparison to him, Alphonse looked positively fresh. Siegfried leaned forward to address him, his hands clasped earnestly before him. “I wanted to tell you. Now that you have these books. Russell and I will work. You two will study.”

“Excellent!” Edward said. “That’s just what we need.”

“I’ll work some,” Al said. “Especially in the mornings. I have to take care of my kittens anyway, and I study best when I take breaks. Not like my brother here!”

“Do as you like,” Siegfried said. “I will continue your stipends. Big Brother? I have some questions. About the structure in the hangar.”

Ed sat straighter. “The Gate under construction. I haven’t been wanting to even think about that.”

“It is to b-be taken seriously then? I left the Society b-before their first experiment came to fruition,” the scientist explained with an apologetic shrug.

“What Heinrich told you was correct,” Ed said. “The Thule Society did manage to break into our world, and they did so twice.”

“But the second time, I was working on the other side to break through and rescue Edward,” Al said. “I sure didn’t mean to help them!”

“They did it once without you, Al. That means they can do it again by themselves.”

“That also means we should be able to co-opt this new technology of theirs to get ourselves home.”

“Maybe,” Ed said. “If it starts looking like they’re going to use that Gate, we’re going to have to be ready to do something about it at a moment’s notice. We might be able to use it, but in any case we’ll
“definitely need a plan to destroy it.”

“But how will you know w-what is going on?” asked Siegfried helplessly.

“Ordinarily, we’d need an informant,” Al said. He turned to smile at his brother and Edward grinned back. “But luckily, we’ve got this!” He rummaged in the nightstand drawer and produced an artifact. It was a long narrow key, and looked like it was made of gold.

“The activation key,” Ed said. “Without this, they shouldn’t be able to energize the Gate.”

“And, if they made a duplicate and it is activated anyway, we should be able to detect it with this,” Al added. “See, this Orichalcum is in tune with the rest of the Orichalcum in the Gate. When one is activated, the other will be too.”

“I can only accept what you say in this matter,” Siegfried said. He drew a deep breath and sat straighter, hands on knees. “How strange that your form of alchemy. Does not function in my world,” he said thoughtfully. It was not the first time he’d said this.

“Actually it does, a little,” Edward replied. “Al and I are going to experiment some more. Find out just how much.”

“Where do you suppose they got that Orichalcum?” Al asked, swinging his legs idly.

“I know what it is made of,” said Siegfried. “If not where they got it. I did the research yesterday. The metal is thought to be the same. As that made by certain ancient t-tribes in South America. Where it is called Tumbasa. The composition is said to be mainly copper. With the--” (he struggled for a long moment with the word) "addition of gold or arsenic.”

“The composition of true Orichalcum is mountain copper, with five-point-one percent arsenic and traces of several other metals,” Edward said quickly. “The smelting of the naturally occurring ore is just as dangerous as trying to manufacture it. But there’s something missing from your definition. Orichalcum, as we know it, is the world’s only living metal.”

“Right,” Alphonse said. “It is ‘the companion of the alchemist with his metals and the warrior with his blades. The friend of the accomplished--’”

“—And the enemy of the weak,” Edward finished.

“Ed, that’s it!” Al snapped his fingers. “If we had several Orichalcum sources that could be triangulated, we could monitor the array on that Gate from a distance—at least under certain conditions. Maybe even make it do things.”

“Or not do things,” Edward finished. He frowned, looking at his brother. “We can’t cut the key in half.”

“Nope. Can’t do that.”

Siegfried looked on with interest as the brothers worked it out.

“It’s pretty plain,” Ed said, taking the key from Alphonse and running his fingertip over the outline. “No extra metal to work with here.”

“We could make some more.”

“Siggy, you don’t have any way to make custom alloys in your lab, do you?”
“Well… No. That is something. I have never attempted.”

“Al and I don’t specialize in that either. But if we could just make a little Orichalcum from scratch —”

“--It wouldn’t have to be a lot!” Al interjected eagerly.

“We could tune it to resonate with the Orichalcum in the key and in the Gate. Siggy?”

“I have a good friend. Who is a metallurgist and blacksmith. If he cannot make the alloy. He will know someone who can.” Siegfried stood up. “He lives some miles to the south. I will go right now.”

Siegfried left in a hurry. Edward returned to the Thule volumes, and Alphonse went to check on his kittens and help Russell open the inn.

* * *

Two hours later, Al came back upstairs. He was carrying the white kitten in his left shirt pocket, and the little syringe he was using as a bottle in his right. “Brother! Beauty won’t eat.”

Ed pushed aside the book and his notes with an indulgent smile. He was just finishing volume one. “Well, maybe she got fed too much this morning. She can only hold a few drops, after all.” He held out his flesh hand and Alphonse carefully put the little creature in it. Ed examined it critically. “She’s just a wiggling sack of fur and protoplasm. She doesn’t even have eyes yet.”

“We were there, too, once,” Al said. “Besides, Siegfried says she’s a little premature.”

“Are you sure it’s a girl?”

“Pretty sure. See?” Taking her back, Al upended the kitten and she began to cry piteously. “Poor thing,” he murmured, turning her upright again and cradeling her close to his chest. The crying soon stopped, but when Alphonse offered her Siegfried’s milk formula, she pushed her nose blindly past it.

“Let me see.” Ed tried feeding her himself, but had no better luck. “Maybe the food’s not agreeing with her, Al.”

“I don’t know. It worries me.” He nodded toward Beauty, who was inching her way along Edward’s wrist, turning her little nose left and right.

“Try putting one drop in her mouth.”

“I have.”

“Well, Al, I can’t help you. Just keep her good and warm, and maybe she’ll come around by herself.”

Sighing in frustration, Al tucked her back in his pocket. “I sure hope so. How are you doing with those books?”

Edward sighed heavily, straightening his back. “Most of what I’ve read so far is garbage, and there’s
no encryption I can detect. The first volume seems mainly concerned with the preservation of the Aryan race.”

“The second volume too. I wonder why. I don’t see any shortage of Aryans.” Al stroked his kitten with a forefinger. “Ed. I’ve been meaning to ask you something. When you looked in the Gate the other day, what did you see? Because you told me not to look.”

“Well, I couldn’t see anything clearly, Al, but it was terrifying all the same. There was definitely something in there.”

“I saw Winry.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“And what’s more—she was looking back, like she saw me.”

There was silence for a moment. Then Edward said carefully, “Are you certain it was really her?”

“Yeah. I’m sure.” Al sighed.

As they pondered the situation, Al’s kitten began to cry again. He took her out of his pocket and held her in both cupped hands, gently blowing his warm breath over her to soothe her, but the complaints persisted. “Ed. I’m really afraid something’s wrong with her.”

“I know. I wish I knew enough about kittens to help, but we’ve just got to wait for Siegfried.”

* * *

By the time Siegfried strode triumphantly into the study, it was early afternoon and Alphonse was ready to weep from frustration. Beauty was still not eating, and every time he tried to distract himself by starting to study one of the stolen texts, she would invariably begin to cry.

“I am here!” the little scientist announced with fake pomposity, bursting in on Ed and Al, who had moved downstairs to his library where the reading lamp and the large desk made studying easier. Al had Beauty in a small box at his elbow, with a hot water bottle that was wrapped in a thick towel tucked underneath her to keep her warm. He and Edward both started up at Siegfried’s grand entrance. “Did you find someone who could do it?” Ed asked eagerly.

“Yes. August himself can do this work.”

“It could be dangerous,” Ed reminded him as he followed him to the coat rack. “A certain amount of the arsenic will vaporize during the smelting process.”

“Yes, yes. I am convinced, however. That making a small amount of Orichalcum. Can be safely done. B-but you must provide my friend. With the exact formulation of the metal. And also, how you want it to be cast.” Siegfried looked back at Al. “I see you are keeping your child close at hand!”

“Siegfried,” Al said desperately. “She’s crying too much and she won’t eat. What’s wrong with her?”

“Be calm,” Siegfried admonished him. He washed his hands in the lab sink before picking up the tiny white kitten. “Ooh!” he said. “Such a round little tummy! Little Brother! Has the baby been d-d-
defecating?"

Al’s eyes went wide. “Why no!” he said.

“Al,” Edward said reproachfully. “You’re supposed to pay attention to both ends.”

“No, no, it is my fault,” Siegfried said. “I forgot to show him. Tiny kittens do not know how. Someone get a warm wash rag. From the kitchen.”

Edward ran off and soon returned with the sacrificial rag. “Now take your little one,” Siegfried said, handing her over to Alphonse. “And rub her gently. Under the belly. And under the tail. Just gently. Like Momma.”

Carefully, Al did as he was told and was immediately rewarded by a surprising amount of effluence. Beauty stopped crying and was visibly relieved. Minutes later she began to suck contentedly on the little syringe. Smiling, Al glanced up as she began to purr. “Listen!” he said in wonder. “This is the first time she’s purred!” He ducked his head to caress the tiny creature with his cheek. “I'll have to do the others right away. Thanks so much, Siegfried. I had no idea these little guys couldn’t go to the bathroom by themselves.”

“Siggy?” said Edward, who’d been enjoying the little drama from the background. “I just realized something this morning. I haven’t held up my part of our deal.”

“How is that?”

Edward pulled off his shirt, posing dramatically with flexed automail. “You wanted to study my arm after we got the Thule texts, right?”

The little scientist grinned, clapping his hands together. “I was wondering. When you would remember.”

“Better not let Russell see you like that,” Al muttered under his breath as he wiped Beauty’s face.

“Will you help me for a second, brother?” Edward pretended he hadn’t heard.

"Sure thing." Pocketing the softly purring kitten, Al came at once to Edward's side. He gripped Ed's steel shoulder socket firmly with his left hand, bracing himself against it, then slowly unlocked the collar with his right. "You ready?"

"Yeah." Ed grunted sharply as Al disconnected the arm.

"That hurts? Why should that hurt?" Siegfried demanded.

"It connects directly to my nervous system," Edward explained, taking the limb from Al and handing it to Siegfried, who staggered under its weight. "Weighs as much as a real one!" the naturalist said.

"It almost is real," Al replied. "I mean, there's no life in it, of course, but it still transmits all sorts of signals to him. He's learned how to use it really well, except when he's asleep."

"Yeah," Ed said sheepishly. "I almost broke Al's nose the first night he was here. We were sleeping in Uncle’s truck and I swung my hand back in a dream." A thought struck him and he leaned into Siegfried, wagging his remaining forefinger. "You are not to disassemble this!" he said emphatically.

"I don't disassemble," Siegfried said, drawing back. "I analyze. I examine."

"All right then. Analyze and examine. Learn what you can. Maybe you can apply it to make this
world a better place. But I want it back in one week or less, OK? Less if my back starts screwing up."

"It's the unequal distribution of weight," Al clarified. "It always gets him."

Siegfried took the arm back to a lab bench, then hastily returned, digging around in a storage closet until he came up with a cloth shoulder sack. "Put your shirt back on, my friend," he said gently. He waited until Ed, a little sheepish, complied, then continued, "Just fix like this--" he demonstrated, putting the strap over his own shoulder-- "And fill with books. Until the weight is balanced."

"Listen, you guys," Al said. "I have to go do the bathroom thing with Princess and Scooter now, and give them their dinners too. Siegfried, thanks again. Ed, will you please take my stuff upstairs with you?"

"Yeah, I will," Ed said. "But we can’t go to bed until we get the basic formula for the Orichalcum written out, so August can manufacture it."

* * *

"Brother?" Al asked that night, after they had put away the alchemical instructions they had made for the smelting of Orichalcum. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course." Edward stretched out on his bed, trying to get comfortable by propping his right side against an extra pillow.

"Do you have a crush on Siegfried?"

"Yeah. I guess I do, a little." Edward grinned, turning his head toward his brother. "Don’t worry, Al. I’m not competing with Russell."

"I’m not worried about that. It’s just, what if Siegfried were to go back with us to Amestris?"

"Whoa, whoa!" Edward sat up suddenly. "Al, we both know that’s impossible."

"Why?" Al was sitting up, too. "Why is it impossible?"

"Well, for one thing, it looks like there’s only room for one unique individual per world. Dad said that my counterpart here died in England, and Alfons Heiderich died too. If Siggy really does go to our world, someone over there is gonna die because of it."

"Maybe our world works differently that way."

"Unlikely. But the main reason Siegfried won’t go is his loyalty to Russell. And Russell won’t go because he has his little brother Fletcher to look out for."

"Not every brother is as responsible as you are, Ed."

"I think Russell is."

"Hm. I hope you’re right. Because I’d hate to see a confrontation between Siegfried and Roy Mustang!"
“It would never happen,” Ed said instantly. “Roy’d be out of the picture the minute he saw me with another man.”

“You really want to be careful, then! Because I do believe that Siegfried is going to go back with us somehow. I think he really will.”

II.

The next day, Siegfried took his charges to August’s shop, a converted barn high in the mountains near the Austrian border south of Munich. This was the area Uncle’s and Noaa’s *familia* frequented in summer, and the brothers kept an eye out for the battered old truck they’d left on the pass that spring. They saw no sign of their Roma friends, but were introduced to August and recognized him immediately as the counterpart to Sig, their teacher’s husband in Amestris. August was a gentle bear of a man and a member of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, and he lived alone, with only barn owls for company, way out on the mountain.

Ed and Al were most impressed by August’s marvellous works—bronzes and coppers and all the softer metals—and they exclaimed over the samples of his more unusual alloys. His bell metal was their favorite, producing a crystal clear, ringing tone that magically lifted the heart. “August is not only a smith!” Siegfried said, proud of his friend. “He frequently does assays. Of various ores for the miners. And he is a prospector himself. Of gold. And of uranium.”

“Uranium!” exclaimed Edward. “Are there uranium deposits around here?”

“Oh yes. Erzgebirge region,” August replied. “There is much uranium there. Very good for pottery glaze. And radium, of course.”

Edward was galvanized. “Tell me something, please!” he said, gripping the startled smith’s arm. “I’ve been looking for someone. He walks with a slight limp. He carries a golden cane and he’s obsessed with uranium. Have you seen him?”

“I know of the man,” August said with a frown. “If the story is to be believed, he came from some exotic country in Tibet. But from the little I’ve heard, he’s bad news. You’d best avoid him, child.”

It was at moments like these that Edward cursed his own appearance. With his tiny frame, his smooth, elfin face and his fine yellow hair blowing loose in the wind, he looked younger than he actually was—especially now, as he was out of his platform shoes. The appealing cuteness he’d often used to his advantage had backfired on him. August would say no more about Huskisson.

Later on the trip, Alphonse took a moment to pull him aside. “None of Siegfried’s books mention the existence of nuclear fission,” he whispered. “Maybe it’s something that happens only in Amestris. Maybe it doesn’t even matter here if he’s sold his bomb or not.”

“They just haven’t discovered the principles here yet,” Edward replied. “All this uranium and that stupid greedy idiot. I’m telling you, he’s around here somewhere close.”

“Well, why don’t you tell Siegfried we’re looking for him—that he was interested in selling a newfangled device to the highest bidder. You don’t have to say it’s a bomb. That should pique his curiosity, and if Siggy has August here keep an ear to the ground, he just might turn up.”
Manufacturing the precise alloy which the brothers had specified ended up taking several weeks. As Edward had feared, August had to adjust his manufacturing methods to make the smelting process less toxic, and his first three attempts to produce Orichalcum failed.

Meanwhile, Edward and Alphonse finished their careful study of the Thule texts. To their dismay, they could find nothing in the volumes which warranted more than passing interest. “I can’t believe we went through all that crap and burned down a building, for this stupid racist tract!” Ed said one morning as he shut the cover on the final volume with a thump. He shrugged his shoulders uncomfortably. Siegfried had returned his arm undamaged, but after a few days had requested to see it again. This was Edward’s second session without the mechanical limb, and he was beginning to feel it.

“But we did find out other things,” Al said. He was sitting nearby, feeding Beauty out of a small glass bottle with a tiny rubber nipple. The little kitten had grown much larger. Like her siblings, she no longer needed to be in the incubator. Her eyes had opened weeks before; they were a lovely shade of sapphire, and her whiskers and claws were lengthening. Her ears, once flat stubs, were beginning to stand upright on her head, and her snow white fur showed the promise of growing long and luxurious. She sucked greedily out of the bottle, clinging to it with her paws as Alphonse cradled her tenderly in the crook of his arm.

Edward moved to stand by the side of his chair. “Yeah,” he said. “We found out Envy’s still with us. And we found out about the mechanical Gate.”

“I wonder where Envy is, Ed. If he were crawling around the city, you’d think it would be in the newspapers, but I haven’t seen a thing.”

“And I haven’t heard anything from the customers, either. I can’t believe he survived the Thule Array only to be killed by a fire.”

“Ed,” Al said suddenly. “Do you remember when we were in the underground shop and Siegfried was digging around in that desk?”

“I’ve been thinking about that too. I could swear he took some papers. But he hasn’t said anything about it.”

“Let’s ask him.” Beauty was finished; Al wiped her face with his sleeve and set her to balance precariously on his shoulder as he got up to wash the bottle. Scooter and Princess, having already been fed, were curled up contentedly in their box on the sunny windowsill.

Siegfried was sitting quietly in the beer garden with Russell. They had noticed that lately, Russell had been looking tired and harrassed, but when they’d asked if he needed them to do more chores, he’d declined their offer. Now he smiled as they approached, nudging the sleepy Siegfried with his elbow.

“Hey Siggy,” Ed said. “We’ve got a question.”

“Oh?” The little man straightened, adjusting his glasses.
The moment was awkward; Ed did not feel inclined to discuss the Gate in front of Russell, but Siegfried showed no sign of moving. Ed compromised. “Don’t you have some papers or something from our little expedition to the library?”

“Oh yes.” Siegfried got to his feet a little laboriously. Turning to Russell, he said, with more sympathy than usual, “Wait here, mon ami. I will be back shortly.”

As they came in through the study door, Al put Beauty in the box with her siblings. “Is there something wrong with Russell, Sig?”

“Family problems.” Siegfried was rummaging around in a large filing cabinet. “They do not want him associating with me.”

“What?!” Edward spluttered.

“Oh, this is normal. About once a year. They protest our marriage. There!” He pulled out a single large, folded paper. “The blueprint. For the Thule Gate!”

Al blinked. “Siegfried!” he said in shock. “Why didn’t you tell us you had that?”

“I wanted you first to conduct. A thorough study of the books. This diagram is much too fascinating. Much too good. Once you see it, those old books will be history!”

Ed snorted, snatching the blueprints out of their friend’s hand. “As you’ve no doubt already guessed, those books are history. They’re worthless, Siegfried.”

“Yes. You had said little about them. So I gathered as much.”

Ed had partially unrolled the paper. It was a little awkward since he only had one hand. “This looks interesting, all right. Come on, Al. Let’s get this under the lamp and see what we can see.”

“I am going to August’s now. To see about the Orichalcum. I will be back before dinner. Keep the Toad hopping, you two!” Siegfried strode back out to the garden where he could be seen having an earnest discussion with Russell before going to his car.

After only a few minutes examining the blueprint, Al straightened to meet Edward’s eyes. “This is the key, Ed,” he said quietly. “One way or another—with their Gate or ours—we’re definitely on our way home.”

* * *

The Elrics soon realized that to fully understand the implications of the blueprint, they needed Winry, or someone with comparable skills, to interpret it. “I’ve never missed her more,” Ed said, leaning back in his chair to scratch the top of his head in perplexity. Alphonse didn’t need to ask who he was talking about; he merely grunted in agreement. “But parts of it are really straightforward,” he observed, slowly tracing the diagram with his finger. “It looks like it emits a really strong magnetic field, for one thing. I wonder what they’re planning to use as the energy source?”

“Whatever it is, it’s going to have to be incredibly powerful,” Ed said.

They stared at each other. “Nuclear fission?” Al hazarded. “You mean they have discovered it?!” But
they’d have to refine so much uranium for that!”

“Siegfried said there’s a lot of it around here.”

“It’s going to take ages for them to set up a power plant, but the Gate looks almost completed right now. They must have been working on it nonstop all through last winter. Is there anything else they could use?”

“The only thing I can think of,” Ed said slowly, “would be a Philosopher’s Stone.”

“Oh no,” Al breathed softly. “Envy knows all about how to make those.”

“So did Dad. Al— Is this what my nightmares are about? Is someone going to try to make a Stone?”

“I think it wouldn’t work here,” Al said hastily.

“How can we be sure?”

“We can’t. There are definitely traces of alchemy still left in this world.”

“Now do you think we should just go home and leave it up to fate?”

“Hey Ed!” Al said quickly, leaning forward. “I’m on your side. You know I am. I don’t want anything bad to happen here either. Let’s just not act rashly. We need to keep our ears and eyes open—all of them, especially August’s. And we need to finish our design for our own Orichalcum and get it tuned to the new Gate. Otherwise we won’t be able to throw a monkey wrench into their works.”

Edward bit his lip, hesitating. Alphonse looked to him expectantly.

“Al? I know my mind’s not been working quite right lately,” Ed admitted painfully, looking down at his feet. “But I promise to try and not act rashly. OK?”

Al smiled reassuringly. “OK, brother. It’s the best you can do. Now why don’t we put that blueprint in a safe place—maybe in a tin or something—and finish our wax model before we open the Toad, all right? I have a feeling that Siggy’s going to be coming back with an ingot today.”

* * *

Siegfried did, in fact, come back with a tiny ingot. It was less than an inch in diameter and perhaps two inches long—but it was enough, and when the brothers lay their fingertips on the shining red metal they both gasped in delight. “That’s Orichalcum!” Ed said triumphantly. “And it needs only a little tuning. He made it exactly to spec!”

“Yup. It’s got proto-life!” Al weighed the small lump of metal in the palm of his hand. “Isn’t this the most amazing stuff?”

“It is just a dead metal,” Siegfried complained. “I cannot understand. Why you should say it is alive.”

The brothers turned to him. “It’s because you don’t have an alchemic sense, Siggy,” Edward explained. “We can feel the difference, and you can’t.”
“But it is only an alloy! Just several metals mixed together! There is nothing magical about it. Why should one alloy be alive. And another, not?”

“There’s nothing magical about Greater Alchemy, either,” Alphonse said. “It’s just a science your world has lost.”

“We don’t even know why this particular alloy has these properties,” Ed said. “They’ve never figured it out, even in Amestris. But alive it is—at least by alchemical standards.”

“Yeah,” said Al. “There’s a naturally occurring spirit in this metal.”

“We’ve got the model for it carved,” Ed added. “If you can take us back to August’s tomorrow, maybe he can do the casting while we’re there.”

* * *

That night, after dark, Ed and Al lay on their little beds in their big upstairs room. During these mild spring days they were leaving the window open to air out the musty old building, and now, floating in on the soft breeze, came the sound of Siegfried and Russell in a heated discussion. Edward got up, coming to sit beside his brother near the window.

“They’re fighting,” Al said sadly.

“Yeah, well, it wouldn’t be normal if they didn’t fight a little,” Ed said philosophically.

They listened despite themselves. While some of the conversation could not be understood, enough carried up to the window that the gist of it soon became clear. Sensing a break, Siegfried was already preparing to go to Amestris, and Russell did not want him to leave.

“See? I told you,” Al said, caressing Beauty, who now slept on his pillow every night. Purring, she rubbed his hand with her head. “Nothing will keep Siegfried from exploring a new world. Not even love. This is going to break them up, Ed.”

Edward sighed heavily. “I hate that. But at the same time, I know right where Siegfried’s coming from. Don’t you?”

“Yeah. I mean, I love Winry the same way. I really do. All I wanted to do was stay with her in Resembool and live my life. But as long as you were lost, I couldn’t do that and be happy. I’m happier now, even though I miss her so bad.”

“I appreciate that, brother. But Siegfried isn’t going to be happy either way. If he comes to our world, he’ll be pining for Russell. But if he stays here, he’ll always regret that he lost the opportunity of a lifetime.”

III.

Siegfried was not as talkative as usual when he drove them to August’s metalworks the next day. He stood quietly in the background as the master smith carefully prepared the tiny mold for the lost-wax
process. The actual pouring took very little time; but there was a period of waiting before the metal would cool enough to open the mold and clean up the casting.

Al and Ed had brought a good lunch from the Golden Toad’s kitchens. It was a sunny warm day and they found a spot to spread their blanket right on the hump of the low mountain where August had built his home. There were alpine trees and small native rhododendrons growing all around the area, and to the south they were looking into Austria, with her high snowy peaks and green valleys. The two brothers pointed out familiar elements of the landscape to each other, comparing it to their homeland in Amestris, but Siegfried sat a little apart, gazing fixedly at a single point on the horizon.

“Siggy,” Edward said at last, with his mouth full of bread and cheese, “What’s with the long face? Are you and Russell still having problems?”

“You know we are, Edward.” Siegfried’s glance was slightly reproachful.

“Here. Have a sandwich.” Al put one in his hand and folded his chubby fingers around it. “You can’t think on an empty stomach.”

Siegfried sighed. Then he began to eat listlessly. After a few minutes, he did seem to perk up a little and Alphonse realized he probably hadn’t eaten anything since the day before. Ed poured him a glass of wine. “You know,” Edward said, “As a State Alchemist, I’m forbidden to let any alien into the land of Amestris. I could just tell you that you couldn’t come with us.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Siegfried said, unimpressed.

“It’s not that I wouldn’t dare. It’s that I don’t have the heart to disappoint you. But maybe it would be better if I did. That way there’d be no conflict.”

“I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves,” Al interjected. “Sure, we’ve got a Gate already built for us, and we have the blueprints to understand it with. But using it successfully to travel between worlds—that’s something else entirely! It’s going to be extremely dangerous, Siegfried. We might not even survive.”

“I know these things!” The naturalist slapped his thigh impatiently.

“Another thing,” Al continued. “You’ve seen what exposure to this world does to us. How do you know you’ll be able to adapt to Amestris? And if you can’t, what happens if you can never return?”

“There’s more.” Ed leaned forward earnestly. “I’ve already told you about our dopplegangers. You’ve seen it in action with Alfons Heiderich. Your entry into Amestris may result in someone there dying.”

“We do not know this beyond two anecdotal instances,” Siegfried said. “Besides, and most importantly: If it is me. That I am going to kill in the name of science. Then I will most certainly forgive myself!”

“…That’s original,” Al said in some dismay.

There was a long silence.

“So Russell’s family’s still putting the thumbscrews on him?” Ed asked after awhile.

Siegfried shook his head. “This is all happening at once. A convergence of problems. Yes. The family. Is threatening to send his little brother Fletcher. T-t-to his aunt in Berlin. If he continues to treat me as though we were married.”
“Berlin?!” Edward almost laughed. “There’s more queer sex in Berlin than anywhere else in the universe! He’ll really get his eyes opened there!”

“Don’t they have anything bigger to worry about?” said Alphonse scornfully.

“And at the same time. This opportunity for me,” Siegfried continued. He looked sadly away. “I am afraid that this may be the end for us. How can I refuse the chance t-to see a whole new world?”

“Don’t give up yet,” Edward said. “You do have choices, after all. And so does Russell.”

“Yes, and all of them bad,” the scientist replied quietly.

Siegfried went the next two hours again without saying much. When they returned at last to the shop under a cobalt sky, August had removed the Orichalcum from the mold and was filing away the excess, saving the fragments in a tiny envelope, which Alphonse later pocketed.

The pendant was simple, formed in the shape of an oval and bearing a crude representation of a Flamel cross. Once buffed, it sparkled and shone in the sun with a brilliant red light. August strung it on a leather thong, and Edward immediately put it around his neck. “Excellent!” he said with satisfaction. “The composition is exact! I won’t have any problem tuning this!” Siegfried paid August, who was very pleased with knowing the secret formula for Orichalcum, and they left with his assurance that he would tell them about anything he heard regarding Huskisson.

When they got home, the shadows from the building fell soft and purple across the cobblestones. The frogs were calling in the distance, and in the beer garden pond. “Hey,” Edward said gently, touching his friend’s arm. “This is a beautiful evening. Don’t waste it. Why don’t you go out with Russell? Spend the night somewhere really nice. We’ll hold down the fort.”

IV.

Siegfried and Russell took Edward’s advice, but they did not return the next day. In the absence of other instructions, the two brothers opened the inn on their own. In the bright sunny morning, Edward manned the front desk with a stack of books at his elbow and Al’s three little kittens toddling around his feet, while Alphonse managed the kitchen.

Around noon Edward was trying to sweep the cobblestone sidewalk in front of the inn one-handed when Fletcher Hansford suddenly appeared running madly down the street, waving a butterfly net and crying Ed’s name. Even though he wasn’t often at the Golden Toad, the boy was a favorite with the Elric brothers—bright and clever for his age, with the promise of a keen scientific mind. Ed put aside the broom just as Fletcher threw his little arms around Edward’s waist, almost knocking him off his feet. He was crying and blubbering, carrying on so uncharacteristically that Edward was astonished. He pulled the boy into the dining room, yelling for Alphonse to come quick. "Hey, hey, calm down!” he said sympathetically. “What's the matter, Fletcher?"

Fletcher was babbling about Russell and the police. At first it made little sense, but the Elrics were patient with him. Eventually they made out that Russell had shown up alone at his parents’ house that morning, and after some arguing had managed to get his mother to allow Fletcher to come with him on a picnic. They’d met up with Siegfried a couple of miles outside the city. Siegfried had given Fletcher the butterfly net and a magnifying glass as a present, and the three of them had spent several pleasant hours wandering in the countryside studying insects. But when they returned to the car, the
police had suddenly appeared from nowhere and taken the two adults into custody. Fletcher had run away into the woods in a panic. After being chased, he'd found his way back to town by following a creek back down to the river.

"This is weird," Al said, glancing nervously to the door. "What if they come here next?"

"Don't worry," Ed said grimly. "We're just a cook and a bartender. We have nothing to hide."

"Nothing to hide if these are real police!"


"Uh huh. I don't think it's Russell's family. What are we going to do now?"

At Al's question, Fletcher began to weep. Ed hastened to reassure him. "Don't worry, Fletcher. Al and I are going to get to the bottom of this. We'll get your brother back, and Siegfried too."

Fletcher brushed away tears. "I promise, Russell hasn't done anything wrong."

"Fletcher," Ed said, "You might not be safe going back home by yourself right now. Why don't I leave you with Al while I go see what's going on? You can help him with the customers. OK?"

Al grabbed his brother and pulled him aside. "Ed!" he whispered fiercely. "What if they raid the inn? They could be working for Envy, for all we know!"

"Just stay sharp. Lock everything and keep an eye out. If they come, go out by the back door to our meeting place at the vacant lot, OK? If the real police arrested Siegfried and Russell, then Constable Hughes should be able to tell me something about it. I'll take Siegfried's bike. All right?"

"I still don't like it. When you're done, get back here as quick as you can."

Ed gripped his hand by way of goodbye and took off to get the bike. Moments later he could be seen careening recklessly down Einhorn Street. Alphonse hesitated, watching him through the window until he was out of sight. "He forgot his arm."

One gentleman was just entering the inn looking for lunch, but Al quickly told him that the building was closing due to a family emergency. He locked all the doors and began to shutter the windows, with Fletcher in tow to provide the child some distraction from his worry.

* * *

Edward returned two hours later. Al greeted him eagerly at the door. "Fletcher's asleep in the study. Did you find out anything?"

Ed strode wearily into the kitchen and sat down with a thump at Siegfried's little table. "I had to stop by the University library to do some research on this. Al, you're not gonna believe this." He rummaged in his breast pocket, coming up with a scrap of paper, and began to read:

"A male who indulges in criminally indecent activity with another male, or who allows himself to participate in such activity, will be punished with imprisonment." He looked up. "That's Paragraph 175 of the Reich Criminal Code."
“What’s ‘criminally indecent’ supposed to mean?” Al said.

“Well, according to the official report, some dirt farmer saw Siegfried and Russell kissing each other under a tree. So he called the cops and they took them to jail.”

“Edward! No way!” Al went into a brief coughing spell. Ed waited until he was finished before continuing.

“It’s true. I didn’t really know much about this before, but if you happen to be a guy who has a boyfriend here, they’ve got a special punishment on the books just for you. The Roma have it tougher, of course, but this is still terrible.”

“So is this a coincidence, or do you still think the Thule Society might be in back of it?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“How long will they be in jail?”

Ed sighed. "I don’t know. But people say they’ve been accused of things like this before. It's all over this side of town."

There was a brief silence.

"Ed. This is ridiculous."

"I agree completely!"

"Do you think there are many people who get into trouble like this?"

“Al, you’ve never been to Berlin.”

“I don’t care about Berlin!”

Ed slid off his chair to pace the room restlessly. “Dad took me there a couple of years ago to party and get my mind off my worries for awhile. This was before I went to Transylvania and met Alfons Heiderich. Believe me, Munich is totally dead in comparison to Berlin! I had hordes of guys chasing me there. So yeah, that law could affect a lot of people.” He sighed. "I'm going to go to Siggy’s lab and get my arm back. I’m getting so used to going without it, I didn’t think about it before.”

“I did, but you tore out of here so fast I couldn’t remind you. If it is the Thule Society pulling the strings here, you’re going to need that thing when—not if— they decide to break in.” Al sighed. "I'm going to walk Fletcher home. His mom is probably going crazy by now."

“Just hold your pants on. You wake up Fletcher, I’ll get my arm, and we’ll walk him home together. All right?”

* * *

Unfortunately, the two brothers had learned long before that a neatly thought-out plan often shattered when it hit reality. As Alphonse gently woke Fletcher from an exhausted slumber, Edward found his arm lying on a workbench in a thousand pieces. He was so flabbergasted he couldn’t even swear. Al and Fletcher glanced at each other, then simultaneously came forward for a closer examination.
Each component was lovingly labeled with a tiny bit of tape on which was written a number. Some had two bits of tape. But there was no corresponding diagram with which to put the pieces back together.

Al turned to Ed. "Uh... Didn't he take notes?"

"Apparently they're all in his head." Edward was grim.

"Well... He's shot himself in the foot this time. We need your arm working to rescue him." Al sprang into action, already busy hunting for a container. "First we're going to take Fletcher home. Then we're going to batten down the inn for the night. We'll make sure it's completely secure, and check the upstairs windows too.

"I'll take your arm up to our room and I'll lay it all out on the floor on a bedsheet. We'll get something to eat, and after that you'll be feeling a lot better and you'll be able to help me put it back together without cursing too much. All right?" He smiled winningly at his brother. "Don't worry. We can fix anything if we just work together." As he spoke, he took a crate of ugly-looking little rocks and dumped them into the flower bed outside the study door. "Here’s your box. When we get back, we’ll put all your parts in it."

After a moment, Ed sighed and shrugged. "All right. I guess there’s nothing else we can do."

*S * *

Siegfried had an assortment of decorative walking sticks. Some of them were more dangerous than they looked, with hidden, spring-loaded spikes or concealed blades. Alphonse chose a tall, hollow Oriental staff which housed a long thin sword ready to use with a twist of the grip. Edward picked a shorter walking stick with a dagger concealed in the handle. They walked Fletcher the one and a half miles back to his house as fast as the boy could go.

"Fletcher," Al said as they finally neared his home, "It might take awhile for your brother to come back."

"How long do you mean?" Fletcher's eyes were huge, and he kept glancing back and forth to Ed and Al for reassurance.

"We really don't know," Ed said as they reached the gate. He opened it, then bent slightly so he could address Fletcher eye to eye. "I do know one thing for certain. He's thinking of you a lot, and he'll come back just as soon as he can. OK?"

"You are going to rescue him, aren’t you?"

"Ed and I will do our best with what we've got to work with,” Al said. “That much, I promise. Now I have to go help him with his arm. One of us will stop by tomorrow and tell you the latest news.”

“Meanwhile,” Ed added, “We want you to ask your mother about where they took him. OK?"

Fletcher nodded determinedly. "OK. I'll do that."

"Good." Edward shook his hand and released it unsmiling. "It'll be all right. You'll see. Just be strong."
After letting themselves back into the Golden Toad, re-securing the building and having a hasty meal of leftovers, the brothers started work on Edward’s arm. It had begun to rain outside and they were jumpy, starting at every noise. The telephone sat silent despite their constant expectation of its ringing. The two brothers debated calling some of Siegfried’s friends, but hesitated, as they were not certain that all of them knew about his relationship with Russell. The incredibly vindictive attitude of this strange world to love and sex had sapped their confidence; they did not want to create more trouble for their friends. In all their travels, Edward and Alphonse had never felt more like foreigners anywhere than they did during that long, dark night.

As they worked steadily on Ed’s arm, the kittens were repeatedly crawling out of their box, and every time Ed turned around there was at least one of them trying to make off with the parts. Under Al’s watchful eye he did not dare to get angry with them. Finally Al took the box, kittens and all, and put it in the frog bathroom, kissing Beauty on top of the head with the gentle admonishment that he would return soon.

"So where does this go?" Ed held up a tiny shim, blinking at it with bleary eyes. It was three o'clock in the morning and they had made very little progress.

"I don't know yet, brother." Al yawned cavernously and put down the parts he'd been working with. "I'm concentrating on the power supply right now, but I think we should get some sleep, OK?"

"I don't. I need my arm and I need it fast."

"You can't force stuff like this. You know that."

Ed sighed heavily, putting down the shim. "Damnit." He looked up. "Why did he have to do this? I told him not to."

"I've seen you take things apart a time or two. How was he to know he was going to get arrested?" Al glanced out the window at the night skyline. The moon was setting and the frogs were calling. "I bet he's just as worried about us as we are about him."

The Elric brothers were awakened from an exhausted slumber late the next morning by someone shouting while pounding on the door of their room. They sprang up from their beds, looking wildly at one another. "All the doors and windows were locked. No one should have been able to get in!" Al said. He had grabbed the Oriental staff, which he had slept with, and was ready to unsheathe the blade. Ed swore as he automatically tried to flex his steel arm and realized it was still missing.

The knocking came again. "Who's there?!" yelled Edward.

"It is Heinrich Shauer! Open this door at once!"

"H-h-heinrich!" stuttered Edward, staring at Al in horror. "Oh, no. It's Siegfried's brother!"
Siegfried had a tendency to exaggerate when telling stories, and Alphonse would have wondered if that was not the case with his fearful descriptions of Heinrich had Edward not corroborated his facts. Now Ed cautiously opened the door. Standing behind it was a grossly overblown version of Siegfried. Twice the size of his brother, he was older by several years, balding, and the lines on his stern face were ominous. The last hopes of the two brothers evaporated on the man's first sentence. "You two. Are you customers or rentboys?"

Edward stared at him, astonished that the man did not recognize him. Al colored. "We aren't either! We work for Siegfried."

"Well, with that hair you look like prostitutes."

Edward turned dismissively away and began putting the pieces of his arm into their box. "Come on, Al. Let's get ready to go. It's obvious we're not wanted here any more."

"Wait!" Heinrich pointed at him. "I recognize you, little man."

Ed turned back. "You should. I worked on your private rocketry project with Alfons Heiderich. This is my brother, Al."

There was a moment’s silence as Heinrich stared at Alphonse. At last he spoke. "The resemblance is uncanny. What is going on here? You are a scientist, but Siegfried told me he had bought his help from the Gypsies."

"He did. We fell on hard times and the Roma sold us to him."

"Please, Heinrich sir," Al said. "Siegfried is our friend. Can you tell us what’s happened to him?"

The big man drew himself up, crossing his arms. "My wayward brother is currently residing in the local jail, pending a hearing. That is all you need to know. You cook and clean here?"

"Yes. And the desk, the kitchen, and the books. Edward’s the barkeep too."

"We're the only employees Siegfried had besides Russell." Edward tossed the last piece of his arm in the box.

A noise suddenly erupted in the street below. Two dogs were barking frantically, as if they had something cornered. "I wonder what that could be," Al said, glancing toward the window. Then his face turned white.

"I put out the cats," Heinrich said, but the Elrics had already run past him out the door.

Al rushed down the front steps, Edward following a little slower as his missing arm left him unbalanced. The barking was coming from in back of the inn and as they ran around the corner of the building Al almost fell over a huge Alsatian. He'd never seen the dog before; it snarled at him and he skidded, frantically trying to stop. As the animal briefly gave way, Al almost stepped on the mangled body of a kitten. He fell to his knees in horror. "Oh, no. Beauty. Don't be dead!"

"AL!" Edward screamed. "Watch out!" The Alsatian, ears flat, was about to lunge at him. Edward leaped to get between his brother and the dog, kicking it back with his prosthetic leg. The stray whirled to bite him in the ankle and knocked him to the ground. Tears streaming from his eyes, Al sprang up with an inarticulate yell. Grabbing a stray brick, he threw it with all his might, striking the big dog hard in the ribs. It let go of Edward with a yelp and took off. The second dog followed. They ran away, slipping under the back fence and taking off down a narrow trail between some row houses.
Al grabbed his brother by the shoulders, gasping. "Edward. They killed Beauty. Are you all right?"

Ed nodded, getting to his feet and glancing around. "We have to find the others quick!"

Al pointed suddenly. The overturned box was lying some distance away, in the shadows at the very back of the lot. As they approached, a small black shadow appeared from behind it, mewing loudly. It was followed by another. Al lifted Scooter and Princess tenderly in his shaking hands. He examined them carefully. They were unhurt.

Ed picked up the box. There were holes in it where the dogs had savaged it. "That evil fucking bastard!" he said, as Al gently deposited Scooter and Princess back into it. "I hate him!"

"Me, too," whispered Alphonse. Dazedly he turned to collect the body of Beauty, leaving Ed to follow slowly behind him with the box.

"Look," Al said miserably, turning back to his brother with his favorite kitten in his hands. "She's all bloody and broken. They shook her to death."

Ed swallowed hard. "I see. We have to find a good place to bury her, Al," he said as gently as he could.

"I bet she was trying to save her brother and sister," Al continued as the tears spilled freely down his cheeks. "She was always that way." He looked at Edward for confirmation.

"She did save them." Edward was feeling terrible. "She led those dogs away from the box. Look, Al. If you stand guard til I come back, I know where there's a hand trowel in the cellar. I'll go get it."

"OK."

A few minutes later the pair set out for one of their favorite places, an empty lot in a nearby residential district. It had become an informal neighborhood playground, with a large apple tree overhanging it. Ed and Al knelt at the roots of the tree and busily chipped a grave out of the hard packed dirt. When it was deep enough, Al made a bed of grass in the bottom and spread a handful of wildflowers across it.

"That's a beautiful bed," Edward said softly. "I'm sure Beauty would like it."

"They're weeds," Al whispered. "No one wants them. Just like kittens." Carefully he arranged the small broken body in a comfortable sleeping position.

"Beauty was wanted," Ed said. He drew a halting breath. "That's what's most important, I guess, when you die. To know that you meant something to someone."

"Why, Ed?" Al's cry was plaintive. "Why must the world be like this? What is wrong with it? This is wrong! You can feel, I can feel it. Why?!"

"People have been trying to answer that forever," Ed said thoughtfully. "I don't know if the problem is in the world itself, like the religious cults say, or in the way we look at it. Maybe this was just a function of nature. Dogs and cats."

"I don't care what it was. It's just plain wrong!" Al left no room for argument. He was gazing again at his kitten. “I’m a Spirit Alchemist, Ed,” he said thoughtfully after a moment. “You think I’d have the answer to this."

"I think it's important to remember that there are many worlds," Ed said. "We can't come to a
conclusion about the whole universe just from our experience in this one. Right?"

Al did not reply. After a moment he whispered, "Why could I raise you from the dead, but I can't raise her?"

"I don't know. I really don't," Ed said.

"I never got to say goodbye to her. I put her in a box and stuck her in a strange room, and she got thrown out and died."

"But you saved her in the beginning. You worked hard to keep her alive, even though she was born prematurely. She got thrown out because of an inhuman act. You couldn't possibly have anticipated these circumstances, Al. This wasn't your fault."

Leaning on his hands over the grave, Al finally began to cry, hyperventilating and coughing as he gasped painfully for breath. "She didn't deserve this, Ed! It's like a horrible nightmare." Edward encircled him with his single arm as tightly as he could, and they wept together.

Afterwards, Al couldn't bring himself to cover Beauty with dirt. Ed slowly strewed some handfuls of soft grass over her until her body was hidden, and Al was able to continue the burial. When he was finished, and they had marked the little grave with a stone, both of them were completely drained. Ed looked at his brother with great compassion. "Al," he said. "I know this won't help right now. Nothing will. But when we get back to our world, if we ever get back, I promise to never keep you from having every kitten you could ever want."

"Thanks. I was going to anyway. But I only want Beauty back," Al said tiredly. His nose was stuffed up and his face was streaked with dirt and tears.

"Are you up to some more bad news, baby brother?" Ed asked, very gently.

"I know. I can't keep the others any more." Al coughed, casting a glance toward the box. The two tiny black-and-white cats were sleeping peacefully inside it.

"I wish you could. Especially after this. But I just can't see a way. You can bet Heinrich won't allow it. But if we leave the Toad, we'll be homeless again."

They sat on either side of the grave and gazed dully at one another. After a moment Edward gave a great sigh. "My poor back," he groaned. "It's killing me." He leaned backward and sideways, stretching his muscles, then froze. "Hey. Al."

Al looked up into the apple tree, where Ed was gazing. "A treehouse!" he said.

"An enclosed treehouse. It's very well built. Maybe you can keep your kittens up there!"

"That's true," Al said, a little life coming back into his eyes. "I wonder who it belongs to?"

"Well, I think this lot belongs to the people next door," Ed said, pointing at a modest but well-kept two-storey mansion on the adjoining lot. "That apple tree’s rooted in their yard."

"I thought the place was abandoned. You never see anyone there. But it's not far, and the weather’s warm. I could come here all the time to feed and play with them!" He looked back to the grave. "Maybe Beauty is still protecting her brother and sister."
Ed and Al returned to the Golden Toad that afternoon without their box of kittens. They had debated between themselves whether they were really willing to work for a monster like Heinrich, and had decided that they had to on a temporary basis, for Siegfried’s sake. It was likely Heinrich had more information relating to his arrest. Al braided Ed’s loose hair into a severe military plait at his request, and they marched grimly back to the inn like soldiers going to the front line. Going around to the back of the building, they discovered the outside door of Siegfried’s study was standing wide open. Coming cautiously through into the lab, they found Heinrich standing, hands on hips, surveying the scene. "There you are!" he said. "Where have you been all day? I should fire you on the spot."

"I've been with my little brother to bury his kitten," Edward said through his teeth.

"You could have told me to take them away," Al added. "You didn't have to just throw them out the door to the dogs."

Taking in Alphonse's dejected stance and swollen eyes, the big man gentled slightly. "I am sorry. I thought they were simply another of my brother's numerous atrocities. I intended only to put them outside, where they belong. I did not intend for them to be eaten by the dogs." His words were civil, if lacking compassion, and the brothers blinked in surprise. Then he turned back to his perusal of the study. "What a waste of space. Three rooms here that can each be rented! I should have been checking on him more often, but it pains me and my wife Rose to even come to this part of town. Still, this inn provides part of our income. I have been irresponsible." He crossed his arms, nodding with his head to a sealed wooden crate that was acting as a plant stand. "Bibles. I sent them several years ago, to put in all the rooms."

Ed and Al glanced at each other, mystified. "Why?" Ed said finally.

"Why?" He stared at them as if they were joking. "You truly don't know? My brother has obviously neglected your education! I will explain in detail later. Meanwhile, all this has got to go."

"You're throwing out all of Siegfried's stuff?!” Al asked in astonishment.

"There's an empty storeroom in the cellar by the boiler. I want you to take what I set aside down there. Later I will determine what to do with it."

Ed and Al glanced at each other. Ed nodded. "All right," he said as he clumsily lifted Siegfried’s little typewriter one-handedly.

Al moved to gather up a pile of books which Heinrich pointed at. As he did, he asked, "Can you please tell us if you've heard anything more about your brother? Like when he'll be back?"

"You needn't concern yourself about any of that," Heinrich said. "What matters is preparing these rooms for proper rental. Go along to the cellar, and then get back here quick!"

* * *
been stocked in several days.

Eating with Heinrich was an experience they would not soon forget. First came the prayer, which made Ed and Al uncomfortable. Al was made more uncomfortable when he asked if they could pray for his kitten and was refused on the grounds that animals didn't have souls. Throughout the rest of the meal he sat with a red face, not from embarrassment, but outrage.

Then came the lecture, if lecture it could be called. It was more a rambling invective against Siegfried's supposedly lecherous lifestyle, interspersed with a show of concern that he might have "sullied" the boys. Al, who had had enough long before, finally interrupted. "I don't understand about all this 'lifestyle' stuff," he said. "And I don't care to, either. But if you're trying to say that Siegfried isn't normal, or that he might have kept us for sex, you're sicker than I thought." He stood up from the table. "I don't feel so good, brother," he said.

Ed pushed his chair back, laying his hand on Al's arm reassuringly. "You've had a really rough day. Just go up to our room and lay down, Al. I'll be along shortly."

"I have not given him permission to leave," said Heinrich.

"No, but I have," Ed said. He nodded calmly to Al, who bowed slightly and left. Then he turned back to Heinrich. "Please, go easy on him," he said. "He's not well."

"I noticed the cough. Is it consumptive?"

"It’s probably asthma." Even though Alfons Heiderich had taken medicine for the same thing, consumption was little known in Amestris. Edward knew, of course, that it was a serious disease, but despite his scientific interest he had not given it much thought. Siegfried’s medicine had worked wonders for Alphonse, and Ed had felt there was no immediate danger.

"Very well. You have worked hard for me today. I give you your leave. Tomorrow, we will discuss your situation."

"All right." Ed got up to follow his brother. Then he paused. "Heinrich," he said. "If we write Seigfried a note, will you send it to him?"

"Please forget him! He does not deserve our concern."

"What do you mean, ‘forget him?’ He's your own brother!" Edward could hardly believe the man’s callousness.

"Not if I could help it. He has besmirched the family name and his way of life is an embarrassment to all true Germans."

"You don’t even know what his way of life is," Ed said. "He is a scientist of the first order, Heinrich. Always looking for the truth!"

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Al was laying on his back on his bed by the window, staring fixedly at the ceiling when Edward came in. "Ed," he said miserably. "I can't shut my eyes. I keep seeing Beauty all mangled and dead."
"I hear you, brother." With a great groan Edward collapsed on his bed, twisting to stretch his back muscles. After a moment he shifted over as far as he could against the wall, patting the narrow mattress with his hand. "Come sleep with me."

Al got up and moved across the room to climb under Ed's blankets with a halting sigh. It was not too crowded. He backed up against Edward’s chest and his brother put his arm around him. The Orichalcum pendant pressed cold between his shoulder blades. "I'm supposed to be a Spirit Alchemist, but I can't tell what happened to her. Do you suppose she's at the Gate?"

"She might be. Would it make you feel better if you could say goodbye to her?"

"Yes. But this world is so cruel. It won't allow that."

"It's not too late everywhere. The Gate is a timeless place. Maybe you still can."


"As long as you and I know he's wrong, why worry what he thinks?"

"It's just... How do people come to these crazy conclusions? All they have to do is look. The truth is right before their eyes!"

"No, all they have to do is look without preconceptions. If you've been taught from birth that animals have no souls, how are you ever going to see them? You're never going to try. That is the difference between Heinrich and Siegfried. But try not to think about it right now, brother mine. You need some rest."

"Siegfried will be so furious at Heinrich. I bet they'll have a huge fight."

"Hopefully we'll get him and Russell back soon, so they can set things right again. Now let's try to get some sleep, Alphonse. Hold my hand and maybe we can share a dream, like we used to do."

"OK. Maybe we can dream about Winry."

"That's a great idea."
The Faces in the Mirror

Chapter Summary

While working for Siegfried's cruel brother Heinrich, Ed and Al plot their escape.

Chapter Notes

Magnus Hirschfeld was a heroic, pioneering doctor and scientist who advocated for LGBT rights long before it became a mainstream topic. For a quick summary of his work, see this article: http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/magnus-hirschfeld-einstein-sex-who-braved-nazi-genocide-wage-lgbt-crusade-1502973

I.

It had been years since the two brothers had tried to share their dreams. As they had grown, so had their instinctive barriers, until the sweet union of their very young minds had become itself a distant fantasy. Now, as they lay lost in this strange cruel land, those barriers faded away as though they had never been, and they were very young once more.

The dream was brilliant and lucid, and their sleeping minds seemed to hand the guidance of it back and forth. It seemed that they were back in Resembool, travelling through woods and fields and over little paths no longer in existence. Then they were running up and down and around the little hill by the pond under a bright blue sky.

Suddenly Winry was with them. Neither one of them had seen her come. She was running just ahead of them, laughing and looking back over her shoulder, and they were just a little too slow to catch up. "Hey!" said Al. "Hey Winry! Wait up!"

"Can't catch me. Nyah!" Her voice floated distantly back.

Then all three of them were sitting under the apple tree. Al noticed it had grown larger.

"Are you two ready to come back now?" Winry asked. She'd changed from a little girl into a grown woman with sparkling blue eyes.

"Yeah. I hate this place," Al said, meaning the world where he was trapped.

"We want to come back more than anything," Ed added. Al noted that in the dream he was
experiencing Ed’s thoughts as his own, and they had lost any hint of the wrongheadedness that still plagued him in waking life. Here, there were no misplaced feelings of responsibility for crimes he had not committed, or any egotistical fantasies of being able to save the world. Clearly, like Al, at heart he really only wanted to go home. Al felt a great sense of relief.

Winry laughed and handed Ed a wrench. Then she vanished. In her place was a little kitten.

"Beauty!" said Al, and in his dream he began to cry. The kitten mewed inquisitively at him, as if asking where he’d been, and Al gathered her up. "Beauty. You're all right! Your spirit went all the way to Resembool?"

Then he rolled over, but as his hand slid out of Edward's, the dream was broken too, and he woke up.

It was early morning. Edward was still deeply asleep. Al sat on the edge of the bed, knees drawn up, and looked across the room out the window. The sky was clear. The sun had not yet come up. His heart was eased and he felt refreshed. "It was true," he whispered. "The dream was real. Beauty’s alive!"

He sat for a few minutes just breathing. Then he slid quietly out of bed. He pulled on his clothes and sat down by the crate that contained the pieces of Edward’s arm.

II.

Every morning for the next week, Al would get up before the sun rose and work on his brother's arm until Edward woke up. Then he would sneak out of the Golden Toad carrying milk and scraps for Princess and Scooter, who seemed quite happy to be living in the treehouse. It was a delicate operation, as Heinrich also got up before the sun rose and would seize him for work if he found him out and about. Edward always tried to provide a distraction so he could get away.

Workdays under Heinrich were predictably long and humorless. The two brothers were not surprised when they got no thanks for keeping the inn running. Word about what had happened to Siegfried and Russell had spread quickly among the clientele, and between that and Heinrich’s decision to close the Hopping Frog bar in order to convert that section of the inn into more rentable space, there was a pronounced lack of customers. But what bothered Ed and Al even more than this was Heinrich’s utter lack of concern for what was happening to his own brother. Though they asked him what was going on with Siegfried every day, the answer was always the same: "That is none of your concern."

By the end of the week, the Elrics were nearly frantic with worry. On Friday night, Edward tried to place a phone call to August, but was caught and just missed a beating by telling Heinrich that Siegfried had allowed him to make whatever calls he liked. Still, the incident was telling, and Ed realized that like so many people—but with less excuse than most—Heinrich took him to be little more than a child.

At last, Saturday morning, Edward managed to contact the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, an antisocial’s advocacy group of which Siegfried was a member. The news had made it all the way to Magnus Hirschfeld, the group’s founder and one of Siegfried’s longtime friends, and he had some of
the answers the brothers were looking for. A judicial hearing had been set for the upcoming week, but Hirschfeld was not optimistic, and looked for both Siegfried and Russell to be sent to the local penitentiary. “Part of it’s his association with my society,” the social scientist said. “In the eyes of many, that would incriminate him further. You two be careful. I’m amazed your inn has not been raided like Adolf Brand’s house. And watch out for Heinrich. He’s known for his rages.”

* * *

It had only taken one incident for Winry Rockbell to understand that her strange new dreams were something very much out of the ordinary, and she quickly realized that her dreams of Ed and Al were most clear and vivid when she napped in the early evening. She could guess why: That was the time in the other world when her two best friends were most deeply asleep.

At first, Pinako was somewhat skeptical of the whole affair. "Are you sure it's not just wishful thinking?" she said. Winry had shaken her head firmly, adamant that some kind of communication had indeed taken place. She remembered how Alphonse had spoken to his brother in his sleep, and how he had seemed to get an answer.

Winry began to lay down each night with a certain doll in her arms. It was the one Ed and Al had made for her when they were little children. It seemed to her, as she shut her eyes, that in a way she was holding them as well. As she lay down now in the early dusk, the tears began to leak from under her lashes slowly, drop by drop, as they often did when night began to fall. "Edward," she whispered. "Alphonse. I love you. Sleep well."

At last the tears stopped and her breathing evened out, and she was years ago, by the pond under the apple tree, when the cow path still went past the yard and the old wooden fence was standing.

This time, Al was sitting alone under the tree, holding a white kitten in his arms. "Her name is Beauty," he said, looking up at her with a brilliant smile. "She's coming to live here because she knows this is my home." Then he frowned. "Winry, we have a problem."

Winry stood in her shop with Al beside her. "That's the nerve harness," she said, pointing a small part that lay by itself on a workbench. "L-1 to red, L-2 to green, the rest don't matter, he can learn again."

"Thanks. I love you, you know." They were sitting together on the little wooden bridge that arched over the pond where the creek came in. Al leaned toward her with his warm, sweet smile and Winry felt a great rush of something wonderful in her heart. She opened her arms to him and they fell through each other like shadows.

She was standing alone in a huge empty white room. In front of her was a large well in the wall, or was it a strange circular machine? Looking in, she could see a distortion at the bottom, like looking in a mirror. She could not help but gaze at it intently. There was something in there, she felt—terrible faces, just waiting to surface.

Into her mind unbidden came a diagram. It was not an alchemic array, but it resembled one, and she saw it clearly, every detail crisp and precise. "Winry," Al’s voice whispered. "You have to remember this."

"Al? Alphonse?!" The lights went out.
"Here, Winry." She turned. It was not Al who had spoken, but the head of a huge dragon, looming out of the darkness. She screamed and woke up. Den had climbed onto her bed and she was staring into his face.

Half-laughing, half-sobbing, she rolled onto her back. The clock said nine. She had slept for less than an hour.

She lay for some moments catching her breath. Then, suddenly remembering the diagram Al had shown her, she got up, found a pencil and a piece of paper, and began to draw.

* * *

"Ed. Hey Ed." Alphonse hated to disturb him, but they were running late this morning. He shook his brother gently. "Ed! Wake up!"

"Mm?" Edward blinked, then scrambled quickly to sit up. "What is it, Al?"

"I've got a couple of things for you. First I need you to try this." Al presented him with his arm.

"Oh, wow!" Ed swung his legs over the side of the bed so he was sitting straight, his feet on the floor. "OK, brother. Plug me in."

"All right." Al unlocked the socket and fitted the arm. "Here goes." He twisted the collar into place and Ed gasped with pain, reeling a little.

"You OK?" asked Al. Winry did not believe in coddling Edward, but Alphonse could not help but be sympathetic.

"Yeah." Edward stood, flexing the arm as Al tightened the connection with a small wrench. "Al, this is great! The fingers are kind of screwed up, though." He opened and closed them with difficulty. "When the little finger moves, I feel it's my thumb, and vice versa."

"I must have gotten part of the harness backwards. Sorry about that. Winry said your brain would re-learn it, and it didn't matter which way it went."

"Al—you’re communicating with her that well?" Ed was astonished. He sat down hard.

"That’s the other thing. Ed, we’ve got a clear line home! We just never tried it before!"

"That’s amazing! I wonder why you and I were never able to exchange information like that when we were separated."

"I wondered that too. My guess is, both of us have to be together in the same place to act as a strong enough receiver. How she does it in our world, I really don’t know."

"Could someone be helping her?"

"Maybe Beauty. I see her a lot, you know." Al gestured to his brother’s arm. "Winry showed me how to fix this. L-1 to red, L-2 to green, she said."

Ed whistled. "Al, this changes everything!"
“Doesn’t it though?” The two brothers grinned at one another.

"Well, it’s about time we got a break. So is Winry doing OK?"

"She's really lonely. She cries for us, Ed."

"She-- she does?” Ed seemed genuinely surprised.

"Well of course she does, silly! We’re her best friends." Al shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. "I tried to kiss her, but that didn't work so good."

Edward stared thoughtfully at the floor. "So she really misses us, huh?"

"That’s right. Another good reason why we need to get back home as soon as we can."

"Poor Winry. I had no idea."

"Oh, come on!" Al cuffed him gently. "Look, we can talk about it more later, but we have to get going now or Heinrich will be mad. I can get the milk for my kittens if you cover for me."

* * *

During the course of the day, Edward and Alphonse went their separate ways, making their plans as well as doing their chores. Alphonse was dreaming of a way home and a joyful reunion with Winry, while Edward’s fantasies involved transmitting the information Roy Mustang would need to make certain that there was no human travel between Earth and Amestris ever again.

Their thoughts collided that evening. They had gone upstairs to their room and were getting ready for bed when Edward voiced his hope that he could eventually determine what information Roy Mustang might need to seal the paths between the worlds forever, including the original Gate. “I know it’s a big thought,” he said. “But it’s the best way to make sure Amestris is never in danger again.”

Already in bed, Alphonse sat straight back up. “But Ed!” he said in dismay. “You don’t know what that would do! It’s one thing to prevent the Thule Society’s army from invading our home, but another to interfere with the basic structure of spacetime!”

“If that’s what you think, Al. Destroying the Gate would stop anyone in Amestris from using negative Earth energy in their alchemy—and it would also prevent Earth people from being further exploited by our system.”

“Oh, it would stop anyone in Amestris from using Earth energy all right! Ed, you’re talking about wiping out our whole culture! All! of our transmutations are powered by Earth energy!”

“That would be a problem, all right,” Edward conceded. He’d flopped down on his back and was staring at a point on the ceiling.

“Ed, I don’t believe you! Haven’t you learned a thing? You don’t mess with nature!”

“This doesn’t look like nature to me. We both perceive it as some kind of interdimensional structure.”

“Whatever that thing really is, Ed, it’s much too big for us and I’ll take no part in messing with it. I
let you talk me into something else like that once. It won’t happen again.” Alphonse lay back down with a worried frown. “Ed, have you forgotten the spirits that live there? Do you want to ruin them too?”

“Of course not. But we’ve almost got the power to change things now, Al. Make things safer for everyone.”


“Oh, come on, Al.”

Edward fell silent after that, but when Alphonse dared to glance at him a couple of minutes later, he was still staring at the ceiling.

Al burrowed under the covers. He felt cold. It seemed to him that his brother was getting worse again since Siegfried and Russell had gone. It was easy to see how that could happen, of course—the loss of the Toad’s usual customers was bad enough, as many of them had become their friends, and the little cruelties of Heinrich were difficult to bear on a daily basis. But something more was going on. Siegfried, especially, had been a stabilizing and reassuring influence for both of them. Alphonse realized that Edward was feeling his loss keenly.

“Ed? Where’s this private penitentiary Siegfried and Russell are probably going to after the hearing?”

Edward stirred. “Huh? Oh. It’s only a few miles from here, little brother, on the outskirts of town.”

“Maybe we can scout it out tomorrow. Heinrich will kill us, but I can’t stand spending my day off around this place.”

“Good idea. We’ll have to get going before sunrise.”

“Right. I usually wake up pretty early anyway.”

“OK. Get me up at the right time then. Good night.” Edward hesitated a little. Then he said softly: “Al, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I know you didn’t. Good night, brother,” Al replied.

III.

Heinrich, like Siegfried, closed the inn on Sundays. Unlike Siegfried, who often managed to arrange educational excursions to archaeological digs or private libraries, he had been intending to make them go to church. Anticipating this, Ed and Al crept out of the building well before the sun rose and sped away on Siegfried’s bike. By the time Heinrich discovered they were missing, they were well out of town and nearing the swampland near the dismal penitentiary.

Ed had dismounted and was trotting quickly beside the bike as they approached a vantage point on a craggy knoll from which they could survey the entire area. Al was clearly getting winded pedaling slowly along the rutted dirt road, and when they reached a good resting place in the shadow of a small fir tree whose branch tips swept the ground, he all but fell off the bike coughing. Ed steadied him. “We’ve got to get you some more of that medicine as soon as we can,” he said grimly. Al
waved him off, bending with his hands on his knees to catch his breath before digging in his knapsack for Siegfried’s birdwatching binoculars. Edward raised them, peering past the branches of the tree at the far-off complex. After a long moment, he whistled. “That prison is huge,” he said. He turned to Alphonse and his face was solemn. “Even if we managed to break in, we’d never find him without a map.”

“See, now this is what I’ve been trying to tell you for ages,” Alphonse said, seizing the opportunity he had foreseen the night before. “Saving the Earth world from bombs or Amestris from invasions is a great idea. But without our alchemy—or even with it, for that matter-- it’s going to be so much harder than just breaking into that prison over there. It’s simply impossible for us to do without help.”

Al would have liked to imagine that Ed looked a little chagrined. After a moment he raised the binoculars again. “I know it’s not likely, so just don’t say anything more about it, all right?”

“All right, brother. I’m sorry.”

After a few minutes of silence as he studied the situation, Edward turned his back to the tree and seated himself on the ground. “What if we did manage to spring Siegfried and Russell? What would they do then? If they went back to the inn, they’d just be in more trouble than before, and us with them.”

“But if they run away, well, no matter how much Siegfried likes the Roma, I can’t really see him as a member of Uncle’s familia,” Al added. “Maybe we should start by just sending Siegfried a letter.”

Ed dropped the binoculars in his lap and clenched his fists in frustration. “In our world, this would have been so much simpler. Get in, get Siggy and Russell, and get out.”

“I know. Everything was simpler in our world.” Alphonse sighed heavily and coughed once.

“Well, brother, we need to rest before we go back to our own little penitentiary. I’m still tired from working yesterday.”

“Sounds good to me. Let’s have something to eat first. Later on we can sleep under this tree.” Al opened his knapsack again. “I got us some rye bread and part of that pot roast we cooked Friday.”

“Did you remember the mustard?”

“Oops.”

Ed looked so disappointed that Al relented at once. “Of course I did, silly! I made your favorite sandwich. Here.” His chuckle devolved into another cough. Edward pretended not to notice, but his heart was fearful. Since Siegfried’s arrest, his brother had started going downhill.

“Ed?” Al said as they ate. “How long are we going to stay at the Toad? Because I’m starting to wear pretty thin.”

“I know, baby brother. Just let me try to line up some other work first.”

“When? You don’t even have the time to look.”

“If we get desperate, we can always go back to the Roma.”

“I’m sure we could. But Siegfried is the one who knows how to get in touch with them, remember?”

“Oh, I think we could manage something. Or maybe the Scientific Humanitarian Committee could
help put us up temporarily.” Edward licked his fingers.

“I don’t think they’d be wanting to harbor a couple of teens,” Alphonse said doubtfully. “Even if you are a bartender. At least I wouldn’t if I were them. Judging from the bad stuff Heinrich’s been implying about us and Siegfried, critics could misrepresent it and create a lot of trouble for them—and they’ve got a lot of critics.”

“True. It wouldn’t be fair to burden them like that.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Al?” Ed said after some consideration. “I think we’re in a good position right now to test the Orichalcum.”

“You’re right!” Alphonse glanced at the expanse of undisturbed dirt below the gracefully spreading branches of the tree. “This is a great opportunity. We’ve got a good work area here, no previous arrays, and total privacy. Let’s do it!”

* * *

Both brothers carried with them the Orichalcum for the triangulation of the Thule Gate. The activation key hung from a thong around Al’s neck, and the newly cast cross was on Edward. Ever since Ed and Al had tuned August’s pendant to resonate with the key, the two brothers had been trying to find a large private space to run an alchemical experiment—with the empty lot in town high on their list of possible places. But events had conspired against them. Besides their being overworked, too tired and emotionally distracted to perform well, it was not good to place an array anywhere near the dead, and Beauty’s recent burial had eliminated the lot from the equation. Siegfried’s beer garden hadn’t been large or private enough for such a complex experiment, and they hadn’t wanted to mess up their bedroom floor with chalk. But bare earth, especially under a tree, was perfect for their purposes.

Hanging the Orichalcum artifacts on a low branch over the center of their carefully delineated circle, the brothers took their time drawing a vastly complicated array, working it out as they went and orienting it according to the local ley lines. “All right,” Ed said at last. “It’s finished!”

“I don’t expect to get much out of this,” Al said as he knelt to place both hands on his side of the array. “But if something happens that we do, will the Thule alchemists detect it?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I don’t think it’s very likely, Alphonse. All we’re doing is testing the connection.” Ed took up his position on the array opposite his brother, placing his hands firmly on the ground. He exhaled heavily, glancing up. “Wow. It’s been a long time since we did this together.”

“Yeah. I miss it. You ready?”

Edward nodded firmly. “One—two—”

“—Three!”

It was always startling for Edward to feel the traces of Greater Alchemy that still lingered in this foreign world, but never so much as now. The energy flowing to and from his fingers had a sweet
and sensual feel—like a drink of cool water in the middle of a barren waste. It was only a trickle, much less powerful than even a small acid battery, but it was there, and the array was working. Ed felt and saw the two Orichalcum pendants orient themselves quickly, like compass needles in the sudden presence of a strong magnetic pull.

What the Elrics were doing was the equivalent of fashioning a weak electromagnet, except that the spirit of the Orichalcum was involved in the proceedings. That spirit did not orient the metal north and south, but rather pointed it in the direction of the Thule Gate and the much larger mass of Orichalcum that adorned it. As Alphonse added what power he could, the brothers began to get a faint feedback—glimpses of the Thule Gate, shrouded in darkness like some great dead ribcage under a giant sheet.

“There it is!” Ed said in satisfaction. “It’s in the same condition as we left it. Let’s stop now,” and they sat back simultaneously, breaking their contact with the ground and letting the array die. Above it, the key and the pendant twirled slowly in a random breeze.

“Think we’ve got enough power to actually turn it on or off?” Al asked after a moment. Even that little exercise had drained him; his face looked pale.

Edward regarded him, hiding his concern. “I don’t know. We were just viewing the Gate; it’d be another order of magnitude to actually reach out and touch it.”

“I’m tired.” Al took a long drink from the water can he’d brought with him.

“So am I.” Ed was already carefully erasing the array with a dead branch. “Let’s take a nap before we head back.”

The two brothers moved to a sheltered spot untouched by the array and arranged themselves comfortably on the blanket they’d brought with them, leaning side by side against a large, gnarled root. The June weather was balmy and sweet, but several mosquitoes were buzzing around them. Ed swatted at them idly. “Go to sleep, little brother,” he said kindly. “I’ll keep the bugs off you.”

“Thanks.” Al curled up beside him. “Ed? I don’t want to go back to the Toad.”

“Neither do I. It’s not fun there anymore.”

“I feel like we’ve let down everyone. Siegfried, Russell, and poor little Fletcher too. All we keep telling him is that we don’t know anything.”

“It’s like you keep saying, Al—what else can we do?”

Al grimaced. “It’s true.” He rolled restlessly onto his back, using the root as a pillow. "Ed, Let's give it one more week, just in case Siggy and Russell get let off somehow. But if they go to the penitentiary, then let's leave the Golden Toad and strike out on our own. Camping under the trees like this won't be bad in summer, and anything's got to be better than staying with Heinrich. OK?"

Ed nodded. “OK. I promise. If Siegfried and Russell go to the pen, we’ll leave the Golden Toad in one week.”

“Thanks, brother.” Al’s glance was grateful.

“Al?” Ed said presently, just before Alphonse fell asleep.

“Mm.”
“Have you seen Alfons Heiderich lately? You haven’t mentioned him in awhile.”

Al stirred, blinking. “He’s always there, Ed, keeping an eye on you, but he hasn’t tried to get in touch again. I think he wants to act as a guardian spirit.”

“Well, if he does get in touch, tell him thanks.”

“OK.” Al smiled a little and closed his eyes.

IV.

The next afternoon, Ed managed to get off work long enough to take Al’s empty medicine bottle back to the apothecary. Afterward he took a quick detour to see Fletcher, only to be told by his mother that he was at her sister’s boarding house in Berlin. Little mention was made of Russell during the conversation, which was polite and brief. Ed did not misread the signs: Mom considered him on probation as a possible threat to Fletcher due to his association with Siegfried and the Golden Toad. Ed returned to the inn feeling like a second class citizen, and knowing that Russell had gotten treated similarly by his own mother only made it worse.

By the time he arrived back at the Golden Toad he was in a rage. He stormed up the steps to the bedroom, kicking open the door and throwing himself down on his mattress. After a few minutes he heard Al come up from the common room to join him. "What's going on, Ed? Did you get my medicine?"

Edward rolled over to lay on his elbow. "They have to compound it. I can pick it up in a day or so. But since we never found out what Siegfried’s mods were, it might not be as effective as the first batch."

“Oh.” Al looked disappointed. Edward couldn’t blame him, but dwelling on it would do no good.

“Well, Russell’s mom carried out her threat and sent Fletcher to Berlin."

"I was afraid of that." Al pulled up a chair next to him and straddled it, resting his chin on his arms. "I've been thinking about everything, Ed. Before Heinrich came, this inn was functioning as a kind of secret meeting place for people like Siegfried and Russell. I mean, for guys like you.” Al scratched his head. “That’s funny—I never used to think of you as being any different from me. What is it they call you here again?"

“Antisocial.”

Alphonse snorted. “Anyway, I’ve been reading Heinrich’s Bible book, and it explains the reason he doesn’t like this place. Remember that Sodom and Gomorrah stuff he keeps discussing?"

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Well have you read it?"

Ed rolled his eyes. “Since when have I had the time to read anything?"

“You have a point. Heinrich and Rose are being especially hard on you, aren’t they?”
“It sure feels like it.”

“Anyway, when you add together Paragraph 175, the behavior of Russell’s mom and what’s written in the local holy book, well, the people that this affects would obviously have to find safe places to meet—especially outside Berlin. This was one of them and we both know that, but what I didn’t realize before is just how much Heinrich hates the Toad because of it. Siegfried must have had free reign when they inherited it—no doubt Heinrich was too busy fooling around with the Thule Society or some such nonsense. Either that, or their aunt liked girls! But now that his brother is in jail, Heinrich’s torn between wanting to make money or just getting rid of the place. Either way, if Siggy goes to the penitentiary, Heinrich’s going to be so happy! His aura is so stale, this must have been eating at him for years.”

"Wow." Edward digested this. "Wouldn't that be awful? To have a brother who hated you?"

“We do,” Al reminded him.

Ed cringed. “You’re right, of course. Or, we did.”

Al was looking out the window. Finally he turned back. "Oh yeah. Heinrich’s decided he doesn’t want us staying up here anymore. He says it’s a waste of a good room. We’re supposed to move our beds and our stuff to the cellar starting tonight."

"The cellar?! That moldy hole?"

"Look on the bright side. Siegfried's stuff is there, and it’s only for a few more days." He grinned.

Edward sighed. “Don’t drop too many hints that we’re leaving, Al. You look pretty young, and they could say I was, too—and arrange to just keep us here against our will, even though we’re not underage, because we can’t prove otherwise. We don’t have any legal papers here.”

Al’s look turned unhappy. “I didn’t think of that.” He coughed hard just as Heinrich’s voice bellowed up the stairs for them to come back to work at once.

V.

That night, their first in the cellar, Edward had a brief, strange dream. It seemed that he was back home in Resembool, but the Elric house was still standing and he was alone in the yard, looking down a well. He stared and stared, but saw nothing, only heard his father’s voice whispering softly—or was it the wind?

He woke at sunrise with a splitting headache. Alphonse, who was already up, consoled him and said that as soon as he fed his kittens he’d try to spell him off work. Ed felt too sick to insist otherwise.

* * *

When Al climbed hastily into the treehouse that morning, anticipating seeing Scooter and Princess's expectant little faces, he was crushed to discover them missing. Their box was still there; the window
with its real glass panes and curtains was still shut. There was no way they could have escaped. He noted that their little pan of dirt had not been used since he'd cleaned it the day before, and their water dish was full.

"Oh, no," he groaned, and slid down to sit with his back against the wall. "Someone's taken them." He shook his head slowly. "I hate this awful place."

Suddenly there was a thump and rustle in the leaves below. Al scrunched as far away from the door as he could and held very still until it opened and the newcomer crawled in. It was a blond girl thirteen or fourteen years old.

She gasped out loud in surprise. So did he. "Win-- Winry?!" he stuttered. His eyes were huge.

"It's Winnifred." She stayed half in and half out of the doorway. "What are you doing in my treehouse? Were those your kittens?"

"Yeah. Did you take them?"

She pulled herself the rest of the way in. "Yep. They're living in my room now."

Al sighed with relief, his shoulders slumping. "Now that's better. I was so worried about them. The innkeeper where I live won't let me keep them there anymore," he explained.

"What's your name?" she asked. "I see you and your little friend here every now and then. He only has one arm, right?"

"Oh. I'm Alphonse. The one-armed guy is my brother Ed. He's got it back now."

"You mean his arm?" Her eyes went round.

Al stuttered. "It's a prosthetic limb. It was broken, but now he's got it back."

"Oh."

"Can I see my kittens?"

"Sure. Come on." She climbed down, and he followed. When they reached the foot of the tree, Al showed her the grave of Beauty and told her what had happened.

"Why don't you mark it with something besides a rock?" she said, a little disdainfully.

"I didn't have anything else."

"Well, we can fix that later." Winnifred led him along the edge of the lot and around the fence into her back yard. The house was old but well-kept. "My parents are doctors," she explained. "We travel a lot. We keep this house for when they're teaching at the university here. They're both gone right now, and Granny's asleep. Were they surprised when I found those kittens!"

"Oh," he said, not knowing what else to say. "Are you sure they'll let you keep them?"

"Of course," she said, looking at him in surprise. "We're supposed to care for all God's creatures, right?"

"Now that's a religious idea I can live with!" he said fervently.

"I had a dog once," she said, leading the way in the back door. "But he got hit by a train and died."
"I'm sorry," Al replied with genuine regret, picturing Den, who had also gotten hit by a train but had survived, sporting an automail leg.

Princess and Scooter were curled blissfully up on a frilly pink and white comforter on Winnifred's bed. When Al stroked them, they started to purr in greeting, stretching out their little limbs and raising their tails.

"This is great! I'm so glad you took them in," Al said gratefully. "I'll give them to you, if you promise to look after them forever."

"I promise," she said with an impish grin. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

"Oh, don't do that!" he said in horror. She blinked.

Al realized something at that moment-- if his own double, Alfons Heiderich, had had to die in order for Alphonse Elric to come into this world, it was possible that Winnifred was in mortal danger. He had detected in his communications with Winry a growing frustration, a desire to resolve the situation that was keeping them apart. If she came across worlds to get them, Winnifred could die.

He drew a breath and smiled for her. There was no sense in babbling to her about something so strange and disturbing. He would just have to tell Winry to not come to Earth, whatever the circumstances. They would have to make it back to her instead. Meanwhile, the least amount of time he spent with Winnifred, the better. Otherwise, their combined presence might start skewing things in favor of disaster. "I have to get back to the inn now," he said a little apologetically as he gave the kittens one last caress. "Otherwise Heinrich'll be mad."

"OK," she said. "Will you come back some time?"

"Sure. I don't want Princess and Scooter to forget me."

“You’ll have to come back soon. Mom and Dad are only guest lecturers here, and we’ll be going to Innsbruck for the summer.”


"I was just happy to find them. With Mom and Dad gone so much, things can get kind of lonely around here."

VI.

Al returned to the Toad to find Edward crumpled in his little bed in the cellar, gripping his head in agony. “Ed!” he said in horror. “Haven’t you taken your medicine?”

“I can’t see to find it, Al,” Edward gasped. “It hurts so bad!”

Alphonse had to light an oil lantern to find his brother’s headache medicine in the cold and musty place, and the bright flame set Edward cringing and pulling his blanket over his face. Once he located the pills he dipped water from the well, which was situated in the center of the room, and coaxed Ed to sit up. “Here.” He offered him two of the pills with a glass of cold water.

Ed took them immediately. “I hope I don’t throw up.”
“I’m sorry you feel so bad,” Al said sympathetically. He smoothed back his brother’s fine pale hair, then paused. “Ed? Your face is bruised.”

“I was dizzy and fell down.”

Alphonse held up the lantern and Edward cringed away from it, lifting his hand to shield himself from the light. Gently Al pushed it out of the way. “Heinrich hit you,” he said grimly.

“No. You’ve got it wrong.”

“I’ve got it exactly right. Don’t forget, Ed. I can see auras—and his is still on you. It’s like a sooty black handprint on the moon.” Al stood up decisively. “This is too much.”

“Al!” Ed tried to struggle up, but Siegfried’s medicine was a soporific and he could barely make it. Alphonse pushed him gently back onto his bed. “Don’t worry, Ed!” he said. “I’m better than you at confronting people. Just take it easy. I’ll be back in awhile to check on how you’re doing, OK?”

“Al— If you cross him, he’ll kill you. Please, please, don’t put me through this.”

“I’m not putting you through anything. Don’t worry,” Al repeated. “I’ll be back soon.” Extinguishing the lantern, he left Edward in his agony in the dark.

* * *

As Edward lay helpless, holding his breath every time he heard a sound upstairs, images kept flashing unabated through his mind. Each time he saw a picture, it was followed by a jolt of pain, as if it was trying to get his attention. At first, it was the head of the Orichalcum dragon that adorned the Thule Gate—a quick series of snapshots from every angle imaginable—but this morphed soon into a real dragon with fiery eyes and carplike, golden scales. The image morphed again, still dragonish, but now with an indefinable human touch. Ed wanted to recognize it, but the strange visual faded quickly. Then he seemed to see Alphonse. He was sitting on a large bed in a darkened room, but when he turned toward him, Edward gasped in horror. Al’s teeth were grossly overgrown and pointed, jutting from his mouth, and his brow was that of an animal’s. He regarded Ed with tears in his eyes. Edward immediately thought of Shou Tucker and his bioalchemy experiments. “Al!” he cried, but the image disappeared. Throughout this senseless parade he heard his father’s voice murmuring beneath it all as if beneath the very foundations of the world, uttering words that he could not—quite—understand—until he wanted to scream.

The visions ended suddenly and everything fell still. He lay in the blackness of the cellar as though it were a grave. Above him, he heard Al’s voice speaking calmly and clearly, like a light shining through the clouds. Though he could not make out what he was saying, the sound was sweet and sank into his heart. “Oh, Al,” he whispered silently as his love for his brother brought tears to his darkened eyes.

* * *

“Hey, Ed. Edward.”
Edward woke that evening as the sun was setting. Alphonse was by his side, offering him a bowl of soup. He looked confident and unruffled.

Ed sat up on his elbows, blinking. Three small candles illuminated the gloom, along with the fading sun shining redly through the small window-grate.

“I got you leave for today, and tomorrow too, Ed. How’s your headache?” said Al.

“Better. The medicine’s working.” Edward straightened and swung his legs over the side of his bed. “Is that chicken soup?”

“Yep. I made it especially for you.”

Ed took the bowl, savoring the aroma before tasting it. It was heavenly. “Wonderful. Thanks so much, little brother!”

Alphonse had brought himself a breadroll. He sat down next to his brother and worked on it steadily as Edward proceeded to quickly finish the soup. “What happened up there anyway?”

“Nothing much,” Al said. “I just took his Bible book and showed him where he’d gone wrong.”

“You know it that well?”

“Parts of it. It’s kind of jumbled around and it contradicts itself sometimes, but it’s easy to use.” Al chuckled to himself. “I think I embarrassed him in front of his wife, because I knew it better than he did. I got him to apologize for hitting you. And that’s how I got you your time off, too.”

Ed laughed out loud. “Good for you, Al. You really are better than me at confrontations.”

“Of course I am.” Al finished his bread and dusted his hands together. “I found out from Rose that the judicial hearing for Siegfried and Russell is happening Thursday.”

Heinrich’s wife was named Rose. Though the name was common enough in both worlds, Edward had still started when he was told about it. But when Heinrich had brought her in to sew new curtains for the three empty rooms of Siegfried’s former study, he saw that she bore no resemblance to the Rose he had known and loved. She was short, heavyset, and plain, but nevertheless, she had the heart of a rose, as Alphonse had put it rather poetically. The boys were happy to help her with her sewing, painting and furnishing projects, as in her presence, Heinrich was kinder to them.

Alphonse sat next to Edward on his bed and proceeded to tell him all about his encounter with Winnifred. Edward was startled, and concerned, to hear of Winry’s double being so close by. “You did the right thing by leaving, Al,” he said. “Now tell me more about her.”

“Well, there's not that much more to tell. Her parents are alive, and teaching at the University. Granny's here, too. But the dog isn't.”

“Huh. Well, whatever we do, we've got to get it across to Winry that she needs to steer clear of this world.”

“Right. And tell her that we’ll get back to her instead, whatever it takes.”

VII.
By Wednesday, Edward’s migraine was completely gone and he returned to work. Heinrich seemed to want to make certain he made up for his time off, because that morning the great fat man dumped a load of firebricks down the cellar steps and commanded Edward to re-line the fire box of the Beast.

The Beast was the inn’s central heating unit. It crouched in a corner of the cellar like some immobile monster—a truly frightening specter of a boiler with its great black dragonish hulk, steam pipes spidering away from it in all directions and a hinged fuel door that looked for all the world like a huge, unhappy maw. Siegfried and Heinrich had salvaged it in better days from a wrecked locomotive engine, putting it back together to serve as the main source of heat for the Golden Toad. Ed and Al had had no trouble believing Siggy when he said there was no other boiler like it in existence. Under his tutelage, they had learned its vagaries well, including the necessity of keeping an eye on the water-glass. Back then-- it seemed ages ago now-- they had traded off with Russell on its upkeep. Now, with fewer guests and the season warming up, Heinrich was saving coal by not running it at all. It seemed a little sad to see it cold and dead in the corner.

Just before noon, Alphonse came down from the kitchen with lunch. "Ew," he said. "You're filthy!"

"What do you expect?" Sweating, Ed sat down on a crate nearby, mopping his forehead and torso with a rag as Al pulled up their two chairs from the section of the cellar that was doubling as their bedroom. Using one as a table, he laid out their meal—ham sandwiches and warm beer. Edward tied into it appreciatively.

“Well, the hearing’s tomorrow,” Al observed. “What are we going to do if it works out the way we think it will? I mean, Siegfried really wants to go to Amestris, and I can’t bear to just abandon him, especially under these conditions.”

Edward nodded. “We can’t just leave him. But at the same time, the Thule Society isn’t going to sit around forever, and if we botch it with the new Gate, we really are stuck here forever, little brother.”

“What kind of conclusion is that?” Alphonse crossed his arms. “Nothing’s impossible. We’re both living proof of that. I just want to go back to Amestris, and in your heart of hearts, so do you. And we’ll get there too, sooner or later.”

“We need to tell Winry to inform Roy Mustang about the new Gate. Give him and his troops advance warning.”

“I agree they should be warned,” said Al, “But I don’t want to start any situation where the Gate might be blocked or destroyed before we use it. Besides, have you thought about this situation from the Amestris side?”

“What’s that?”

“Well, for a manmade, mechanical crossing to work, there has to be a portal in both worlds. Winry’s going to build one, and we don’t need the military interfering.”

“Did she tell you that?”

“She’ll figure it out. I’ve shown her the blueprints.”

“You did what? Without asking me?” Edward was astonished. "That was stupid, Al! You could have leaked the information all over the place.”

“Well, what else could I do? This will be a mechanical crossing, not an alchemical one. We need a
Gate over there to make this Gate work.”

“Al, a second Gate may not be necessary at all. It’s possible that opening a portal in this world literally *induces* a portal to be made in the other.”

“I disagree. Maybe the Thule Society just doesn’t know any differently. After all, they had good luck last time with their alchemical Gate, first with their contacting a live counterpart array in Lior, and then with my own array. They may not even realize they need help on the other side. Or, if they do—maybe they have an operative in Amestris already.” Al finished his sandwich with a decisive bite.

Edward blanched. It was entirely possible, he realized, that a few stragglers from Dielinda’s army might have somehow survived the crossing to his homeworld, the same way Al had survived the crossing here. “Mustang and Armstrong would have taken care of that a long time ago,” he said firmly.

“Maybe. Anyway, it’s remotely possible someone’s built a Gate in Amestris already, and all we—or the next Thule invasion force—have to do is step on through.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Edward’s temper was fraying. “Don’t we have enough problems already without inventing more?”

Alphonse blinked. “We have to look at all the possibilities, brother.”

“Al, why didn’t you tell me before you showed Winry those blueprints?”

“Why didn’t you tell *me* before you had Uncle sell us?”

They stared at one another. Things could sour so fast, Alphonse thought as he reflected the hurt in his brother’s eyes.

“I don’t want to start any arguments, so let’s just not discuss this any more,” Ed said sullenly after a long moment. He looked away.

"I think an argument might be good for us right now. We're so busy being nice to each other, we're not telling the truth. Let's agree to disagree, and even to shout at each other, for five minutes. OK?"

Ed glanced back at him wearily. "I told you, I don't want to fight."

"I know, Ed. I don't want to either. But wouldn't it help if we only told each other the truth? Just for five minutes. It won't kill us."

Ed sighed. "OK, if you really want. But if you get hurt, just remember—I didn't start this stupid game. Five minutes. You go first."

"All right." Al shifted so he was straddling his chair directly in front of Edward. "Brother," he began, "You’ve changed so much since I came to this world that it scares me. I’m not sure if you’re still yourself, or if you’re even sane. Something here is warping your mind. Some of your thoughts are almost inhuman, and for awhile, I kept having dreams you were really a Homunculus. But I know that’s not true, because I recognize your spirit.

“I want to see you acting like yourself again, with your feet on the ground. I want to see you realize how deeply you miss our home, and Winry too. I want to see the old you, the Edward who never gave up and *always* put his loved ones first. The clever, intelligent survivor who would have anticipated what I just theorized about the Gate ages and ages ago. For awhile, when Siegfried was here, you seemed to be doing a lot better, but now I’m really worried about you again.” Alphonse
fell silent, looking at his feet.

Edward concealed the twinge of fear he felt at his brother's words. "OK. I hear you, Al. Now here goes:

"Alphonse, when you followed me through the Gate into this world just to be with me, I didn't appreciate it at all. When you climbed out of the armor and gave me that little speech, expecting me to go all teary-eyed on you, I just wanted to groan and bang my head on the nearest wall. I've spent a good portion of my life trying to protect you and I had thought you were finally safe back in Amestris with Winry, and that I was exchanging the burden of taking care of you for another, even bigger burden—saving this world.

"I once said that as long as I knew you were alive, I could bear being separated from you. That is still true. You've always been a little clingy and your being here is something I don't need. I wish you weren't. I have a bad feeling about it, and it's getting worse. I think that cough of yours is the same disease Alfons Heiderich had. I'm afraid you'll die here, Al." Ed sat back on his crate, arms crossed. His look was as loving as his words had been harsh. "Your turn again."

Edward's words did hurt. To his credit, Al didn't attempt to conceal it. Gasping a little, his eyes brimming with tears, he floundered for a long moment. Then he straightened his spine. "Did you hear what you just said? You're saving the world again! That's plain crazy. Everyone wants to save the world, but no one can really do it.

"I might be a burden to you, brother, and I might be clingy, like you say. But you're also a burden to me. It's true my body's not doing well here. I can feel it. This place is sapping my strength and making me sick. But it's sapping your mind.

"I'm a Spirit Alchemist. I'm not afraid of dying anywhere. My real burden is no sickness. It's my fear of you bailing out at the last minute when that Gate is finally activated. That's what I'm most afraid of. Do that to me and you've killed me yourself. I need to be by your side, even if you don't want me to be. You're the one I care most about, or I would have never left Winry."

Ed leaned forward. "What we want as brothers is irrelevant. Look at the circumstances, Al! An insane genius from our world invents a bomb that can blow up the planet. He uses a situation that we helped create to escape into another world, this world, with that bomb. He's loose here, and he's probably sold that thing to some rogue government the same as he was trying in Amestris. Now you're telling me that I'm crazy to think that this is our responsibility?"

"Ed, you're not crazy to want to save this place, just crazy to believe you can do it, and crazy to believe that this was somehow all our fault. You and I didn't create madmen. We didn't create that bomb. We didn't create human nature. And there is no way we can save this world from it's own nature. No one can." Alphonse leaned forward as well, unconsciously mirroring his brother's posture. "If our madman hadn't imported the bomb, there are plenty of madmen here who would have been glad to invent it. And they would have, now or in the future. Just look at that politician guy, you know, Adolph. He's batshit crazy, and he'd use it!"

"That is exactly my point, Al. What if he and his little gang got hold of it? They already have that Gate. Everything the Society researches is at his disposal, even if he doesn't belong to the group, and you know how he thinks."

"I hope he doesn't get hold of it, ever. But if he does? Here we are to save the day! Ta-da!" Alphonse spread his arms expansively. "Two State Alchemists! Ooops, how about two lost teenagers who can barely manage to put a miniscule amount of energy into a pendant!" Al paused for breath, then plowed doggedly on. "Maybe it's still hard for you to realize that we don't have our
powers any more, but all someone has to do to completely knock you out of the equation is to steal your arm and leg. Let's see how you save the world then, Ed."

"That was a low blow, Alphonse." Edward's eyes were bright with hurt.

"But it's true! Look what Siegfried already did with your arm. We wanted to rescue him from the jail, but we weren't even able to try. You'll always be a cripple in this world, and I will be too. If we want to help, we have to do it from the other side—from Amestris, where we’re strong. Can't you see that? And don’t give me that crap about being stuck here forever, or about destroying the source of our own power! We can find a way home and still work for good in this world." Al sighed heavily. "Two more things, Ed. What we want as brothers is not irrelevant and I take personal offense at that notion. And I can’t believe you don’t need me. OK. It's been more than five minutes." He looked at his brother earnestly. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too, Alphonse. You were right, though. I think it was good for us to get all this out in the open." Edward dredged up a wan smile. "You're so determined, Al. So full of life. I remember what it was like to be that way."

Alphonse could say nothing to that, but Edward’s words shocked him. Speechlessly he opened his arms, and they hugged one another tightly as Heinrich yelled down that their lunch break was over. Then they went thoughtfully back to their respective jobs.

VIII.

Ed and Al sat together that night on Edward’s bed, deep in thought in the deeper gloom. One of the Thule volumes rested on Ed’s knees, and atop that was a sheet of stationary paper which they’d scavenged from Siegfried’s effects. Assuming that Magnus Hirschfeld was correct in his pessimistic estimation of Siegfried’s situation, they had already addressed the envelope to the Munich Penitentiary. Ed rested his pen tip lightly on the surface of the paper, flicking his lower lip with his thumb. “Well, I guess we’d better start it ‘Dear Siegfried.’

“Don’t leave out Russell!” said Al.

“OK then: ‘Dear Siegfried and Russell.’” He wrote it slowly and laboriously in his best script. “Hope you are doing as well as could be expected. We miss you very much. August and Magnus are very concerned for your welfare and have been inquiring after you.”

“That’s good,” Al observed, leaning over his brother's arm. “Tell him this: ‘We are grieved to say that Beauty was killed in an accident. We buried her and held a funeral. Princess and Scooter were adopted by a girl down the street.’"

Ed smiled gently as he took his brother’s dictation. “Got it. Now let’s see… ‘Al fixed my arm. Heinrich and Rose have taken over the Toad. They closed the bar and are renting out the study and the adjoining rooms. We saved what we could. Your books are safe.’ He looked up. “Anything else you want to tell them?”

“Think we should tell Russell about Fletcher?”

“Yeah. He should know what happened to his brother. ‘Fletcher is in Berlin at Auntie’s boarding house. We talked with him a lot before he left. He’s very worried about you. He asks you to send him a note as soon as you can.’”
“OK.” Al bit his lip as a pang hit home. “Let’s start a new paragraph. ‘We have discovered that our princess is dreaming of us every day. We are talking to her a lot and she is listening to our troubles.’”

“Good,” Ed said. “Let’s be a little cryptic. Siggy can figure out anything.” He bent over the paper, thinking hard. ‘The Garden Gate isn’t finished yet, but it will be shortly. We will keep you advised.”

“Better wrap up,” Alphonse suggested.

“I know. I don’t want to ramble.” Edward chewed on the end of the pen for a moment. “How about: ‘Please come back soon. This place is really crappy without you. The frogs aren’t croaking anymore.’”

“Aren’t croaking? Heinrich exterminated them!”

“Yeah, well, Siggy doesn’t have to know that part, does he?” Ed scribbled furiously. “Damn. I don’t know how to end this.”


Ed looked up, his face coloring.

“I love him,” Al said. “And so do you—enough to flirt with him!”

Edward sighed heavily, then overcame his embarrassment and wrote it down. “Yeah, yeah.” He had carefully folded the note and was stuffing it into the envelope when a thought struck him and he pulled it back out, spreading it open again. He picked up the pen.

“What did we forget?”

“‘P.S. Siegfried: Don’t worry. We won’t go anywhere without you.’” Ed raised his eyes to his brother’s candle-lit face. “All right?”

“All right!” Alphonse said firmly.
Ed and Al go scouting near the prison where Siegfried is being held, but are discovered.

This is partially based on an experience I had while riding my horse in the back country many years ago. Fortunately, the structure I discovered was abandoned.

The next day seemed to drag on forever as Ed and Al waited anxiously for the outcome of the hearing. “If this was a fair trial, they’d tap us as witnesses to Siggy’s behavior,” Edward said as they picked up around the boiler after he had finished his bricklaying job. “But it’s not.”

“When it comes to antisocials, the law is obviously not interested in ‘fair,’” Al said. He was sweeping up the ash his brother had tracked across the cellar floor, pausing every now and then to cough at the unhealthy dust. “Just another argument against mixing up religion and politics.”

“They all do that, if they think it can get them any leverage,” Edward replied. “I heard Hitler give a speech at the beer hall last year that leaned on God as if He were his right-hand man.”

“You’re kidding!” Al finished his sweeping and straightened up. His hair was disheveled and his cheeks were red.

“I wish I was. But what was really scary was the audience applauding him. Well, little brother, it looks like we’re done down here. Let’s go up and see if Rose has any news.”

* * *

In the end, they didn’t get word on what had happened until that evening, and the outcome was just what they feared: Siegfried had received a stiff prison sentence. Russell, however, being younger, had gotten off more lightly, and was due to be released shortly. Alphonse, on a kitchen errand, stopped at a friendly business just down the street and called August with this news, requesting he find a way to deliver it to Fletcher in Berlin. His duty thus discharged, he returned to the Toad with a
new sack of flour to find Heinrich already announcing his intent to put the inn up for sale.

The Elrics knew better by this time than to try to argue on Siegfried’s behalf, and instead went to Rose with their letter to ask if she knew how it could be delivered. It was then they found out to their astonishment that she had already visited Siegfried while he was in the Munich jail. “I don’t believe it!” Ed said. “You mean we would have been able to see him except for Heinrich’s obfuscation?”

Rose sighed as she handed the envelope back to him. “There has been bad blood between those two ever since my husband became involved with the National Socialist Worker’s Party,” she said. “But that kind of talk is not for you boys. Would you like to visit Siegfried?”

“Oh, yes, please!” Alphonse interjected eagerly while Edward nodded.

“Then help me move the furniture and do some cleaning tomorrow morning, and we will go in the afternoon.”

* * *

The next day, Rose hired Alphonse as driver to take them to the Penitentiary. As they started out in Siegfried’s car, Edward, who was riding in the back, leaned over the seat to whisper in his brother’s ear. “I met some of the local church folks when I was at the store, and they say Rose is a saint. She helps run a soup line. Heinrich gives her an allowance, but it mostly goes to that. And this isn’t the first time she’s visited inmates in the Correctional Penitentiary. They know her pretty well there.”

Alphonse nodded sagely, intent on driving.

“Boys,” said Rose, “Heinrich tells me you’re from a small town in a distant country. I know that I’ve never heard an accent resembling yours before. Will you tell me about this place?”

Ed smiled. “Sure. What do you want to know?”

“My husband sometimes exaggerates. He was telling me that there is no religion where you come from. Of course, I could hardly believe such a thing.”

“Oh, there’s plenty of religion,” Ed said. “We have the Ishvarlans, and we have the cult of the Sun God Leto.”

“Amestris is also full of nature spirits, and various religions based on them,” Al interjected. “I’m a Spirit Alchemist there, so I can talk to souls the way mediums do here. I’m also a practitioner of Shin. You’d call it Nature Religion. It’s kind of like Siegfried’s beliefs, except it includes spirits.”

“A lot of people there, like myself, don’t have any religion at all,” Edward added. “But if you’re looking especially for Christianity, it died out in our homeland hundreds of years ago, except for a tiny handful of esoteric practitioners.”

“But why should it have?” she exclaimed, puzzled. “Have no missionaries been sent to your country?”

“Uh, the journey there is a little perilous. Most folks wouldn’t make it.”

“But I understand from my husband that you intend to return there one day.”
Ed scratched his head. “Yeah. We do.”

“When you go, would you promise me that you will take the Bible back with you?”

The question caught Edward by surprise. His hesitation was painfully obvious, as he stuttered like Siegfried on a bad morning. Al glanced back at him, clearly wondering what he would say. At last he cleared his throat. “Well, I could try. Like I said, the journey is perilous. We could lose our baggage and everything else.”

From there to the penitentiary, the conversation was awkward and sporadic despite Rose’s continued interest. Edward had embarrassed himself, and Al was too distracted driving the vehicle to fill in for him. When they reached the prison gates, it was immediately apparent that Rose was a familiar face there. She was greeted with smiles by the guards while Ed and Al were regarded as children, and they were quickly shepherded to the low-security cell block where Siegfried was being kept. As they entered the building, Edward automatically began scanning the area for weak points and vulnerabilities.

“Edward, Alphonse, I know you have been waiting so eagerly to see him,” Rose said as they were led to Siegfried’s cell. “You will cheer him up better than I could.”

“Thanks, Rose,” Ed said. “Is there a chance you could check on Russell while we’re with Siggy?”

“Yes, I will. Thank you for thinking of him.”

“She’s something, all right,” Al said in admiration as Rose went off to locate Russell.

The brothers paused at Siegfried’s cell door, hesitating anxiously. Siegfried was sunk deep in gloom. The prison was fairly busy with traffic going to and fro and he was deliberately ignoring it all, unaware that he had visitors or even that his door had been unlocked. In his institutional uniform, he did not look like the same man. He sat on the edge of his little cot, resting his elbows on his knees. His round little face no longer glowed, but was creased with exhaustion and worry lines. “He’s lost so much weight in such a short time,” Alphonse whispered sadly. “He hasn’t been eating or sleeping.”

“Yeah, well, I just hope he doesn’t cry when he sees us. I hate scenes.” Edward drew himself up and led the way in, clearing his throat. “Hey Siggy,” he said gently as he approached the despondent figure. “How’s it going?”

The effect of his words was transforming. Siegfried looked up in astonishment, then broke into a brilliant smile, springing to his feet. “Big Brother!” he cried. His reaction was so heartfelt that Edward, to his own surprise, found himself rushing tearfully into his arms. Alphonse followed one step behind. Siegfried reached to embrace him too, kissing the top of his head. “And dear Little Brother!” he said. “I am so glad to see that you are all right. I have b-been so anxious for you.”

“Thanks, Siggy. We’ve been worried about you too.” Al noted as he hugged his friend that Siegfried certainly no longer smelled like lavender and sage. As he stepped back, he observed that Siegfried’s curly red hair had been cropped close in an ugly style, and his freckled skin was getting paler from being indoors. Al finished his quick inspection of Siegfried’s condition. “You don’t look so good. We would’ve visited you sooner if we’d known Rose had privileges.”

“Yeah,” Ed added, wiping his face with his sleeve. “We’ve missed you! Heinrich doesn’t tell us anything. How are you doing?”

Siegfried shook his head slowly. “Not so good. There is no news. They do not tell me anything
either. Except that I will be here six months. And that I may lose my assets.”

“Don’t worry now about that,” Edward said. “You’ll lose them anyway when you leave this world.” He gave him a meaningful look.

“Oh, I am not worried. No. You know what I am worried about. Besides you and Russell.”

“Right. Nothing much has happened so far,” Ed replied, touching his Orichalcum pendant.

“Siggy, do you know who was responsible for turning you in?” Al asked. “Was it really just some farmer? Or was it some of Heinrich’s Society friends?”

“No one has told me a thing. But no one knew but Russell. Where I was going that morning.”

“So it was probably coincidence,” Ed said, relieved. “That’s good to know. We’ve been pretty uptight about it.”

“Heinrich’s messed up your lab and study,” Al said, laying a hand on Siegfried’s arm. “He says he’s going to sell the inn, but it might take a long time, so he’s renting out all the downstairs rooms. We saved everything of yours that we could, but some of your furniture got sold, and the big alembic got broken.”

“Here,” Ed said, pulling the letter they’d written out of his breast pocket and handing it to him. “This is a note we wrote. We wanted to tell you not to worry. We won’t leave without you.”

“But that makes me worry even more!” Siegfried cried. “The longer you stay here. The more both your lives are at risk!”

“Just calm down. Al and I will work something out. It’s all we’re thinking about. We’ll come up with a solution. Right, Al?”

“Right,” Al said. “Ed and I were talking earlier, Siegfried. We decided we want you to consider yourself an honorary Elric. And Elrics take care of their own!”

Siegfried looked at them tearfully for a long moment as he fumbled for words. Then he spoke firmly. “If you get a chance to leave. Please do so immediately. Do not wait for me.”

“Stuff and nonsense.” Edward snorted. “You heard us.”

“That’s right!” Al said firmly.

Ed glanced over his shoulder. “Looks like she’s coming back already. That was fast.”

“Oh,” Al said, snapping his fingers. “Siggy, what is it you were putting in my medicine? They don’t know how to compound it.”

“Damn, that’s right!” Edward’s eyes widened as he realized they’d almost missed the opportunity to find out.

“Yes, here is the formula,” said Siegfried, and quickly recited an herbal combination. “Combine this with four ounces. Of Kristoph’s cough medicine. You will need scales to measure this.”

“Got it. Thank you!” said Alphonse. “It helped me so much before.”

“It worked very well. For Alfons Heiderich. For a long time. I was intending to patent it.” Siegfried lowered his voice. “There is something. About your illness. That you do not understand. I believe it
is--” He was interrupted by Rose’s arrival, followed by the guard. “Ah, the beautiful Rose! You have seen Russell?”

“Hello, Siegfried. I just found out Russell will be released today,” she said. As Siegfried reacted with happy astonishment, she turned. “Boys! We have to go now. Visiting hours are ending soon.”

“OK.” Al turned back to Siegfried, gripping his arms tightly. “I know prison food’s crappy, but I want you to start eating, all right?” he said plaintively. “You’ve lost too much weight.”

“Yeah,” Ed said, awkwardly clasping his friend’s hand. “Please don’t worry. Things will work out somehow. I promise.”

Siegfried nodded mutely and Edward blundered away, going out quickly. Alphonse lingered for a moment before following. “We love you, Siggy,” he said quietly. “Always remember that. We’re leaving the Golden Toad soon, so it might be awhile before we meet again. But believe me-- when we do, justice will be done.”

II.

Edward woke abruptly that night with a burning sensation on his breast. At first he thought he’d been bitten by a scorpion such as those which frequented the deserts around Lior, and he sat up so quickly he knocked his bedding to the cold, damp floor. Then he realized it was his skin reacting to the Orichalcum pendant. He grabbed it with his live hand and started as though he’d received an electric shock.

“Al! Alphonse!” Al was still sound asleep. The activation key was in the pocket of his coat, which hung over the back of a chair. “Al!” Ed scrambled up, briefly bending to grab his bedclothes and toss them back on the mattress.

“What is it?” Al rolled over, blinking blearily in the light of the small taper they’d left burning.

Ed parked himself beside him. “The Orichalcum’s waking up. It’s the Gate. They must be testing it!”

“Oh, wow!” Alphonse sat up, reaching for the cross. As he grabbed it, he started just as Edward had done. “Ouch!”

Ed grinned. “Still, it’s nice to know we haven’t completely lost our alchemic sense, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I miss it a lot.” Alphonse closed his eyes, concentrating on the spirit in the metal. “It’s talking to me, all right. Not as loud as I would have expected it to be. Funny. It’s not coherent at all.”

“Not sentient?”

“Not really.”

“I know we made it right. It must be the properties of this world again.”

“Yeah. Or, since Orichalcum requires power to make it think, there’s only a small amount of energy going through the Gate.” Al released the pendant and looked up. “This must be a test run.”
“That makes sense. We mustn’t interfere, Alphonse, or we could be detected.”

They sat side by side on Al’s bed, holding the pendant and the key respectively until the flurry of alchemical reaction died down less than an hour later.

“So, Al, have you been putting any thought to how we can get through the Gate and close it behind us this time?”

“Yes. You said your blood caused some kind of reaction when it touched the first Thule array. I’d like to look into that before I try to invent anything. Who knows what we could learn?”

Ed nodded. “You’re thinking along the same lines I am, and probably the same as whoever supplied alchemic information to the Thule Society in the first place.”

“That part’s been bothering me. Do you really believe it was Dad? Didn’t he realize how dangerous those people are to Amestris?”

Letting go of his pendant at last, Ed leaned back thoughtfully against the headboard of the bed, drawing his knees up and wrapping his arms around them. “Al, even though I lived with Dad for awhile after I first came here, and even though he seemed to truly regret his past actions, I still think he was a totally selfish bastard. He lived for four hundred years and in all that time he never really learned that to be fully human, you have to love something other than yourself. Sure, he made me new limbs when I first came here, and yeah, he always felt guilty about what happened with our half brother. But he never really learned empathy, Al.” Ed looked up at his brother. “And in the end, he was a traitor to our homeland. He used his own body to try to open the gate and send me back, either without thinking about the danger to Amestris, or not caring. So, yeah. I do believe Dad gave them those secrets. But he couldn’t bring himself to go back.”

Al swallowed. “It always hurts when you talk about our Dad like that,” he said sincerely. “But I think you’re right, Ed. He should never have helped the Society open that Gate. As for going back, well, I’ve learned from experience that it takes heart to cross the Gate. You crossed it three times through an act of love—well, twice anyway, because I figure when Al Heiderich sent you through successfully, you must have been thinking of him or me. That was how I got here too, with love, and that’s how we’re going to get back. But if what Dad said was true, and Mom was the only person he ever really loved, well, then that was why he just could never go back.”

“What about Dielinda? Did she cross out of love? What about Envy? Was that love?”

“No,” Al admitted. “Eckhart said it was fear that drove her, and most likely that was what drove all her minions, too. And Envy must have crossed over out of sheer hate. Probably any really strong emotion can do it. But wouldn’t you rather trust love? Even if it didn’t work for some reason, if your heart is full of love at the time that you die, that’s how you will always remain.”

“You’re a remarkable person, Al,” Ed said quietly. “So wise for one so young. I bet that’s knowledge from your past lives.”

Al smiled, suddenly self-conscious. There was a brief silence.

“Ed? Have you ever wondered about Mom? Whether her double might be alive here?”

“Don’t go there, Al. Remember? Never look back. It just gets you in trouble.”

“Yeah,” Al sighed and stretched back out on his bed as Ed moved out of the way. “Tomorrow morning let’s move our stuff and chalk out that array, OK? The sooner we can figure this out, the better for all of us, including poor Siegfried.”
“OK. I’ve been thinking about him, too. They’re keeping him in a pretty low-security area. Under the right conditions, we might be able to spring him. But we’ll have to do a better reconnaissance first.”

“Right. To get him out, the conditions would have to be nearly perfect. We can’t count on Rose to provide a distraction—she may be sympathetic, but she’s too straightlaced for that. Russell’s useless too, even assuming his parents haven’t already used Fletcher as a bargaining chip to make him do what they want—like leave Munich altogether. We can’t depend on him.”

“It would be interesting to talk with him, Al. Get his point of view.”

“Yes it would. Do you suppose the Roma could help us?”

“It’s possible. We’ll have to think on it.”

“And we need to get the ingredients for my medicine, too. And make plans for getting out of here. So we have a lot of stuff on our plate. It’s time we got some rest.”

Yawning, Ed took to his own bed, pulling his single blanket up against the cold and damp. “Good night, Alphonse. Sleep well.”

“Good night, big brother.”

III.

It was unusual for Winry to see only Edward in her dreams. He was sitting under the apple tree, digging thoughtfully in the ground with a stick. She ran to him. “Ed! Is Alphonse all right?”

“For now. Not for long.”

She glanced up. The pond had disappeared and her house had become a depot. A passenger train rolled slowly by and she saw the face of Roy Mustang in one of the car windows.

Ed’s face was solemn. “You’ve got to warn him. There’s going to be a new Gate.”

“Yes,” she said. “And I’m going to build it with the plans Al gave me.”

His eyes widened and he seemed to be staring right through her. “Winry. Whatever you do, don’t come here. Stay away!”

* * *

Waking from her slumber in the early dawn, Winry snorted in disdain. “Hmph! He still thinks of me as a girl first and a human second. When will I cease being a liability in his eyesight?” She got up,
stretching slowly, and fumbled for her hairbrush as her old dog Den, who had been curled on a rug on the floor, sat up and shook himself.

“Good morning, Den.” Her brush strokes were unnecessarily rough. “For that matter,” she continued, “When will he cease this stupid infatuation with Roy Mustang? It’s bad enough they’re both males. That alone makes Edward look like an idiot. But falling for Mustang of all people?!”

Den laughed silently. She snorted again and continued the conversation with herself. “I’m used to Ed treating me poorly. I admit that. All this time I was giving him the benefit of the doubt. He’s had a lot of things on his mind, after all. But ‘stay away…?!’”

She changed into her work clothes and went downstairs. Her grandmother was already up.

"So you’ve decided what you’re going to do?” said Pinako, pouring two cups of tea. “That’s a very determined look on your face.”

"I swear you're telepathic," Winry grumped, sitting down at the table and promptly burning her tongue on the hot beverage.

"Not at all. I just know what I would be feeling at your age.” Pinako sipped daintily at her own drink, seemingly oblivious to its scalding temperature.

"I want to learn alchemy," Winry said decisively.

Her grandmother actually looked startled. "You're awfully old to be beginning that," she said.

"Not really. I've learned quite a bit already from Ed and Al. What I need to do is to learn to integrate it into my daily work."

"Ah. Planning on building a time machine?"

"No, that wouldn't work." Winry leaned forward on her elbows, eyes burning with determination. "I have to build a Gate."

"A Gate?"

"Between the worlds. Maybe between life and death."

Pinako looked at her through narrowed eyes. "Between the worlds? Maybe. But I think you had better leave life and death alone."

Winry tried the tea again. This time it was just cool enough to tolerate. "I'm going to see Scieszka."

IV.

One hour before dawn, the two brothers were huddled together over their single candle in the darkness. Finding a piece of chalk had turned out to be an interminable affair; they’d had to go through half of the dark storeroom before finally locating one among Siegfried’s effects. They’d broken it in half, moved their beds farther apart, and were in the process of drawing a small version of the alchemic array which Edward had seen the Thule Society use at the University many months
before. Correcting mistakes on the damp floor was difficult.

“That’s it,” Edward said at last, sitting back on his haunches. “Just as I remember it!”

“OK,” Al replied, leaning to hastily reinforce a line. Pulling the activation key on its string from around his neck, he placed it into the center of the completed array.

“Now,” Ed said. “We need some of my blood.” He produced a clean paring knife he’d taken from the kitchen the night before and held his hand out over the circle. Biting his lip, he gently punctured the back of one finger with the razor sharp tip of the knife. As the blood welled up, he turned his hand over and the drops fell onto the array.

“There!” Al said excitedly. “Did you feel it? For a fraction of a second, the array responded! Edward! Our blood’s definitely got power here!”

“Yeah,” Ed said thoughtfully. “But it wasn’t reflected by the Orichalcum.”

“There might not have been enough of it to resonate. Give me your pendant.”

Edward handed over the cross, and Al added it to the circle. “All right. Will you do the knife thing for me?”

“OK. Give me your hand and close your eyes.”

Al shut his eyes and Edward delicately pricked his finger. “Done.” Al turned to hold his hand out over the array.

Where his blood fell, the lines of the array jolted to life, briefly seeming to writhe on the floor as the two brothers fell back in astonishment. The effect was brief—only a few seconds—but it left them wide-eyed and gasping. Alphonse stared at his finger as though it were something he’d never seen before. “Ed! Did you see that?!”

“I did. Al, that was real Alchemy! Your blood’s got power here!”

“But why? Why didn’t yours do the same?”

“It did, a little.” Ed chewed his lip thoughtfully. “Could be a funky array.”

Al sat down heavily on a nearby chair and ruminated for a moment. He looked up and around the cellar with the disconcerting gaze of a cat seeing invisible objects. “There was no spiritual interference. So what have we learned?”

Edward walked slowly around the small circle, rubbing his chin with his fingers. “We’ve confirmed that our blood can activate some of the residual alchemic forces here, and your blood is very strong indeed. It creates an effect here as powerful as any Greater Alchemy. We can certainly use that, Al. The question is how.”

“Edward, are you sure that the difference between our blood reactions doesn’t mean anything?”

“Like what? What could it mean, Al?”

“I don’t know.”

Ed shook his head adamantly. “Neither do I. But I’m glad we ran this little experiment. I wish we’d run it before.”
“Me, too.”

The two brothers discussed their discovery for a few minutes more before Edward stretched and yawned tiredly. “I’d like to repeat this, but I don’t want to draw a whole new circle right now. Besides, we don’t have the room, and this one has to wear off the floor before we can use this area again.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I’m going to rest a little now, before Heinrich comes to wake us,” Edward said. “You’d better do the same.”

* * *

Kristoph, the pharmacist, had Al’s medicine that afternoon, and Ed purchased it with his last few marks. He also got directions to a local herbalist who, Kristoph said, had most likely supplied Siegfried with his special ingredients. It was too far for Ed to walk there, at least if he wanted to get back within a reasonable time, so he reluctantly returned to the Golden Toad.

On entering the kitchen, he found himself in the middle of an upheaval. Rose had just discovered Al chalking out a small alchemical array on the sidewalk near the inn. Ed walked in on her as she was furiously beating his brother with the broom, chasing him round the kitchen. She paused, still holding the broom in midair as Edward finally overcame his astonishment enough to speak.

“Hey,” Ed said, in a voice made small by sheer bewilderment as he slowly put his package down on the tile floor. “What’s going on here?”

“What does it look like?” she said grimly, and turned to address Al, who was cowering in a corner. “There, son. This was for your own good! Now go to your bed and stay there until I tell you otherwise.”

Giving Ed a reproachful look for not instantly coming to his aid, Alphonse ran out of the room. Edward turned back to Rose, his face coloring. “Now look here,” he began. “If anyone’s going to discipline my little brother, it’ll be me!”

“Edward Elric. Did you teach him to draw those Satanic devices?”

“What Satanic devices? I don’t understand.”

“On the sidewalk,” she said impatiently, and grabbed him by the ear, dragging him out the back door. She pointed to the unfinished array.

“Oh!” Edward said as the situation became clear. “Rose, there’s nothing Satanic about that. It’s a traditional design. In our home country, this is a science called Alchemy.”

“It is an occult symbol,” she said.

“Occult?”

Realizing that Ed’s puzzled reaction was genuine, she controlled herself with effort, breathing deeply, her fists clenched at her sides. Edward put a hand on her arm. Rose was their one bright light
at the Toad now and it was important that they stay on her good side. “I’m sorry if you thought Al was doing something bad. I had thought Heinrich had told you that my brother and I are both alchemical scientists. Where we come from, those arrays help us do stuff and think things out. See?” He pointed. “The base line of the central pyramid is where it all starts. It’s the leveling factor. The circular aspect refers to the circulation of alchemic energy. It--”

“Stop. I do not want to know.” She turned abruptly and stormed back into the building.

Edward, still a little bewildered, lingered over the array. It was the same pattern they’d been experimenting with that morning. “Al. You’re wondering about your blood.” Scuffing the design with the toe of his boot, he wandered slowly out into the garden.

“What do I tell you? The truth? That your blood really is different from mine? That you’re one thing, and I’m something else? That we might not be brothers after all?”

“Edward!” It was Rose again, her voice sharp. He looked up. She was waving a book and gesturing to the small stone table by the vine-covered wall in the beer garden where he, Al, Siegfried and Russell had often eaten lunch. Ed hurried over, anxious to placate Heinrich’s wife.

Seating herself, she gestured Edward down beside her. She had opened the book and laid it flat on the table. Ed saw that the volume was a floridly illustrated religious propaganda tract and he noted its title: “The Seven Deadly Sins.” He wondered what she would say if he ever told her that he’d known them all personally.

V.

“You could have at least acted like you wanted her to stop, Ed!” Al said, reaching back to rub his bruised buttocks. He was laying on his belly on his little bed in the cellar.

“I’m sorry,” Ed said. “But it was pretty funny!”

“Only if you weren’t the one getting beaten!” Al glared at him.

Edward relented. “You know if I thought you were really getting hurt I would have stopped it. You weren’t yelling or anything, Al.”

“Yeah. Well, what hurts worse than getting hit with a broom is knowing that someone as nice as Rose has that kind of mean streak in them.”

“We all have a mean streak, Al, and besides, she’s just afraid. She just spent half an hour urgently explaining to me how drawing a chalk circle on the sidewalk can cause the boogeyman to steal your soul. She’s been force-fed all that stuff from birth, Al, and she turned out OK despite it. So cut her some slack.” Edward paused, hesitating. He wanted to pursue the question of why Al had been experimenting without him, but he was reluctant to share the answers he already knew. “Hey,” he said. “I got your medicine.”

“Really?” Al sat up eagerly, then winced.

“Maybe you should soak your butt in a bucket of Epsom salts!” Ed grinned as he handed over the
“Very funny.” Al shook the medicine and held it up to the light of the narrow basement window-grate. “You didn’t get Siegfried’s ingredients?”

“No, I couldn’t. The place that sells them is too far away. We’ll have to take the bike or get a ride.”

“Well, after today, we’d better just knuckle down and be good for a day or two, brother. Otherwise we’ll probably get kicked out of here before we make enough money to pay for it—or get out of here!”

* * *

The brothers worked hard for the rest of the week, all the while plotting their impending escape. Rose seemed to have forgiven them for their ignorance, and Heinrich couldn’t lecture them any harder than he already had been, so they endured without too much extra misery except for Al’s cough. Sensing the Shauers’ increasing awareness of it, Al did his best to stifle it when they were near. Meanwhile the Orichalcum key and pendant remained inert, indicating that nothing of note was occurring with the Thule Gate.

Friday afternoon Edward managed to get away long enough to visit Russell’s mother. According to her, Russell would not be living in Munich any more. Her hostility toward him was well-veiled, but he was still glad to extricate himself from the conversation.

Upon hearing this news, Al’s face fell. “I had thought he would at least leave a goodbye note for us,” he said. “Still, the friendlier he remains with us, the harder they’ll make it for Fletcher, so he can’t be blamed.”

“I wonder if he said goodbye to Siegfried,” Edward said thoughtfully.

That night they began to make their plans for the next Sunday. “We can’t do anything about Siggy until we’ve completed our reconnaissance of the penitentiary,” Edward said. “And even then there’s not much hope, unless we get a lucky break.”

VI.

Heinrich was prepared for their escape attempt early Sunday morning, but he was too late—the brothers had made their exit Saturday night. As he pondered the scuffed-out alchemical array he’d discovered on the cellar floor and the sun slowly rose higher in the early morning sky, Ed and Al, still in their clothes and bundled up snugly together with their blankets, were just waking up under the fir tree on Penitentiary Knoll.

Edward sat up first. “Well, Heinrich’s probably discovering we’re gone about now. I can just hear him raging!”
“Yeah. Better hope we still have jobs when we get back today, Ed. We haven’t gotten my herbs yet.” Al stretched until he grunted, then began to cough. He fumbled for Kristoph’s cough elixir and took a small swig straight from the bottle.

“Hey! Go easy on that!” Edward exclaimed. “It’s got alcohol in it. I don’t need you getting drunk!”

Al smiled and got some food out of his knapsack. “I wish we’d already left the Toad, and were on the road. Don’t you?”

“Yeah. I do. I guess even though we aren’t Roma, we must still have a little Gypsy in us, Al.”

“So when are we going to go?”

“I’d like to get a bit more money saved up first, little brother. There aren’t many jobs out there. But if you can’t stand it any more, just give the word. We’ll leave whenever you need to.”

Alphonse seemed satisfied with this and they ate breakfast leisurely, admiring the rising sun. When they were done, Al took the binoculars to scan the area. Ed was just stretching out to rest again when Alphonse elbowed him. “Hey. Something’s going on at the prison.”

Edward rolled over on his elbows and took the binoculars from Al. “Looks like they’re exercising some of the prisoners. Wait—is that Siggy?!” They tussled briefly over the glasses before Al finally got them again and put them to his eyes. “It is! Oh, poor Siegfried. He looks even thinner, Ed.”

“That’s not surprising.”

“Look where they’re taking them,” Al said with some excitement. “They’re going around the perimeter of the grounds.”

“This is our lucky day, Al,” Edward said, climbing slowly to his feet.

“Wait! What are you going to do?”

“I didn’t come all the way out here to sit on my butt and look at the scenery,” Ed said grimly. “I came here to find a way to get Siegfried out. There’s woods all around that side of the penitentiary. Let’s get ahead of the chain gang.”

Al frowned as Edward picked up Siegfried’s bike and straddled it forward of the seat. “You’re pushing it, Ed. Remember? You promised to not be rash.”

“Come on,” Edward said shortly. Al sighed, shouldered his knapsack and scrambled on in back of him. Edward started slowly off down the hill toward the prison.

They quickly reached the level of the swamp, which acted like a natural moat. A landfill supported the gravel road in and out of the compound. A well-travelled trail crossed the road just in front of them and Edward turned onto it, paralleling the prison fence at a distance. The path ran atop an unused railroad fill and its banks were steep, plunging down into the trackless mire.

Al clutched his brother’s shoulder. “Edward. This is not safe. I think we’re trespassing.”

“Don’t sweat it. It’s not posted. Besides, we’re at least three hundred feet away from that fence. Even if someone’s watching—which I suspect they are—we’re just a couple of kids out for a joyride.”

The trail ran relentlessly straight, without deviating in its course, and Alphonse wondered what kind of traffic kept it so well-worn, and what its many rabbit-sized tributary paths, all leading into the
swamp, were made by. “Ed! I want to go back!”

“OK, OK! We will in just a minute.”

Alphonse glanced to his left, toward the prison. It stood on a low hill and the fence ran much higher than the trail, so the group of prisoners jogging the perimeter was now above and behind them. “We’re never going to find an easy way over, under or through that fence, brother!”

“No, but there might be some back way into the compound.”

“I didn’t see any other roads from the knoll.”

“You can’t see the back of the building from there, either. That’s what I really want to get a look at.” Edward was huffing now as he pedaled them both over the bumpy track. “Are you with me, Al?”

“I guess,” Al said reluctantly.

The trail turned slightly as they continued on, and the swamp grew deeper on both sides, with patches of open water. Dead and broken trees thrust from it at odd angles. The high fence loomed ever nearer.

“There he is!” Alphonse pointed and waved, standing on the frame of the bike. “Hey! Siegfried!”

The little figure on the green hill above them turned, seeing them for the first time. He began waving them back frantically as the whole party halted to see what was going on.

“Uh-oh,” Al said, grabbing Ed’s shoulders as he dropped back down. “He’s telling us to get out of here. Edward! Turn around right now!”

Edward cursed and braked hard, almost unseating his brother as he spun the bike on the hard-packed dirt. Al’s knapsack went flying and he sprang off to get it just as Ed heard the barking of guard dogs. “Shit! Get moving, Al!” he yelled. “Looks like we really did trespass!”

“Oh, no!” Al said, catching up his bag as three large Alsatians came racing into view some distance ahead of them. “Ed!”

“Get on! Get on!” Edward yelled.

Al scrambled back on the bike and Edward took off as hard as he could pedal. “Faster!” Al cried as he glanced back.

“I’m going—as fast—as I can—!” Ed gasped.

The trees and sun whipped by in the wind. The dogs gained on them by leaps and bounds. “Ed!” Al said. “We’re not going to make it!” Just as he uttered the words,

Edward hit a rock. Both boys went tumbling end over end, and the bike, its front wheel twisted beyond repair, crashed over the embankment and into the swamp. Ed picked himself up and scrambled for his brother. “Al!” he screamed.

“I’m OK!”

“Go! Go!” Ed hiked him to his feet and pushed him down the weedy embankment in front of him. They plunged into the wooded swamp on the side opposite the prison. It was too deep. Ed instantly went in over his head and did not come up.
“Edward!” Al bawled, treading water as he remembered that his brother couldn’t swim and would be dragged down by his automail. He ducked down into the stinking, oily sludge, sweeping his arms blindly, and connected with Ed’s steel one, grabbing it. Lunging and straining as the dogs tumbled down the bank, he managed to get his brother’s head above water and began to drag him farther out, toward a grassy hummock. Somehow they reached it just as the dogs dove in and began swimming toward them. Al hauled Edward up onto the shaky hummock of peat. Ed sprawled face down across Al’s knees, coughing up water.

“Brother! They mean business!” Al said, looking frantically behind them. The swamp continued for several hundred feet in the direction opposite the prison until it met the gently sloping wooded ridge that they had descended earlier. He could see their little knoll up on the very top of it, less than a mile away.

Ed nodded, still coughing. “Come on.” He crawled on hands and knees across the hummock and slid into the murky water on the other side. “Give me your knapsack.”

“Good thinking!” Al’s sack was made of a piece of oiled canvas, and he had tied it tightly shut. It held the air, acting like a float. Clinging to it, Edward was able to half-swim, half-wade until he was over his head. Al, who was an excellent swimmer, stayed close by his side, ready to support him as they continued laboriously across, negotiating much sunken and floating timber and hoping, with no luck, that the dogs would turn back. Treading water for a minute as he began to cough, Alphonse saw their handlers standing atop the railroad grade. “They’re not calling them back, Ed.” He coughed again, harder, and turned to support himself over a fallen tree. Ed nudged him with his shoulder. “Al. We’ve got to keep going.”

Al nodded and pulled himself with difficulty over the obstacle and back into the water. Ed followed. It was shallower here, but the sticky mud bottom perversely made the going harder and he stretched out to swim it. Beside him, Ed waded, pulling his feet out of the mire with increasing difficulty. As the open water gave way to a treacherous peat bog, they floundered across it as best they could, arms windmilling wildly as they jumped from hummock to hummock. The sound of the snarling dogs spurred them on until Al finally halted only a few meters from solid ground, doubled over with coughing and unable to catch his breath. “Al!” Ed said again, bending over him. “We have to keep moving!”

Al shook his head vehemently, unable to reply. Edward saw a little blood running down his chin. The dogs were catching up and they were out to kill, and the ground was so unstable that there was no way Edward could carry his brother to safety. “OK,” Ed said. “I’m going to lead them off. When you can, I want you to try to get up the hill by yourself. Pace yourself and don’t bust a lung. Aim for our tree. I’ll circle around and get you when it’s safe, OK?”

Al looked up, his face red and anguished. “But Edward--”

“Do as I say!” Ed shouted fiercely, and turned, wading past him to meet the oncoming dogs.

Gasping, Alphonse pulled himself upright by force of will, and by force of will he slogged forward through the mud. He heard one of the dogs yelping and smiled grimly. No doubt it had met one of Edward’s steel limbs. He had to admit that in this particular situation, Ed’s thinking was perfectly logical, as it needed to be to save them.

Edward yelled and cursed behind him and Alphonse’s heart caught in his throat, but he did not look back. Ed had schooled him well in this lesson years ago. In a scenario like this, where one of them was trying to lure an enemy away from the other, the worst danger lay in the distraction caused by the brothers to themselves. As hard as it was for him to flee the scene, Alphonse obeyed Edward.
Al slid suddenly into a hole. He was up to his waist in muddy water. He grabbed a stick that was lying near and used it to feel his way, finally hauling himself out of the mess at the foot of the hill. He rested for several minutes under the cover of a thicket, his head down as he panted. His breath was whistling in his chest and he wanted to cough again, but struggled to contain it. Two dogs were barking with great excitement in the middle distance, growing rapidly farther away. He followed the sound, turning slowly. It seemed that Edward had managed to lure the dogs to the shoreline and was running northeast on solid ground. Either that, or he’d been caught. Al shook his head. “Please don’t put me through that,” he whispered.

The hill loomed before him, mossy and dank and covered with small trees and brush. Al started up its trackless slope one step at a time, pulling himself onward with the occasional low branch until one snapped suddenly and he fell hard, sliding back down the way he’d come for several painful yards. He lay in a crumpled heap, his head downhill, coughing and coughing, until the world began to grow dizzy and dark. He reached out blindly toward the sky, as if appealing for help to the very same air that was refusing to enter his diseased lungs.

Ed, he thought. Winry. I don’t want to leave you like this!

VII.

When he came to, he thought that only a few minutes had passed. He sat up with a muffled groan. At least he could breathe again, but his muscles were aching and he was caked with drying mud. He was freezing cold. He managed to get to his feet, listening and looking.

Suddenly he heard a faint whistle. His spine snapped straight and he turned on his heel in the direction of the call. It was an old signal from his childhood. Al tried to whistle back. At first he couldn’t make a sound, but at last he managed it, wondering all the while how Edward had lost the dogs so fast.

He was answered immediately, and before long Ed came darting through the trees, skidding down the hill to land almost at his feet. “Brother!” Al said in astonishment. Edward was a mess. His left arm was bleeding and he was caked with mud and slime from head to foot. “Are you OK? How did you slip those dogs so fast?”

“What do you mean, how did I slip them so fast?” Ed said. “I’ve been trying to find you for hours. You had me really scared, little brother.”

“Oh, no. I must have laid there forever.” Al explained what had happened.

Ed’s face was very solemn. “We’ve still got a long way to go,” he said. “I can’t carry you up a hill this steep, but I can help you climb it.”

By the time they got to the top, the sun was westering and the sky was a cold cobalt blue. Al sat down on the ground under their tree to catch his breath. After awhile he fumbled in the pocket of his soaked red coat for his little bottle of medicine. “Oh no. I must have lost it!”

“We’ll get some of our pay in advance and buy you more when we get back.” Ed got to his feet and stooped. “Now get on my back and I’ll carry you home.”

Al did not protest, but wearily clambered up to put both arms around his brother’s neck. Ed hoisted him up so he was riding piggyback. Ed’s frame was very slight beneath his bigger one, but it was
wiry and strong. Al put his tired head down on his brother’s sodden shoulder, closing his eyes as they started back up the road. “Ed?” he said miserably. “I don’t think we can rescue Siegfried.”

Ed sighed under him, his sides rising and falling slightly between Al’s legs. “No, little brother. We can’t—at least this way. I admit it. But now, with your blood, we’ve got the possibility of having alchemy again to help us. We’ll figure out something, Al. OK?”

“OK.”

* * *

Getting back to the inn was not an easy task. Fearing further pursuit, Edward took to the brush, hiding under trees and in thickets every time they heard a car approaching. Fortunately this only happened a few times.

After walking more than two miles under his brother’s weight, Ed’s leg socket began to hurt and he started to limp. When it grew noticeable, Al insisted on walking the rest of the way under his own power, and he did, slowly. Ed’s help had given him a chance to recuperate a little.

When they finally reached the Golden Toad, it was well past nightfall. Heinrich was predictably furious, but, presented with their utterly wretched condition, he could muster no argument against their having a hot bath and a good meal. Rose was in a fluster, invading the bathroom when Al was in the tub, bearing medicine for his scrapes. Later, Alphonse fell asleep twice at the table. The two brothers endured an exhausting lecture and finally made it downstairs to their beds, where they collapsed in weariness and defeat.
Cruelty and Kindness

Chapter Summary

When Heinrich's wife Rose tries to consign Alphonse to a tuberculosis sanitarium, everything falls apart. Al is left wandering the streets of Munich, where he has a mysterious encounter with the ghost of Hohenheim, his father.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Graphic description of poisoning and old-style treatment for it. Like the previous cat incidents, this seemingly random nastiness will make sense by the end of the story!

Many, many years ago I was poisoned by some bad garlic butter, of all things, and suffered accordingly. This left a rather vivid impression, which made it into this fic. :P

I.

The next morning, Edward and Alphonse sat together on Al’s bed, watching the sun rise through the narrow window grate. Al’s face was pale, and a fine sweat beaded his brow.

“This world is so beautiful,” he said softly. “But it can be so cold.”

“That’s not the world’s fault,” Edward replied. “It’s people who make it cold or warm. As long as we can dream of better times, we’ll be all right.” He smiled reassuringly at his brother. Alphonse smiled back, then turned his face again to the narrow strip of sun. “What are we going to do, Ed? Now I’m too sick to leave.”

“I’m not sure what we’ll do. I really feel like I failed you yesterday.”

“No. You didn’t. Impulsiveness is your nature. If anything, I failed you. I went along with you when I should have said ‘no,’ just as if I haven’t learned a thing since Mom died.”

“That may be, but I still want to apologize. If I hadn’t been such a butt yesterday, you definitely wouldn’t be this sick today.”

Al nodded. “OK. That’s true. But I’m sorry, too.”

Ed smiled. “We spend an awful lot of time telling each other we’re sorry!”
“That’s all right. It just shows we’re living up to our pact. I’m proud of us.” Al leaned comfortably back against him, reaching over his own shoulder with a clenched fist, and Edward bumped his knuckles affectionately with his own.

“Ed? What’s a sanitarium?”

Edward blinked. “Why are you asking?”

“Because Rose was mentioning that last night when she was doctoring my scrapes. She said she’s going to pay my way to one.”

“Huh. That’s interesting. A sanitarium is a place you go to get cured of consumption. I don’t know much else about it.” Ed slid out from behind his brother and got up. “Rest now. I’m going to go get you a new bottle of medicine. If Heinrich tries to make you work, you tell him you’re sick. Don’t let him bully you.”

“OK.”

But Edward’s errand was not to be. When he came up the cellar steps, Heinrich beckoned immediately. “Is your brother still in bed?”

“Yeah. He’s sick and can’t work.”

“We need him anyway. Now. At the table.”

Ed fetched Alphonse and the pair soon found themselves sitting opposite Heinrich and Rose in the kitchen. Al, his eyes a little glazed from the fever he was running, regarded them anxiously, while Ed sat down and crossed his arms. “You’re going to fire us now, I guess?”

Rose looked surprised. “Oh, no, son. This is about Al’s consumption.”

“We don’t know it’s consumption,” Edward said.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Heinrich barked, and everyone else jumped. Rose lay a hand on her husband’s arm. The big man turned to Alphonse, who was chilled at his look. "Can you explain why you and your brother lied to me?"

“We lied? I don’t understand.”

“Your brother said that you had asthma and I believed him. You indicated no differently.”

“You were coughing uncontrollably last night in the tub,” Rose said, almost apologetically. “I saw you spit blood. That is a sure sign of consumption.”

“It is consumption!” said Heinrich savagely. “And you are contagious! By allowing you to work in this establishment, I and my reprehensible brother may be liable for hundreds of lives!” His words rose steadily in volume until, by the end of the last sentence, he was shouting.

Al blanched as Heinrich’s words brought home to him the enormity of the situation. “I didn’t know it was contagious. Truly I didn’t!” he stuttered. “We don’t have consumption where we come from, Heinrich. We really don’t!”

Edward had stood up, leaning with his palms flat on the table. “Don’t raise your voice at my brother, Heinrich!”

“You are good boys, if ignorant,” Rose interjected, meaning to be kind. “I am driving Alphonse to
the sanitarium now. We will pay for his treatment.” She stood up. “Gather your things,” she said briskly. “We will go immediately.”

“I appreciate that very much,” Al said sincerely. “That is very kind of you.”

“It is generous,” said Ed. “Come on, Al, you’d better change into your best clothes.” He glanced up at the Shauers. “Is there anything special we need to bring along?”

“You are not going!” Heinrich said. “Only your brother. I need you here to help me mind the inn. Later we will have you tested.”

“Now hold on a minute—” Ed began, but Alphonse touched his arm. “Don’t screw up a good thing,” he whispered. “We’d never have enough money to do this by ourselves. I’ll be OK.”

“Are you sure?” Ed asked. “I know how you hate people messing with you.”

Al smiled as they left the kitchen and headed down the stairs. “I’ll probably do better without you defending me from every poke and prod!”

“And if they decide to keep you there? They probably will, and I’ll want to know what’s going on.”

“Ed,” Al said calmly. “I’ll call you as soon as I know anything. Just stay right here for now. And don’t worry so much, brother! I crossed worlds to be with you. No one’s going to keep us apart now, and if they try, I won’t let them and neither will you.” He paused at the bottom of the cellar steps. “Besides,” he added quietly, “If I don’t get some help pretty soon, we’ll be separated anyway. Just keep an eye on that Orichalcum of yours.” He squeezed the activation key. “I think we should swap. You know what goes on at hospitals, and this key is worth a lot more to us than that pendant.”

“Right. Of course.” Ed hastily pulled his Flamel cross over his head and the two brothers exchanged the items. Then they hugged one another tightly.

“If anything major happens with the Gate, I’ll hitch a ride to the Botanical Gardens and meet you there,” Al said. “Now do you have a little rainy day money for me, brother, just in case?”

Five minutes later, Al had changed and left with Rose after gently admonishing Edward to be good. Ed stood anxiously at the inn’s front door until they were out of sight. The wind was kicking up; a storm with thick gray clouds was moving in. “Al,” he whispered. “You’re being so brave. But I wonder what you’re getting into.” He sighed, turning back to the kitchen and Heinrich, who was waiting impatiently. Alfonz Heiderich had avoided the sanitariums for a reason. Edward had never known exactly what it was, but he knew it was time to find out.

II.

“I didn’t know you drove, Rose,” Al said, as she turned the car off of Einhorn Street and onto a main thoroughfare.

She smiled and nodded. “I am too practical a woman to not learn how. But let me tell you, learning from my husband was not an easy task! He still refuses to ride with me.”

“But then how come you paid me to drive us to see Siegfried?” Answering himself, Al continued, “Oh wow! You are so nice to me!”
“You work and study much too hard. I wished you to have some fun.”

Al blushed and looked away.

“If you were younger, I would consider adopting you.”

Al turned back, staring at her in such blank astonishment that she began to laugh. “What?” she said. “If I won’t stand by while an orphan like you gets eaten lungs first, why shouldn’t I give you a home?”

“Well—I hardly know what to say. That’s wonderful, Rose, and very sweet of you. But Ed and I have been on our own for years. Even if he’s so short, he’s still the one I look up to.”

“Edward is your brother, not your mother, little one.”

“Well, you’d have to adopt us both for it to work.”

“Of course! Your brother is intractable, so his education could prove difficult, but you, I think, are humbler.”

“Nah. I’m just smarter than he is, even though he’s definitely my hero.” Al said it lightly and they both smiled. Then he coughed, and his expression grew sad. “Rose? Do you really think I can be cured?”

She glanced at him reassuringly. “If the good mountain air can’t do it, nothing can. Fresh air, plenty of rest, and light, pleasant work.”

“That’s the cure?” Al said in dismay. “How long does it take?”

“Oh, one or two years.”

Al’s eyes went wide. “One or two years? I’m sorry. I don’t have that long. Please, just forget it, Rose! I have to get back to my brother right now. There’s something very important we have to do.”

Rose frowned, glancing at him. “But it can’t just be forgotten, Alphonse. If you are not cured, you will die of the disease. And you are contagious. A sanitarium is the only safe place for you, both for your sake and Edward’s. We must have him tested soon.”

Al experienced a sudden queasiness. “He can’t have it. The only time I’ve heard him cough lately is when he fell in the swamp.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. Consumption can take a long time to become noticeable, and it can affect other organs, such as the brain. One of the signs is disturbed thinking.”

Al reeled as this information sank in. “Wait. I didn’t know that. Stop the car. I have to tell him.”

Rose kept driving. The determination in her posture and expression made Alphonse suddenly begin to feel a strange sort of panic. It was irrational, but there was no denying it. “Rose. This just won’t work. I like you, but I’m not your pet. Stop the car right now. I want out.” Without waiting for a reply, Al suddenly opened the door and leaped out. He fell hard and rolled on the solidly packed dirt road. As he staggered up he was very nearly hit by an oncoming truck. Seeing Rose pull over to the side of the road, he turned and fled as traffic in both directions came to a halt.
As Al blindly wandered the back streets of Munich, the heavy clouds that had gathered overhead opened up and it began to pour. Approaching thunder rolled in the distance. Alphonse usually loved storms, especially summer storms like this one, but not now. He found a doorframe and huddled in it, wrapping his coat tightly around himself as the wind kicked papers down the street.

What was he going to tell Ed? He squinted, trying again to remember if he had heard him coughing lately, and couldn’t think of any suspicious incidents. But ‘disturbed thinking’ was another thing. Ed had had that from the moment they’d been reunited.

Al started to cough at the mere thought of the disease. His ribs were bruised from his fall from the car and they hurt. He coughed again and tasted blood. A flash of lightning made him blink and the thunder rolled closer this time. He wanted to cough some more and fought it down. After yesterday, he was beginning to realize that his time might be shorter than he’d thought. Being a brave soul and a Spirit Alchemist, it wasn’t the thought of dying that struck the most fear in his heart. He knew he would still be around in some form. It was the thought of abandoning Edward so far from Amestris that made him weep and tremble. If he died here, under Edward’s watch, he knew his big brother would never make it home.

The wind blew. Alphonse leaned his forehead against the cold wall. It felt good against his fevered skin. “Oh, Ed. What should I do?”

After a few minutes he forced himself to look up. He wasn’t quite sure where he was. All he knew was that he wasn’t really that far from the Golden Toad, but he couldn’t get a good view of the skyline from where he stood. The storm was obscuring a lot of it. Uncertain where to go, he stepped out into the windy street. Suddenly he remembered how well Siegfried’s cough medicine had worked, and that he was still lacking the key ingredients. If he could find and compound them according to Siegfried’s directions, it could add more time to his life.

“If I walk for awhile, I’ll probably come to a street I know. I might even find an herb market.” Ignoring the downpour and his discomfort, he turned into the storm and started off, head down, his hair coming out of its ponytail to whip loose in the rainy breeze.

***

Edward had learned enough from Heinrich about sanitariums to panic even before Rose pulled up out front. She spilled from the car in a hurry, and he rushed out to meet her. “Where’s my brother?!”

“He jumped out and ran away.” She was breathless. “Oh, God!” she muttered.

“Good for him. Where did this happen?”

“The intersection of Seventh and Gartenstrasse. He was nearly hit in the road.” She dabbed at her face with her kerchief. “I need you to help me find him, Edward.”

“Oh, I’ll find him. But what about your husband?”

“I’ll talk to him later. Come along!”

III.
The search dragged on all day with no luck. As Rose and Edward shouted into the wind, querying passersby and retracing Rose’s route, Alphonse wandered deeper and deeper into the maze that was Old Munich. Finally, cold and hungry, he took shelter in the crumbling remains of an ancient church, stretching out uncomfortably on a wooden pew.

His dreams were full of spirits. He saw Alfons Heiderich, and Heiderich saw him, reacting to his presence with a wave and a smile. He saw a horde of gray figures marching endlessly, and sensed the presence of various children skipping through like dust devils. The old building was full of lives. His attention wandered to the root of it and then he saw it. Under the floor was a sleeping dragon.

Al woke up with a start. “This place is dangerous. It’s a portal to the spirit world. I’ve got to get out of here!” But when he tried to get up, his legs wouldn’t work properly, and he slid weakly to the floor. As he leaned gasping on the pew, a shadow fell over him and he turned quickly, startled. It was a young blond girl. For a long moment he blinked, trying to focus, wondering if he was fully awake. The girl looked so much like Edward that he almost spoke his name. “Do I know you?” he said finally.

She shook her head, then reached for him. He started as their fingers touched, and pulled his hand away. “You can’t take me to the spirit world. I have to stay here and help my brother.”

At these words she seemed to brighten, and beckoned him on. He managed to rise and follow her without touching her, all the while wondering which world she truly belonged in. He kept glancing backward to make certain he hadn’t left his body on the bench.

The girl led him into the deepest recesses of the church. He stepped carefully over fragments of broken window glass, ducking past veils of cobwebs that waved slightly in the cold breezes leaking through the panes. His knees were weak and he felt heavy. The girl led him all the way to the back of the church and stopped at the door of a tiny room. Al turned around to look carefully in the shadows and when he turned back, she was gone.

Al stepped through the door and halted just inside, letting his eyes adjust. To his surprise he saw a blond man seated at a spinning wheel. Again, he almost mistook the figure for Edward. The man glanced up as Al came to stand before him. Alphonse wondered briefly whether or not he was looking at a ghost, but concluded, from his experience in such matters, that he wasn’t. Nevertheless, there was something distinctly otherworldly about the scene.

He cleared his throat. “Who are you? I should know you.”

“Indeed you should.” The stranger stood up with a beatific smile. “It’s me, Alphonse. Your father.”

Al was literally staggered. He stumbled backwards and felt himself being eased down on a dusty wooden chair. “D-Dad! Of course! I recognize you now! But Edward said you were dead!”

“Yes. In a way, I am—but in another way I survived, and here I am. You look terrible, child.”

“You aren’t wearing your glasses any more.”

“Those went away with my physical body.”

“So you’re a ghost?”

“No. I’m trapped halfway between life and death, so I’m able to walk in both worlds. But what happened to you, son? You’ve crossed over the Gate.”
“Oh.” Al glanced down at his sodden coat, feeling a sudden chill. “I wanted to be with Ed.”

“Where is Edward now?”

Al’s natural protectiveness kicked in automatically. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know, child?” Hohenheim frowned and Al winced at his disapproval.

“I mean, he must be out searching for me by now. They say I have consumption. Rose was taking me to the sanitarium, but I bailed out and went looking for some medicine on my own.”

“Consumption?”

“Yeah. It’s a fatal disease here.” Al wanted to cough, but restrained himself. “Dad? There’s a question I need to ask you. About when you were killed.”

Hohenheim didn’t seem to even hear his son’s request. “Consumption!” he muttered thoughtfully.

“Dad?” Al whispered. Hohenheim lay his fingertips on his shoulder. There was power in his touch. Alphonse felt himself going suddenly faint, the world turning beneath him. Panicking, he lurched to his feet, shaking off his father’s hand. “Please!” he stuttered. “You’ll kill me.”

“I’m the one who should be sorry,” said Hohenheim. “I intended to cure you. But if it won’t work that way—” He turned his back on Alphonse momentarily.

Al’s skin crawled slightly as his alchemic sense stirred. “Dad!” he said. “You can use alchemy here?”

His father turned back to him with an object in his hand. “Only briefly, and only for limited purposes.”

“Well, how do you do it? Ed and I need to know. Is it your blood?”

“I’m afraid it has to do with me being partly dead. You see, in this state I’m a direct conduit between the worlds.”

Al stared at him, slackjawed. Hohenheim smiled wryly. “Here.” He held out his hand. In it was a small blue flask.

Al took the bottle and held it up to the light. “This is a cure for consumption?!”

“And more. You have to take it within twenty four hours or it will lose its potency. I suggest you get yourself home to your bed first, if you can. There will be... some side effects.”

“Dad,” Alphonse said, his eyes filling with gratitude. “You still love me.”

Hohenheim smiled and opened the door, gesturing him outside. “Now get back to your brother as quick as you can.”

“Why can’t you come with me? I’m staying at an inn. The owner is pretty surly, but he loves money. You could definitely rent a room there.”

“Son, not everyone is as open-minded as you are. I don’t think the other clientele of your inn would appreciate the presence of the walking dead! That’s why I’m here, in this abandoned place.” He gestured to the building around them.
“OK then. I’ll come back and visit just as soon as I can.” Al swayed on his feet. “Now which way is Einhorn Street?”

Hohenheim pointed out the back door of the building. Alphonse paused. “I love you, Dad,” he said. “I hope we see each other again.”

“I’m sure we will. Now go on, before the storm gets any worse.”

IV.

When Alphonse stepped out of the old church, the streets seemed somehow different to his eyes. To his surprise, he found Einhorn Street again less than a mile away, and he soon spotted Edward running toward him. Ed saw him, too, and quickly caught up to him. Al noted that he was running with a slight limp, as if his prosthesis was still bothering him. “Where’ve you been?!” Edward said breathlessly. “Al, you’re soaked! If you catch pneumonia on top of what you’ve already got, you’re dead!”

Al grabbed his arm, turning him back toward the Golden Toad. “Ed. You won’t believe what happened to me just now.”

“Tell me about it later. Right now I need to know what happened with Rose.”

“Oh. Well, she told me it would take one or two years to get cured in a sanitarium. Then she said she wanted to adopt me, and she had such a strange look on her face that I got scared. I can’t describe it, but she was being really possessive. I bailed out.”

“Damn. Am I glad you did, or I’d be trying to spring you now instead of Siegfried. Heinrich started talking about sanitariums and I got scared, too. He was saying the most awful things, describing what they might do to you.”

“Like what?”

Negotiating a curb, Edward stumbled over his own prosthesis and caught himself on Al’s arm, nearly yanking them both to the sidewalk. Recovering himself with an apologetic look, he replied, “Crush your breathing nerves. Cut out parts of your lungs. Collapse one of them at a time by sticking a huge needle full of air into your chest. They do the most horrible things to people.”

“Wow.” Al shuddered and glanced behind them. “I almost walked right into that one. What are we going to do now? I might be a public health hazard. What if the authorities come after me? I’m not even sure we should go back to the Toad.”

“We have to, Al. Our stuff is there, and the blueprint, and you need dry clothes and food.”

“I’m afraid I’ve given this sickness to you.” Al was silent for a minute or two, catching his breath as they continued toward the inn, finally adding, “But I won’t after tomorrow. Ed, wait ‘til you hear what happened to me just now!—”

“—You won’t give it to me, Al,” Ed interrupted. “I can guarantee that.”

“Why is that?” Al asked sharply, annoyed. It was beginning to look like he’d never get to tell about his extraordinary meeting with Hohenheim of Light. “Ed, just let me say one sentence—!”
Edward halted under a dripping store awning. “—Wait! I have one for you and it’s a kicker.” He drew a deep breath. “This might not be the time, but I swore to myself that when I found you again, I’d come clean.”

“Come clean?” Al stared at him.

“Al, I haven’t been honest with you. It’s been eating at me ever since our latest experiment. I probably can’t even catch consumption from you, because I’m not the same as you.”

“What?” Al said dully.

“I’ve been afraid to tell you this before because it could be too much of a shock, but I have to. You and I are different races and maybe even different species. Siegfried showed me the proof.”

Al swayed, the weakness returning to his knees as if a hundredweight had been dropped suddenly on his shoulders. All thoughts of their father fled his mind. “But Edward— this can’t be. That’s terrible news. It means we’re not real brothers!”

“After all we’ve been through, you and I are brothers no matter what. Come on, Al, people are staring.” Ed pulled him along, supporting him as he stumbled. They crossed an intersection and continued along a series of storefronts, nearing the inn. “You were right to wonder about your blood, Al. It worked so powerfully in our array because its composition really is different from mine, and I knew it all along and lied to you. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to upset you.”

“Oh, Ed. This is all like a bad dream.” Al started to cough and caught himself.

Ed continued, trying to reassure him. “But Siggy also explained to me that it *could* happen even with us really being brothers. You took after Mom, right? You look like her, you even talk like her. You know that. I took after our dad instead. That’s all.”

“Are you sure it could happen that way?” Al managed.

“Siegfried seemed to be.” They reached the front steps of the Golden Toad and trotted up to the door. Al had to pause on the top step, panting heavily and unable to speak. Edward pushed open the heavy door and looked left and right before he ushered him through, gently but quickly. “I don’t see Heinrich. Rose is still out looking for you, I think. Now you need to go change right away. I’m afraid we’re going to have to leave the Golden Toad pretty quick, Al.”

“Right. I was going to ask you about that. There’s no way I can face Rose again.”

Ed glanced into the dining room before pulling Al across it and into the short hallway leading to the cellar. “Hm. It doesn’t look like there have been any customers. I’m not surprised, considering this weather. Anyway, you won’t have to face Rose if I can help it. We can go hide in Winnifred’s treehouse until the storm is over. Then we’ll figure out what to do.”

“OK. I hate being even that close to her place, though. I know we’re a danger to her.”

“In this weather, and with you sick, we don’t have a choice. Now I’m going to get us some of that soup I started earlier, and pack us some bread and cheese. I’ll get the plans for the Gate from our hiding place too. You go downstairs and change your clothes. I’ll meet you there as quick as I can.”

Edward left him in the hall, but Al was startled suddenly as he heard the front doors shut. Heinrich had appeared from nowhere and was locking them. Al shrank back as he turned and looked directly at him across the dimly lit room.
“There you are, you ungrateful truant.” As Heinrich advanced on him, Al shrank back against the brick wall. The big man had clearly been drinking; as he drew near, Al could smell the alcohol on his breath. “Rose called me. She told me what you did.”

“I’m not a truant,” Al said. “I got freaked out and ran away, but I came back, didn’t I?”

“Yes, and you are going to stay here until you are removed from the premises like a rodent. I will call the health authorities first thing tomorrow morning.” He reached quickly to grab Al by the ear with unnecessary force. Al yelped as he began to pull him down the dark hall. Heinrich had dragged the struggling lad to the head of the cellar stairs when Ed’s footsteps rushing up made them both turn.

"Hey!" Edward shouted. "Quit messing with my brother!" Rushing the incensed Heinrich over Al’s protests, he swung at his head with his steel fist. Letting go of Al, Heinrich ducked out of the way, moving faster than Edward would have believed possible for such a large man. Ed rushed him again and this time Heinrich punched back. Edward dodged it. Alphonse yelled at them both to stop, but as they circled each other Heinrich lunged suddenly, trying to tackle Ed. Edward narrowly avoided him but collided with Al and fell, knocking him down the cellar steps. Quickly scrambling to his feet, Heinrich kicked Edward full in the ribs, sending him after his brother. As Ed tumbled to land hard at the bottom, Heinrich slammed the cellar doors shut and locked them. "Now stay in there for awhile and consider your punishment!” they heard him yell.

Ed had landed on the edge of the last step and lay writhing on the cement floor, unable to breathe. His wheezing gasps filled the darkened room. Al knelt over him, his pale face filled with terror. “Brother? Brother! Don’t die like this. Please don’t.” He lifted him upright to help him breathe. “Are your ribs broken?”

Suddenly Ed’s breath came back in a great rush. “My wind—got knocked out,” he panted. He drew up his knees and sat doubled over his own arm for a long moment. “Damn him. You OK?”

"Yeah," Al said shakily. "I think so. You really had me going there.”

Ed got his feet under himself and stood, swaying a little, waving off the other’s steadying hand. “That was a bad fall for both of us, little brother. Those stairs are steep.” He was silent for a moment before continuing: “Now go change out of those wet clothes, like I asked you to. I’m going to find a way out of here and teach that lard bucket a thing or two!”

V.

Al finished changing and sat down heavily on his bed beneath the window grate. Edward was trying to tear down the cellar doors, bellowing and crashing like a wild animal. Al shuddered. His brother had always had a violent streak, but it never failed to disturb him when Ed went on a rampage. He hoped the Schauers didn’t call the police.

A wave of dizziness passed over him and he wiped his feverish brow with the back of his hand. Leaning back on his bunched-up pillow, he rummaged in the pocket of his sodden coat, coming up with the blue bottle. “Dad…”

Shaking it, he held it to the light. It was filled with translucent spheres. Inside each one was a dark, liquid substance. Al uncorked the bottle and sniffed at it curiously. The capsules smelled faintly sweet, unlike any medicine he knew.

Ed had fallen silent, but Alphonse could still hear him working busily at the doors. Al wanted to
show him their father’s gift and tell him what had happened, but in a mood like this, and as distrustful
as he was of Hohenheim, what would he do? Very possibly the precious flask would end up
shattered on the cellar floor.

Al poured several of the capsules out into his hand and was discomfited at his own hesitation. It had
been Hohenheim. No one could fool him when it came to identity issues; he knew his father’s spirit.
Even though all souls were said to come from the same source, each one had its own unique
attributes, and Alphonse had learned to distinguish between them. It had indeed been his father
whom he had met at the church—different from before, yes, but still recognizably the same.

Al was a trusting soul, but he was not na"ive. It was simply that, unlike his brother, he had never felt
completely alienated from their dad. Having a more rational mind, he understood that the
circumstances which had resulted in Hohenheim’s leaving their mother must have been extreme.
And, regardless of Edward’s opinion, neither had he ever failed to think of Hohenheim as human. It
was this last on which his faith in his father most depended.

“Dad…” he whispered again, weighing the drugs in his palm.

* * *

For the hundredth time Edward banged on the door with his prosthetic fist. It made a satisfying noise,
but brought no response. “Damn you, Heinrich! Open the door!”

The inn had been closed as soon as they had ventured inside. Ed had realized this when, returning
from the kitchen with his pockets stuffed with food, he’d caught Heinrich abusing Al. Now
Siegfried’s brother was probably going to take his wife back to his uptown mansion for the rest of
the day, leaving them locked in the cellar overnight with no heat or lights. Edward snarled in
rebellion and lunged against the door, then ranged back and forth along it, feeling the seams for some
weakness and finally spending at least five minutes trying to remove one of the massive hinge pins
with his metal fingers. He might as well have been trying to disassemble a fortress gate. In fact, that
was what it was. Siegfried had told them that the cellar had long ago been used as a safe haven
during warfare, and its construction dated to that time.

At last he gave up, turning away and dragging back down the stairs. With a groan, he stretched
slowly out on his bed. His back and ribs were heavily bruised; in a few hours it was going to be
difficult for him to move. ‘OK, little brother. We’re stuck here. You might as well tell me all about
this wonderful thing that happened to you. Then we can look through Siegfried’s stuff to try and find
something that’ll help us get out of here. Didn’t he have some gunpowder somewhere?’

Al said nothing. Edward sat up. “Al?” He left his bed to climb onto his brother’s. Al lay motionless
in the shadows, face down. “Wake up, lazybones.” But Ed’s annoyance turned swiftly to fear as he
realized something was very wrong.

* * *

Winry. Winry!

It was early evening. Winry woke from a nightmare of Ed and Al running for their lives before a
writhing dragon made of fire. She felt sick and her heart hammered in her chest, making her dizzy as
she sat up too quickly. She rolled out of bed and ran to the window, flinging it open, but nothing
moved in the dark meadow below her except for four large deer.

After a moment she turned, casting a glance at her nightstand. Scieszka’s gift lay there, a little book, and she picked it up, riffling the pages. "The Alchemy of Love." Pausing, she read one particular passage over again, though she had already memorized it.

* * *

Good intentions, determination and commitment are only half the formula. The other half, one of the great secrets of successful alchemy and indeed of a successful life, lies in the ability to recognize and follow your own natural abilities. A Water Alchemist will not be successful if he studies fire; a Wind Alchemist will not succeed by studying the composition of stones.

She looked up suddenly, certain she’d heard Al calling her again. “Alphonse?” she whispered, but she heard nothing more. As her heartbeat slowly returned to normal, she put down the book and returned to her bed.

* * *

“Al! Alphonse!” Breathless with panic, Ed lifted his brother upright and shouted in his face. "Al! Wake up!"

Al’s lips were moving a little, but Edward couldn’t tell if he was trying to speak or if the movements were random. Something had paralyzed him, rendering him as helpless as a rag doll. His pupils were dilated hugely, wide and unfocused, and his fresh change of clothes was soaked through with urine. Ed’s first thought was that it could be a delayed reaction to some injury from falling down the stairs, in which case there was little he could do and his beloved brother was probably going to die right there in his arms. Gingerly he probed Al’s scalp, carefully feeling for lumps and bruises, but there were none.

“Damnit, Al! What is happening to you?!” At a loss, Edward leaned over him, breathing deep and trying to calm himself as he struggled to grasp the nature of the crisis. “Baby brother? Please, show me what’s wrong!”

After a moment he began to cast about the bed, searching for clues, and immediately lay his hand on the strange blue bottle in the linens. He started, his alchemic sense tingling, and the situation became clear at once.

Edward groaned out loud, dizzy with shock as he retrieved the bottle. It had been formed without a mold, the glass flawless and without bubbles—made by alchemy, and it was empty. The whole world seemed to suddenly drop away from beneath his feet. “Oh, Alphonse. If only I’d listened to you. You’ve been poisoned.”

* * *

Almost as soon as she’d drifted off again, Winry was aware of Al’s presence. He was sitting on a rock in the bright sun, in the middle of a strange desert that she’d never seen before. His face was streaked with tears and he was doubled over, hugging his midriff tightly. At his feet, Beauty gazed up at him, unnoticed. “Winry,” he blurted urgently. “I’m poisoned. I think I’m dying. It was my dad. My own father poisoned me!”

“Al, no!” She rushed to his side in horror, but her hands passed right through his body.

“Listen quick,” he said. His communication was unusually clear and forceful. “You’ve got to rescue Edward as soon as you can. If you don’t, he’ll die here and never get home. You’ve got to build
your Gate, so our Gate here will work.”

“I will,” she said firmly. “I’m working on it now.”

“Good. He’s depending on you.” The desert became a poppy field. “Winry?” he said wistfully. “I wanted to marry you.” As he said the words, his image faded from her consciousness.

“Al?” she cried. “Al?!” But Alphonse was nowhere to be seen.

* * *

“Brother, I’m here,” Edward said urgently, climbing back onto the bed and bending close to speak to Al in a clear voice. "Al, I need you to swallow this thing so we can get the poison out. Don’t be afraid. It won’t be that bad. We just need to work together like we always do."

In their homeworld, poisonings were usually dealt with by using potent detoxification herbs and, if caught immediately, alchemy to transmute the offending substance; but the Earth solution was different. Whatever Alphonse had ingested had to come out immediately, or be neutralized with a charcoal suspension—preferably both. In a rapid search of the medical supplies now stored in the cellar, Ed had found no charcoal, but he had located one of Siegfried’s Ewald tubes, which could be used to empty his brother’s stomach. Ed had been trained in this process to retrieve the raw material for manual production of hydrochloric acid, but he had never tubed anyone other than himself. He was acutely aware of the potential for harming Al, but there was no other help.

Propping Alphonse up against the headboard of the bed, Edward quickly tied his wrists in back of him with his handkerchief. "This won’t feel so good, but it’s gonna be OK," he said, as much for his own benefit as his brother’s. He slicked down the tube with butter from the bread in his pocket before inserting it with extreme care. Al began to gag as it passed down his throat, and even knowing how it felt, it was difficult for Edward to not feel some panic at his brother’s distress. “Keep swallowing, Al. This is the worst part; it’ll pass.” Gingerly he fed him the required length. "OK, it’s in. Just hang on a minute longer and we’ll have that crap out."

Edward shifted to sit on the edge of the bed, rolling Al to lay on his left side while holding him firmly immobilized. Putting gentle pressure on Al’s belly produced nothing, and there was no time to waste; so, pillowing Al’s head in his lap, he bent to take the free end of the tube in his mouth and tried to suck out the contents of his brother’s stomach. The first attempt was unsuccessful, but as he eased the tube a little deeper Al retched, and his vomit flooded Edward’s mouth. “Gah!” Ed spat and recoiled, leaning past Al as his own stomach threatened to empty itself in an intense spasm of revulsion. It was an antique safety reflex—group puking—and he recognized this, leaning and breathing deeply until it passed. Gasping a little, he tried again, sucking out another mouthful. It was burning with a bitterness similar to nightshade, and this time he recognized the substance. Astonished and coughing, he spat once more, missing the slop bucket he’d dragged to the bedside. "That’s dragon's blood, Al!" Then he continued without further hesitation, sucking and spitting again and again.

* * *

Winry was sobbing, her head resting in her grandmother’s lap. “He said he wanted to marry me. But now he’ll never have the chance!”

Pinako stroked her hair sympathetically. “You don’t know that, dear,” she said. “Even a little poison can feel like a lot, you know.”

When Winry had come running downstairs to her room in an uncharacteristic panic, she had known
for the first time with certainty that her granddaughter’s dreams were something other than a wishful fantasy. As she consoled her, the old woman was already considering her options. She knew she’d help Winry rescue her friends in any way she could.

“Oh, Grandma,” said Winry. She had quieted a little, but her eyes were huge and luminous with shock. “Why must they suffer like this? I’d gladly suffer for them.”

“I know you would. But they are suffering as a result of their own actions. Only they can save themselves, but they’re clever boys. Don’t lose faith in their abilities, Winry.”

* * *

By the time he was finished sucking the poison out of his brother, Edward’s mouth was raw and burning, and Alphonse had started to bawl and struggle. Ed restrained him grimly with his automail. Bending, he quickly rinsed and spat from the well bucket before he lifted it to his knee and administered some water to Alphonse, then dropped the end of the tube to the floor and shifted his brother’s position, letting gravity wash out his stomach. “Almost done, baby brother!”

As he worked, Ed had found himself becoming more and more confused. Dragon’s blood was well known in Amestris as both a deadly poison and, in minute amounts, a most powerful medicine. Had Al been trying to cure himself or kill himself? What could possibly induce him, a Greater Alchemist, to drink something like this? And where had he gotten it?

Ed finished and carefully removed the tube. The two brothers were soaked, Edward had kicked over the slop pail and the floor was an unspeakable mess. Alphonse was shivering, sobbing and retching convulsively. Ed couldn’t remember when he’d last seen him in such misery.

His own hands shaking, he untied Al’s wrists. They had been bruised and reddened by his hasty knot. Al’s hands and fingers were swollen. He chafed them regretfully, leaning over him to speak earnestly in his upturned ear. "Al, Al… I’m so sorry, baby brother, I didn’t mean to hurt you!"

Alphonse could not answer. His gasps slowly diminished as Edward undressed him and transferred him to his own dry bed. Ed took off his own sodden shirt and sat with him, leaning back against the wall. Alphonse was shocky, and shivering violently. Ed had seen this before in people about to die, and it terrified him now. He wrapped them both with his blanket and held his brother desperately. “Al?” he whispered. His voice broke and trembled. “Please say something. Please tell me you’re OK.”

Al drew a great, shuddering breath. “I hate you!” he cried hoarsely, and sank unconscious on his brother’s breast.

VI.

Another unseasonable storm came through during the long night. Edward caught snatches of sleep in restless fits and starts, snapping awake whenever his brother stirred a little. As thunder rolled distantly overhead, Al transitioned into a more normal sleep and he began to dream, his muscles twitching and his eyes darting beneath closed lids. Once Ed thought he heard him whisper Winry’s name, but it could have been the wind.

As Ed slowly became more rested, his mind became more active. If the health authorities were coming to get them in the morning, they needed to escape tonight, assuming that was what Al would
want to do. It was far too late to worry about who he might have exposed to consumption. Leaning close, Ed gently rubbed his brother’s cheek and whispered words of encouragement in his ear, but Al still did not respond.

“Please don’t hate me, baby brother,” Edward said. “We’re all we’ve got.”

The moon came out, throwing narrow slivers of ice across the cellar floor. Al stirred in his heavy slumber, and Edward woke again instantly, cursing himself for drifting off. Then he froze. There were hasty footsteps crossing the floor above them. Ed rolled out of bed and hastily pulled on Alphonse’s damp red coat, darting silently up the cellar steps.

He was preparing himself to fight for their freedom when the door was abruptly unlocked. A woman’s voice called out. "Boys! Are you down there?"

"Yes," Edward said cautiously.

"It's me. Rose."

Ed came closer to the door, squinting out into the light. "What’s going on? Where’s your husband?"

She shook her head. "Sleeping it off. He told me what he'd done. I've come to let you out."

"That's nice," Ed said doubtfully, pushing the door open and stepping out. "Your husband nearly killed my little brother by locking us in here like that."

Both of her hands flew to her mouth. "We must take him to Doctor Hofer’s house!" she said. “His practice takes patients at all hours.”

Edward did not hesitate. In this world, no doctor would know about the properties of dragon’s blood or have a treatment for it, if they could even be induced to believe in its existence. Likewise, no one would be easily convinced that little Edward—undersized and dramatically handicapped—was a highly trained and experienced scientist who had known how to get the poison out of his brother. They might want to repeat the stomach pump and Al certainly didn’t need any more of that. Besides, once they were clued in on his TB, he was doomed to the sanitarium.

"I don't think so," Ed said, turning to look back into the darkness where Al lay. "At least, not right away. The worst is over for now, I think. He needs rest more than anything else. But thank you for letting us out.” Edward noted the look on her face—a little bit terrible, he thought, her lips pursed into a sour frown as though she were having to restrain her emotions.

She sighed. “Heinrich and I could never have children, and you and Alphonse are so bright, so studious. Your mother must have been so proud of you.”

“Our mother died when we were young. We’ve been on our own ever since.”

“Yes, I know. It is a miracle you managed so well.”

Ed smiled. “There were a few of those along the way too. Rose? Will you let us go? I can make it look like we escaped.”

Her eyes welled up. “Why? Oh, why? Why give up this roof, and good food, and all my care? Your brother is at death’s door. If he does not go to a sanitarium—”

“There’s another way. The alchemy I told you about before, in our home country. We have to return there as quick as we can. Rose, I promise, if we can just go home, my brother will be completely
“That may be, but it may also be the devil’s work, Edward. I worry not only for your bodies, but for your souls as well.”

Edward suppressed his exasperation. “Alchemy is not the devil’s work. You’re going to have to just trust me on this, Rose. Nothing that cures suffering is the devil’s work. Neither is science, even if it uncovers truths that are really painful.” He paused, gauging the effect of his words, then plowed ahead. “And as far as Siegfried and his imprisonment goes, well, I’ve noticed you folks regard sense pleasures as sinful too, and that’s just plain ignorant. Love, sex, joy, closeness—none of these things is evil in any way! Your society is letting a bunch of old men who died thousands of years ago rob you of your birthright—the freedom to enjoy your own bodies. You’re letting them dictate how you live your lives!” He drew a deep breath and released it slowly. “I’ll stop now. But I could go on and on. There are a lot of things wrong here, Rose.”

Rose was gazing at the floor. “You truly are a foreigner, aren’t you? It’s not just your manner of speaking.”

“We can’t possibly be happy here, Rose. Please. Just let us go.”

After a long moment, she reached for her purse. “You haven’t been paid for this week.” She spilled out a handful of large coins and pressed them into his prosthetic hand.

“Thank you. You’re doing the right thing.” Ed leaned up to quickly kiss her cheek. “Heinrich talks all the time about charity and good works, but you’re the one who’s practicing what he preaches.”

She would not meet his eyes. “I must get back home quickly, or my husband will wake and wonder where I am.”

“One last favor, if you would, Rose. The next time you see Siegfried, tell him we’re thinking of him.”

“I will. But in return, you must do a favor for me.”

“What’s that?”

“Take this Bible back to your home country with you. Promise me you will do this.” She produced a compact version of the book from her purse, holding it out.

“I will, for you. Equivalent exchange.”

She looked quizzical.

“It’s the First Law of Alchemy.” Some sixth sense caused him to glance back down into the darkness of the cellar. “Something’s going on. I need to check on Al. Thanks again, Rose. I’ll remember you.” Ed had already started down the steps when he paused, turning back. As Heinrich’s wife left the building he ran back up to the landing. Grasping the cellar door’s sliding bolt with his automail, he bent it just a little out of shape, so that the door could not be locked again.

***

As Edward bent over his brother, he started suddenly. Al was looking at him silently. Ed dropped to his knees at once. Taking Al’s face in his hands, he smoothed back his damp, matted hair and
caressed his cheek affectionately. “You’re awake! How do you feel?”

Al’s eyes were still dilated. His voice was very faint, and his breath was foul. “Terrible. My stomach hurts so bad.”

Edward moved to sit down on the bed beside him. "Are you still cold?"

"Not really."

"Good. Now I need to ask you something important. What do you want to do—come away with me, or go to a sanitarium? As bad as it sounds, they might be able to cure you there."

Al reached to grasp his wrist. His grip was fragile. “No. I don’t want us to be apart. I want to go home.”

“OK. Take it easy. You can always change your mind. I just had to know what to do.” Ed stood up, starting to gather together what they needed. “Rose let us go, Al.”

Al lay quiet, eyes closed. He felt a little fevered, and the sounds of Ed moving quietly around the room seemed much too loud. The feeling was slowly coming back in his arms and legs. His stomach harbored a deep, penetrating ache, and he could still feel a little tenderness where Ed had put the tube down his throat. Still, he felt he would have died if Ed hadn’t done it. There was no way he could have thrown up the poison by himself.

In their home world, Edward would have simply used alchemy to change the poison in his body into an inert substance, and it would have avoided all the extra trauma. Al remembered once using that alchemic trick on Edward, when he had been bitten by a deadly scorpion during their first journey to Lior. He felt the familiar surge of panic and helplessness that came every time he remembered where he was now, and he began to shiver, curling up on himself.

“Be strong, brother.” Edward had been in the storeroom getting supplies he felt they might need—candles and matches, Siegfried’s kit bag with all the medications he could quickly find, and a few of their clothes, using one of his shirts to make a pack. He then laid out most of their remaining clothes, and the blueprint of the Gate, on the blanket Al was using, rolled it over itself and tied it with Al’s belt, leaving only a sheet covering him. “If we’re going to leave, we have to get out of here soon.”

“I can’t walk.”

“You won’t have to.” Ed moved around to his side. “Can you sit up?”

“I’ll try.”

Al struggled up with Ed helping. He sat on the edge of the bed, swaying a little with weakness. Edward got socks on him and paused. “Both your trousers are wet. I guess you can wear some of mine.” Retrieving the largest pair he had, Ed worked them half onto Al, then put his arms around him to lift him briefly to his feet. “Hang onto me while I pull these up. Good, they fit well enough. OK, we’re gonna sit down again.” Getting Al situated back on the bed, he rummaged for a dry shirt. “Al?” he said as he worked. “Please tell me you weren’t trying to kill yourself or anything.”

Al’s eyes widened. “No!” he exclaimed, nearly toppling over. “Why would I do something like that?”

“OK. Good. Do you remember what happened to you?”

Al shuddered. “How could I forget?” He rubbed his brow wearily. “It was horrible.”
Ed pulled Al’s arms through his shirt sleeves and began to button him up, then paused. “Are you still mad at me?”

“Of course not. You had to do it.”

Ed resumed buttoning. “Actually, you had the best end of the deal,” he said a little more cheerfully. “If you think I’m wrong, try sucking out someone else’s vomit.” Al’s eyes widened and Ed realized his brother hadn’t been aware of what he’d had to do.

There was a momentary, shocked silence before Edward continued, “What I meant by my question was, do you remember what happened before? Where did you get that bottle?”

“Oh. I was trying to tell you. I met Dad.”

Ed froze briefly. “Dad’s dead, Al. It had to have been Envy. He looks a lot like him, you know.”

“No. It was Dad.”

“And he gave you a bottle of dragon’s blood to drink? I don’t think so.” Ed put his own brown coat on him, then stepped back. “We’ll talk about it later. OK, you’re all set. Do you think you can ride on my back to Winnifred’s house?”

“Oh, no. Ed. I don’t want to go there.”

“I know it’s not good for us to be around her, but it’s just for a little while. Just for a little while, and then we’ll go somewhere else.”

“No. I won’t do it.” Al’s head hung with weakness; he was trembling again.

“Then I’ll make a bed for you in her treehouse, and keep you warm until morning,” Ed said desperately. “We were going to stay there anyway, remember? Maybe I can contact the Roma tomorrow. But we have to get out of here now and Winnifred’s treehouse is the only place left to hide. OK? Is it a deal?”

“OK,” Al whispered. His face was going pale. “Ed. I’m going to faint.”

“No you’re not.” Ed rapidly secured the makeshift pack he’d made to his own chest, rather than his back, with a long twisted strip torn from a bedsheets. Then he turned his back toward Al, kneeling down on hands and knees below bed level. “Just slide down on my back. Come on, Al!” He barked the last sentence to wake him up and Alphonse, startled, landed heavily on his brother’s bruised back. Edward grunted with the impact and clamped his arms quickly under Al’s legs to hold him on as he staggered up. He bent far forward and let go of his brother with one hand for a moment to snag the rest of their belongings, flipping the rolled blanket up and over their heads so it would cover Al’s shoulders and provide him some protection from the weather. Then he headed for the stairs. “I can’t believe I promised Rose I’d bring a Bible to Amestris, but I’m grateful to her anyway.”

Al said nothing, clinging weakly around Ed’s neck.

Ed’s leg prosthesis was already hurting by the time he stepped out into the wind and rain. The faint light of a false dawn only served to outline the quickly changing shapes of an ominous cloud front coming in from the north. Ed strained to see through the shadows, but the only figures he observed on the ground were those of two stray dogs. “OK. Here we go.”

He struck out through the back alley, moving as quickly as he could. The vacant lot by Winnifred’s house was almost a mile away as the street route went, but he knew a shortcut—down a little hill,
skirting a drainage ditch, along the back of a cluster of row houses.

The wind howled and he squinted into its blast. Far ahead, the tall trees he was heading for were swaying and bending. He shuddered at the thought of taking shelter in a treehouse during such weather, but Winnifred’s engineering was pretty good. He had been impressed with the structure when they’d first discovered it—good roof, good door, and a real window. If it didn’t leak and the tree didn’t fall down, it would be a much better shelter than having nothing at all.

Still, Ed didn’t entertain the possibility that it could serve them for long, and if he let Alphonse get cold it might be all over. He could already feel Al’s body shivering against his back. “It’s not much further,” he said over his shoulder.

“Ed,” Al whispered. Edward had to stop and turn his head to hear him. “What, little brother? We have to keep moving.”

“Someone’s watching us. Can’t you feel it?”

Ed turned back into the storm. “Now that you mention it, I do feel something. It’s creepy.”

He continued on, slogging through a broad and shallow puddle. He took advantage of the rain-saturated earth by treading in a thin stream for the next several hundred feet, hoping to throw off any creature that could track his scent. The presence which Al had alerted him to was making his skin crawl. It didn’t feel human.

“Strange. It feels like Dad,” Al said, as if reading his thoughts.

“Al,” Ed gasped. “It’s Envy!”

Something dark moved over them as he uttered the words and in the next second a dragon’s head descended from above. Edward ducked and lunged away, deliberately spilling Al off his back. The great jaws snapped shut and Alphonse screamed. Ed whirled as the tail of the dragon flashed by. Envy had just missed, carrying away their blanket instead of the two brothers. Meanwhile, Al had landed in the stream. Ed grabbed him and hauled him out of the water, throwing himself flat over him. “Damn. Oh damn,” Edward panted, glancing from left to right. It was the perfect position for an ambush—the concrete wall of the row house yard on one side, a long board fence on the other, and a hundred yards to go before they could get out of the narrow gap. “Al? Al!”

Alphonse was unconscious. Ed swore again. Dogs began to bark in the distance, and lights began to flash on. Edward scanned the sky, but he saw no sign of the dragon. It was possible that with the dawn not far off, Envy did not want, or perhaps could not tolerate, his serpent form being in daylight. Or perhaps he feared Ed’s legendary ferocity now that he’d lost the element of surprise. After all, Envy had no way of knowing what kind of weapons Edward was carrying.

Ed got up. He lifted Al in his arms and tried to run, but his brother was too heavy and he was forced to pause, arranging him over his shoulders like the Resembool farmers carried their calves. Then he started forward again. His leg socket was hurting him with every step, but he ran anyway.

The wind was letting up and the sky was quickly getting lighter, but the sun was not yet high enough to cast shadows and Edward had to keep glancing back up. Once he thought he saw a dark shape in the swirling air above them and he stopped, pressing their bodies flat against the fence, but nothing came of it. A few moments more and they were out of the open and passing under the trees. Edward passed the treehouse, ducked through the back gate into Winnifred’s yard and stopped abruptly. The house was still dark, the windows shuttered. Then Ed realized that Winnifred’s family might not even be at home. Alphonse had said that this was just one of their houses, and that they were only
staying in it while her parents gave guest lectures at the University.

Ed carried his brother to the back porch and bent to set him down on the top step out of the breeze. Alphonse was soaked from his tumble in the stream and there was no question that he had to be warmed up immediately. He was half-conscious, whimpering with discomfort and leaning into Ed’s touch. “Hang on, brother,” Edward whispered. “I’m going to break in.” He laid his automail hand on the doorknob and twisted, applying all the strength of his steel.

It didn’t break. Edward tried it again. In the end, he had to put his fist through a small bedroom window which was concealed behind a nearby bush. Opening it, he squeezed through. No one was in the room. He darted to the back door which opened on the kitchen, dragging his brother inside as quick as he could. Locking it again, he put his back to it and slowly scanned the room. Everything was perfectly tidy and in its place. He noted that the icebox was empty and dry. “OK, Al. We don’t have to worry. It looks like nobody’s been here for awhile.”

“Ed,” Al whispered. “I’m so cold.”

“I’m sorry I dumped you in the water like that. It was the only thing I could do.” Edward hefted him with a painful grunt. Carrying him through the kitchen, he took him to the bedroom he’d broken into. “This must be Winnifred’s. I’ll have to board up that window. You’re gonna have a canopy bed, brother!”

The double bed looked like a wedding cake, with a white and pink coverlet trimmed with lace roses and four lacy canopy curtains. Ed would have found it hilarious if Al hadn’t been so sick. He sat his brother on a white wicker chair next to it and began undressing him. “I know things are a little hairy right now, what with Envy showing up,” Ed said. “But I want you to try to not think about anything but getting better, OK? You just leave all the rest to me.”

“I’m always doing that,” Alphonse said miserably. His face was as white as the bed. Ed finished undressing him and threw back the thick goose down comforter. “OK, we’re gonna stand up now.” Getting him on his feet, Edward carefully pivoted him and sat him down again on the sheets. “Wow. She has a ton of pillows, brother. We can fix this any way you want.”

“I need my head propped up,” Al said. “My stomach’s killing me. I’m so thirsty.”

Edward arranged the pillows the way Al wanted them and got him positioned comfortably in the bed. “That comforter is great. You’ll be toasty after a few minutes under that. Now I’ll go get you some water. After that I’ll take a quick look at the rest of the house to make sure everything’s locked, and then I’ll come back here and climb in with you. I’m exhausted.”

But things rarely went as easily as they sounded. After only a few sips of water Al doubled over, groaning with agony as it came back up. Edward quickly caught and held him so it missed the linens and spattered on the floor. When Al recovered himself, he looked up apologetically. “It hurts so bad!” he gasped. “I wish I had some milk.”

“Your wish is my command,” Ed said shakily, easing his brother onto his pillows again. “I’ll get some from a neighbor and be right back.”

“Please be careful,” Al whispered. “Envy’s out there.”

Ed gave him a thumbs-up. “Your job is to not worry, remember?” he said. “Nothing stops Edward Elric when he’s on a mission!”

* * *
Edward had not gone a block before he spotted a milkman making his early morning rounds despite the weather. One of Rose's coins purchased three bottles of milk, two cartons of eggs and a block of ice. Edward had to make two hasty trips to carry it all back to Winnifred's kitchen, all the while keeping a sharp watch out for Envy and a low profile in case there were neighbors watching the house. He wondered if Envy normally changed back to human form during the day and, if so, how he managed such a transmutation in this world.

On the second trip, he suddenly sensed something dreadful and oppressive; Envy was close by. He could almost feel the dragon's breath on the back of his neck. Taking a circuitous route, he made his way back to the house, making sure he locked the door behind him. He would have attempted to locate Envy's hiding place—quite possibly under the brambles in the empty lot next door—but Al needed him.

The kitchen cupboards were stocked with dishes. Ed quickly poured a small serving of milk and headed for the bedroom. "Here, Al," he said, wincing as he dropped to his prosthetic knee beside the bed and offered him the cup, along with a large enamel pan he'd found under the kitchen sink.

Al took the milk gratefully and began to drink in cautious sips. "That's better," he said after a long moment. "Thank you," he added, adoration in his hollow eyes as he looked back up. His next words were the naked words of the very ill. "When you were gone out there just now, you left so cheerfully even though the dragon might be waiting for you. I was just thinking again, Edward, what a wonderful brother you are. I love you so much!"

It was the truth, and a cry for consolation. Ed immediately leaned over him to gently hold him close. A healing tenderness passed between their hearts. Ed pressed his face to his brother's hair, inhaling his special, familiar scent. "Thanks, Alphonse. I love you too."

"This is what I missed the most, Ed, when I was in the armor," Al whispered. "It was so lonely in there. I couldn't feel your skin. I couldn't smell you. Nothing seemed real."

"You don't have to be lonely like that ever again, Al." Ed's voice was faint, the profound tenderness he felt for his brother stealing his very breath. They clung to one another silently.

After awhile Edward eased Alphonse back down onto his pillows with a reluctant sigh. "How's your stomach now? Want me to get you some egg white?"

"Better. Yes, please," Al said quietly. Ed noted with satisfaction that he seemed to be much calmer.

Edward went back to the kitchen and broke one of the large brown eggs, carefully pouring out the white into the cup before mixing it with a little more milk. He took this back to his brother. "Just take a deep breath and drink it down slowly," he said encouragingly, and Al did so.

"Feeling better?"

"A little."

Ed rearranged Al's pillows, propping him up a bit higher. "You're looking real sleepy, brother," he said. "Try and have a nap now. Do you need to piss or anything?"

"No."

Ed sat in the wicker chair beside his brother for only a few minutes before Al was fast asleep. Then he got up and found a towel in the nearby bathroom. Quietly he mopped up the water from the floor.
He swept up the glass from the window he’d shattered into a neat, out-of-the-way pile, drew the curtains over the open window, and blocked the draft with a spare pillow. Then he stole from the room, leaving the door a little ajar, and began to explore the house.
A Safe Haven

Chapter Summary

While Envy hunts for the Elric brothers, Al continues his recuperation at Winnifred's house.

I.

Ed’s suspicions proved to be right—Winnifred, her parents and grandmother were not currently living in their Munich house. The building was done up as neat as a holiday package, with all the linens stored away or folded neatly on the beds, the curtains drawn, no perishable foods left in the kitchen, and the compact heating stove cold and dead. Ed knew that he and Al had been incredibly lucky to find such a haven at the moment they needed it most, and he thought kindly of Al’s kittens and how they had brought them to this place.

The house was not overly large. It had two storeys, with the upstairs all bedrooms and storage. The downstairs consisted of a great room, two closets, a small but well-appointed library, Winnifred’s bedroom, a bathroom with a water closet and a clawfoot tub, and of course the spacious kitchen and pantry.

Once Edward was done checking out the house, he returned to Al’s side, where he lay quietly. Exhaustion was heavy on his limbs, but he could not relax. The bedroom had two windows, one of them facing the street and the other inward, toward the small garden. He’d opened the curtain on this one partway to watch the weather. As the sun rose slowly through the morning hours, the sky became darker rather than lighter. The wind died down a little, but it was replaced by an ominous, oppressive atmosphere.

Alphonse seemed comatose. Several times Ed found himself in a panic as he looked for some sign that his brother was still alive. Al’s face and hands were as white as the bed linens, his skin was cool, and his breathing was so shallow that Ed had to hold Winnifred’s hand mirror to his lips to detect his exhalations. Now and then Ed spoke to him softly to let him know he was there, and he was careful to turn him every so often.

Edward thought about Envy, and wondered at the depth of his hatred. The dragon seemed to hate him as much as Alphonse loved him, almost as though, in some mysterious way, these two powerful forces of nature balanced each other, with Ed in the middle. But how had their half-brother’s simalcrum succeeded so well in duping Al? Edward was sure the culprit was Envy, but Al had insisted that what he’d seen was their father. Why hadn’t Envy killed him on the spot? Had it somehow really been Hohenheim? But then, why the poison? Edward sighed heavily. He turned his head on the pillow and closed his eyes.

When he woke, a steady downpour was making a small waterfall cascade from the roof in front of
the garden window. The sky was a thunderous gray. Edward sat up slowly. Al’s condition had not changed; Ed got up, making his way around the bed so he could reposition his brother.

His leg socket had not stopped throbbing, and he decided that he had better take care of it while he had the opportunity. If for some reason they had to clear out of here fast, Al’s fate, and his own, would depend on that socket.

He’d found a pair of adjustable crutches in the attic and a package of Epsom salts in a cabinet in the bathroom. Drawing some water in a cooking pot, he warmed it on the gas stove and made a strong soaking solution. He double-checked that the outside doors were locked, made sure all the curtains were completely closed so passersby could not see that the house was occupied, and then removed his trousers and sat on a stool in the dining area. He unlocked his leg prosthesis, laying it on the floor. Then he carefully examined the permanent socket, prying out the keypins that held the outer housing in place and lifting it off. He was truly vulnerable now, with no way to run or fight.

Using the table and stool as his supports, he slowly slid down to rest on his remaining knee on the tile floor, lowering his aching stump into the pot. The hot Epsom salts made him groan silently with relief. He’d been in enough pain from his leg lately to realize that he might need someone to remove and replace the worn socket. It was not a job that the Elrics could do; in fact, there was only one person who could. “Winry,” he muttered, and felt an unexpected pang.

* * *

After he finished soaking his stump, Edward found himself in a state of utter exhaustion. His brief sleep had not been enough. He could barely get up on the crutches, which were a little too tall for him even on the shortest setting, but somehow he made it into the bedroom, where he pulled off his shirt, crawled under the covers and was out immediately. The time for worry was past. Whatever happened now, he had done his best.

Edward slept soundly until early that afternoon, when he woke suddenly to Al’s agonized retching. He was sitting up, bent double over the enamel basin. Edward murmured in sympathy, rubbing his shoulder blades as he choked and spat. His stomach seemed bloated, but nothing came up except a little froth, and the spasms left him shaking and helpless.

“Ed,” he gasped. “I’m sorry. It hurts so bad. I think I’m going to die.”

“If you only think you’re dying, then you aren’t,” Edward said, with a certainty he did not feel at all. He reached for the glass of water still sitting on the nightstand and offered it as a rinse, then gently wiped Al’s mouth with his handkerchief. “You drank dragon’s blood and hurt yourself. Now you have to be patient and let yourself heal. OK, baby brother?” he finished tenderly.

Al, tearful, could barely nod. Exhausted, he leaned into his brother. Ed held him in his arms like their mother used to do, humming his favorite lullaby, and Al wept quietly until he finally subsided into a restless stupor.

Edward sat still, watching him doze as he mentally reviewed the texts he’d read on standard treatments. Medicine was a fairly recent interest of his, one gained in the Earth world as a substitute for alchemy, and he had never expected what he had learned to be put on trial like this. Still, two things were certain: Al was probably going to get worse, Edward thought grimly, before he got better—if he ever got better at all—and he, Edward, was not qualified to make decisions regarding his care.

But they had no options. Envy was near; he was biding his time, waiting for them to make a mistake.
Even if Ed managed to escape him a third time and find help—as if anyone here knew how to cure what ailed his brother—he’d seen firsthand the firefight Envy had survived before, when the Thule Society had captured him. Nothing short of a specialized paramilitary unit could fend off the huge dragon long enough to get Al safely out. They were trapped in the house.

II.

"What you know is what I know, Sciezka." Winry sat at a library table in Central, leaning on her elbows, staring at the desktop. "I didn't learn a lot about the other world, only that it exists and Ed couldn't get out. He wasn't with us even long enough to have a decent conversation before he went back, remember? But whatever it's like, they don't belong there. They belong here... With me. And now Al might be dead." Her voice broke on the last two words and she closed her eyes miserably.

"Of course they belong here," said Sciezka in commiseration. "And I refuse to believe Alphonse has died. But it's up to us to bring them back again." She turned briskly to a stack of books she had ready at her elbow. "You'll want to start with Machine Alchemy. It's a rare gift. You're doing it already, of course, you just don't know it. These books will speed you up a hundredfold. Also, I think you'll need to brush up on your physics-- just one primer, it's right here-- and there's something new called Quantum Theory you need to check out. That's this one." Gently she pushed the volumes in Winry's direction. "I know you can do it," she said softly. "You already have most of the skills. And just as importantly, you love them, and your love will carry you through this. But I do see one obvious problem."

Winry lifted her head again, blinking away tears. "What's that?"

"Money. Materials. You could spend the whole Rockbell fortune and not scratch what you'll need to build a project of this magnitude. You want to construct an artificial version of the Gate between the worlds. To bend reality like that, well, I don't have any idea about how to do it, but the device is going to be huge and you can bet it's going to take loads of power. You need funding."

"I know that. And I think I know the man who can arrange it." Winry's eyes narrowed a little in determination.

"If you're thinking of Roy Mustang, you can't!" Sciezka said hastily, holding up her hands. "It's his job to make sure no Gate is ever opened again. If the military catches you trying to do that, they'll arrest you as a terrorist and take you away to one of those horrible secret prisons. We might never see you again!"

"Do you have a better idea?"

"No," the librarian admitted.

"Roy killed my mom and dad," Winry said bluntly. "He owes me more than he can ever pay back. And he owes Edward, for taking advantage of him. If there is a shred of decency in him, he will help me now."

"I wouldn't bring up his relationship with Edward," Sciezka said.

"Why? Do you know more about it than me?"

"Don't be irritable. I'm trying to help you."
"Oh, Sciezka..." Winry slumped down to rest her head on her arms. "Sometimes it seems like building a Gate is the least of my problems."

"I don't understand, Winry. What could be more difficult than trying to build a Gate?"

Winry drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. For a long time she said nothing. Sciezka patiently kept quiet, only caressing her shoulder with one hand while flipping through a book with the other.

"You've kept secrets for me before," Winry said at length, sitting upright. "Maybe you will again."

"Of course I will." Sciezka closed the book and turned to face her. "After all, we girls have to stick together." And she smiled a winning smile that elicited a faint echo of it in her friend.

"OK. Once I get Ed and Al back, Sciezka—if Al is even still alive-- that's when the rest of the trouble starts. You see--" she blushed suddenly, glancing away-- "I'm going to marry one of them some day."

Sciezka's eyes grew huge. "Oh!" she said, as if the thought hadn't ever crossed her mind.

Winry looked back at her quickly. "Is it that much of a surprise?"

"Well-- No, not really," the girl stuttered. "After all, they're your best friends, right?" She leaned forward on both elbows, resting her chin on her hands. "Which one is it?"

Winry laughed a little, but there was no humor behind it. "That's the problem. For the life of me, I can't choose between them."

"Well. Don't you think they'll have something to say about that?"

"I don't want them fighting over me, Sciezka. They used to, you know. Back when our moms were alive, they had the most awful fights over which of them was going to marry me. I remember one real battle they had. Both of them crying and screaming and throwing rocks at each other. Eventually they got into a fistfight and rolled right into the nettles by the pond. That stopped them in a hurry!"

She gazed away into nowhere. "I was so mad that they were being so stupid, I told them I was never going to marry either one of them and that was that."

Sciezka chuckled a little. "Sensible girl."

"You know," Winry continued quietly, "After seeing what's happened to them— the failed human transmutation, Al being imprisoned in armor and Ed finally disappearing... After having to see Alphonse cry so many times for Edward in his sleep, and then make that terrible jump across the Gate to be with him— it's all so precious. I'm so afraid, Sciezka, that I'm going to ruin that. And yet... I've waited all my life for them. It would feel so wrong for me to walk away now, I don't think I could bear it."

Sciezka blinked. "Winry..."

But Winry shook herself suddenly and looked embarrassed. "Don't pay me any attention. I'm just talking nonsense here. After all, I've got to get them home first!"

"Now that would be my advice," Sciezka said sagely, patting her hand. "Worry about the technical stuff now and let the rest fall where it may. Who knows? Maybe this will all sort itself out somehow. After all, look at Roy and Edward. Maybe Ed just isn't into girls any more."

"Oh, I can't believe Edward started that nonsense," Winry said sharply. "What a joke— to think Roy
"Mustang could really fall in love with him."

"It does happen, you know."

"Mustang doesn’t have a heart to fall in love with. And I’ve never seen a convincing case of two boys or two girls really in love. I think that kind of thing is just a big-city fairy tale."

"Well, what about Ed and Al?"

Winry looked startled. "What do you mean?"

"They’re in love. You were just talking about it."

"But-- Sciezka! Not like *that*! That’s disgusting!"

"No, not *like that,* but love is love."

"Are you kidding me?!" Winry’s face colored.

"Never mind," the librarian said, a little tiredly. "I just wanted you to be prepared in case Edward wasn’t interested in marrying you."

Winry snorted. "Of course he is!"

"--Or you’ll hit him with your wrench!" They both grinned at the thought. Then Sciezka sobered. "Sounds to me like you’ve already made your choice."

Winry rose from the table without replying to her statement. "There’s no point in me putting this off. I’m going to see Roy first thing in the morning."

"Don’t forget your books. Please stop by soon and tell me how it went."

III.

“Al!” Edward said desperately as his brother heaved and heaved. “Don’t choke yourself!” But at last an immense quantity of foul, putrid vomit went everywhere—basin, Ed, floor. *Everything* was coming up, even bits of fecal matter and things Al had eaten days before, and Edward realized his guts were no longer working.

After this new ordeal Alphonse lay utterly spent, retching and gasping but in much less pain. Edward knelt at his side, holding his hand as he tenderly wiped down his face and neck with a soft damp washcloth, pressing its soothing, cool folds to his brother’s forehead. He didn’t know how much more of this either of them could take.

He felt Al’s abdomen, listening to it carefully. It was no longer dangerously bloated, but there were no sounds except for his breathing and his pounding heart, which kept kicking into and out of an abnormal rhythm.

“Al?” he repeated, taking his hand again. It was cold and clammy. “Alphonse? You should be feeling better now.”

Alphonse swallowed, squeezing his fingers a little before tearfully murmuring something that
Edward could barely hear—something about being human.

“Al!” Ed said urgently, knowing immediately what was in his brother’s mind. “You wouldn’t be human again if it were against the laws of Nature! Being human isn’t what made you so sick!”

“Just make it stop, Ed,” Al pleaded in a weak whisper. “Please make it stop!”

“It will stop. It will. But you’ve got to stop thinking this is some kind of punishment!”

“I hate this body, Ed! I don’t want to be human any more!”

Edward leaned to place a gentle hand on either side of his face, holding him so he had to meet his eyes. “Don’t,” he said urgently. “If you hate your body, you’ll die, and where will that leave me? When it hurts the worst, that’s the time you have to love it the most, Al. Can’t you do that? Can’t you love yourself? For me?”

Alphonse said nothing. Sitting by his side, Edward thought wistfully of their little doctor friend, languishing in prison at the edge of the forest. “Oh, Al.” Ed leaned forward, resting wearily on the bed. “We’re in over our heads. I wish Siegfried was here. I wish I’d just turned us in when I had the chance!”

Alphonse slowly moved so that his head just touched his brother’s. “I’m sorry, Ed. It hurt so bad I forgot,” he whispered weakly.

“Forgot what, little brother?”

“To not be afraid.”

“That’s OK,” Edward replied tenderly.

“I do feel better now.” Al rested briefly before whispering, “You’re doing a good job.”

“I’m glad you think so, but right now I feel pretty much like I’m messing with your life,” Ed said, tears suddenly threatening to spill. “This is so wrong. I wish Winry were here!”

“Don’t—be—afraid,” Al said. He paused to catch Ed’s eye, then added, with difficulty, “Even if I die, it’s still OK, brother. I’ll know you did your best.”

* * *

Al spent the rest of that terrible night trying to rest between desperate bouts of pain and nausea. Despite Edward delivering small amounts of a hydration solution by enema over the course of the long hours, he wasn’t sure if his brother was absorbing enough liquid to replace everything he’d lost. He was very worried about it, and when he managed to finally catch a brief nap, he indicated as much to Winry, who seemed to be listening intently on the Gate’s far side. Al had stopped urinating, too. Ed wondered if he didn’t have any water to spare, or if the poison had shut down his kidneys. Winry had just given urgent instructions to him—a conversation taken place in the blink of an eye—when someone else spoke up nearby. It was a kindly voice, well known and much loved.

“Maybe you’re trying too hard again, Ed.”

“Alfons?!” Even in the dream, Edward couldn’t believe it. Heiderich had materialized out of nowhere, his face serious as he reached for him. They embraced. Knowing that his lover was a
ghost, Ed was shocked to find he could hold him in his arms. “Alfons,” he whispered. “You’re all right!”

Heiderich smiled tenderly, taking his upturned face in his hands. He looked vital and happy and, ironically, more full of life than he had ever looked during the time Ed had known him in the physical world. “Yes. I’m all right. We all are. Even poor Alphonse there. It’s all just a story. A game. A way to pass eternity. So relax a little.” He kissed Ed gently on the lips. “That’s what I came to tell you.”

His depression evaporating into joy, Edward was just leaning into him when his chest began to burn. It was a familiar sensation and he grabbed the activation key. The contact gave him such a jolt that he rushed headlong into the waking world, leaving Heiderich and Winry far behind.

* * *

Winry had been asleep in her hotel room in Central when they appeared to her. She opened a door and there were Ed and Al, sitting and lying, respectively, on her front porch steps. In the dream she rushed to help Alphonse, but as before, her hands went right through his body. She swore roundly and turned to Edward. He was sitting slumped over, his hair hanging loose around his face. “Ed?” she said, but the look in his eyes, when he finally turned to her, took her breath away.

Alphonse lay unconscious in the surgery. “Ed,” Winry said. “What’s happening now--?” and his memories flashed past them like boxcars on a train.

A huge green beast loomed suddenly overhead and she screamed. Stirring in her sleep, she realized lucidly that she was hearing a locomotive whistle. She rolled over and reached for Edward, trying to gain his attention again. He turned halfway toward her. “Dragon’s blood,” he said clearly. Then, startled, he looked past her. “Alfons? Alfons!”

She thought he was addressing his brother, but in the next instant someone else was there, rushing into the scene. “Ed.” His eyes were blue and his hair was a lighter blond, and he was older, but his face and features were otherwise identical to Alphonse Elric. To her utter disbelief he and Edward embraced and began shamelessly kissing right before her eyes. Then something hanging around Ed’s neck seemed to distract him. He grabbed it, his attention shifted, and the nightmare dissolved.

Winry woke up in a state of shock. Her mouth was dry but her stomach churned. “It wasn’t Alphonse,” she whispered to herself. “It was just a dream.” But she knew as she spoke that it was real, and that this young man, so eerily resembling Edward’s brother, was his lover in that mysterious other world.

* * *

Edward sat up with a great gasp. It was early morning. He didn’t know how long he’d been asleep, but his world was spinning. Something was happening with the Thule Gate. Beside him, Alphonse groaned. He was still wearing the Flamel cross, and as Edward watched, his shaking hands drifted upward, grasping the pendant.

Ed sat there in the bed, drawing his knees into his chest and wrapping his arms around them. The stench of vomit still soured the air, but it wasn’t the only reason he felt sick. Something was happening, something important, and it could involve not just them, not just the Society, but all of
Amestris. The ideology he’d come to during his last days in his homeland, that of the good of the many versus the few, tugged at him painfully; but reality was reality. There was no way he could leave his brother now, even for a few minutes. Alphonse would have observed that the most important factor was not that he couldn’t leave, but that he didn’t want to.

“Ed…”

He started. “Yeah, Al.”

Very slowly and painfully, Al rolled a little toward him, clutching the cross. “Something’s going on.” His voice was faint and weak. “Ed. I can see it.” His breathing quickened. “They’re flying it to a mountaintop!”

Ed lay a hand on his arm. “Don’t worry about it. Don’t even think about it, you’re wasting energy. Here.” He gently took the pendant out of his brother’s hand and pulled the leather string over his head. “I want you to put all of that out of your mind. You have enough to occupy you without worrying about that stupid Gate.”

“But—Amestris…”

“Leave everything to me. I’ll tell Winry to warn Roy. As for us, as long as we’re alive, we’ll always have another chance. Besides, they’re probably not doing anything with the Gate today besides moving it. It could take them ages to get it perfectly realigned. Right?”

“I guess.”

“Don’t worry, Al. How’s your stomach? Is it any better?”

Al’s face crumpled. “Are you kidding me?”

“I’m sorry. I bet your throat’s sore, too.”

“Just help me sit up. I’m bloating again.”

Edward bent to lift him slowly to a sitting position. Once upright, Al drew long, careful breaths, bending dizzily forward over his arm. Edward leaned lightly over him, caressing him and gently massaging his belly until he relaxed enough to belch several times. At last he sighed with relief. His stomach was so sore that he couldn’t straighten his spine.

“I was just talking to Winry in a dream, Al. She told me what you have is ‘acute gastric dilatation with ileus and possible volvulus.’”

“Oh.” Al didn’t look very happy at this information.

“She said your gut stopped working from the shock of the poison, and all the crap in your intestines is just sitting there, putrefying inside you. She said you saved your own life by being sick again, and that all this is perfectly normal.”

Edward didn’t add what else he knew—that only time would tell if Al’s guts had suffered blood starvation from the swelling, in which case he could suffer internal gangrene and die a horrible death. Edward squelched this hideous thought instantly; one could read too much. It was going to be a difficult enough trial without worrying about things they couldn’t help.

Al couldn’t look more haggard. “How long is this going to last? Did she say?”
“No.” Straightening up again, Ed leaned sideways to look closely into his brother’s drawn face. He had never imagined Alphonse could look so terrible; his skin was white, his eyes were as hollow as death, and he was trembling with weakness and fear. Ed put his hand on Al’s cheek and stroked it gently, turning his face so their eyes met. “Al,” he said. “I’ll be by your side.”

Alphonse drew himself painfully straighter. “Don’t worry. It’s going to be all right, Ed,” he replied bravely. “No matter what.”

Edward held him close as they lay slowly down together. Alphonse pressed his face into the loving warmth of his brother’s chest, shutting out everything else, even his own pain. Ed felt that his whispered platitudes and kisses were inadequate comfort, but they seemed to help; after a time Al ceased trembling and began to relax, his eyes slowly growing heavy-lidded.

At last Ed removed the activation key and its string from around his neck and lay it next to Al’s pendant on the bedside stand. It felt like he was removing all his responsibility for Amestris, even though he knew it was not so.

Alphonse stirred a little. “Ed—?”

“I’m right beside you.” Edward turned him a little so he was lying more comfortably. “Here’s my hand, brother. Don’t let go.”

IV.

The clouds rolled past; two days and two nights came and went almost unnoticed as Alphonse lay desperately ill. During that time Edward felt something profound happening to him. It was similar to the revelation that had come to him back in Amestris, before he had died, when he reached the realization that all humans, everywhere, were his brothers and sisters; but it was different, too. This epiphany was wordless; he could not quantify what was happening with any concise phrase; but where previously the world had stood before him like the Gate itself, almost overwhelming him, it seemed now to be pulling away, so that it hovered in his consciousness like a globe on a distant shelf. It no longer concerned him. For this moment, he had become a one-pointed being, his only purpose in existence to serve his brother—his one true God—with a devotion and dedication above and beyond anything he had ever known. He felt it burning in his heart and knew he was being consumed, and he gave himself to it completely.

As he sat beside his brother day in and day out, Edward did not feel his own exhaustion. He had no room for it. When he was not caring for Al, he cleaned up, laundering linens in the tub, scrubbing the floor, and propping open the garden-side window to air out the room. Despite the pain it harbored, a strange peace lay over the house; it seemed as if they were surrounded by an invisible protection, giving them the time and space they needed for Al’s healing. Still, if Ed so much as looked out the kitchen door, Envy’s lingering presence collided with his sixth sense in a rush. He didn’t understand the ‘safe zone’ they’d found themselves in, but he accepted it without question.

***

On the third day of their stay at Winnifred’s, heavy clouds turned into a dark, oppressive afternoon. Edward was using some of Siegfried’s equipment to inject a sterile homemade hydration solution in
pockets under Al’s skin. Al’s bowels were inflamed from the remaining traces of the poison, and he had no tolerance left for the brief hydration enemas they had used during the first day and night; Edward had had to improvise diapers out of spare linens, changing and bathing him like an infant in his helplessness.

Being under Winry’s supervision—however distant—had made Ed more confident in performing the intense nursing that was vital to support his brother’s recovery; still, none of it was easy for him. He worked as carefully and steadily as ever, choosing his sites thoughtfully and gently massaging the liquid in, but Alphonse flinched at each puncture, cursing his brother and weeping in his weakness—though when Edward was finished he reached out to him in a feeble attempt at thanks.

Ed held his hand, silently and apologetically. Al was showing no new signs of illness; but he was not pleased to see his hands and feet were beginning to swell slightly as toxins built up in his body. He was still not urinating enough, and what did come out was a strange dark color; proof enough to Edward that the dragon’s blood had affected his kidneys along with everything else. At least he was no longer dangerously dehydrated, Edward thought with a bit of satisfaction.

Finally beginning to feel his own exhaustion and depletion, he lay down beside his brother with a huge sigh, closing his eyes. As he did, he seemed to hear something familiar in the distance, like a snake slithering over a stone.

* * *

“Winry!” Edward was banging on the door, but she wouldn’t let him in. Solid objects were no detriment to dreams, and he saw her clearly, huddled on the opposite side, her face in her hands as she sobbed.

He hardened his jaw and broke the lock with his automail, shoving into the room. The tone of voice he used was like nothing he’d ever dared to use with her before. “Winry. Stop that!”

“Oh, Edward. How could you? I thought you loved me.”

They stood at the window. “I loved him too,” Ed said, picturing Heiderich.

He was chasing her through the big orchard high on the hill. Oddly enough, he remembered that some of those trees were still standing. There was a yellow cherry tree on the edge of the field. She ran to hide behind it. He followed. For some reason his live hand went right through her, but he managed to catch and restrain her with the arm that she had made for him. She struggled so violently that he thought he might hurt her, but he didn’t let go. “Face it, Winry,” he growled.

They were in one of the nightclubs Ed had gone to in Berlin. Catcalls and whistles followed them across the room, but most of them were directed at him, not her. Winry looked around in complete disbelief. Then they were back in the orchard. She tried to strike him across the face. Her fist met nothing and she fell to her knees. “I hate you, Edward Elric!”

“Stop fighting!” It was Al. He was sitting on the surgery floor, downcast and miserable. “Both of you. Just help me.” His voice was very weak. Horrified at themselves, they stared at each other openmouthed.

* * *
It was early evening; the moon was rising. Edward woke with an abrupt start, climbing quickly but quietly out of the bed.

Al stirred at his movement. “Ed? What’s wrong?”

“Damn. I must have slept for hours! Don’t you have to piss?”

Al’s eyes seemed a little brighter, and he smiled slowly from his pillow at his brother’s single-minded anxiety. “No.”

“Come on. I bet you really have to and you’re just embarrassed.”

“I’m—not-- embarrassed.” Al uttered every word with effort; it seemed that his whole body hurt, or else his awareness of it had improved.

“But you haven’t gone all day.” Ed retrieved the much-abused basin from the nightstand and placed it in Al’s hands. “Here.”

Resigned, Al slid the pan under the covers. “OK,” he said a minute later. “It’s not a lot.”

Ed took the pan with dismay, holding it near the candlelight. “No, it’s not.” Recovering his composure for the sake of his brother, he said, “Well, let me just go dump this and then I’ll go sterilize everything again; we need to try and get you a little more hydration.” Taking his single crutch under his left arm, Ed picked up the pan with his right and maneuvered one-legged through the door with the skill of long practice. As Al waited for him to return, he heard the wind starting to blow outside.

* * *

Ed finally crawled back into bed with a tired sigh at midnight. “Al, I checked the Orichalcum again and it’s still dead. Whatever they were doing with the Gate, they haven’t used it since.”

“Why is Winry so mad at you?” The question came unexpectedly.

“What?”

“In your dream. I heard you fighting and went to look.”

“Oh.” Edward sighed. “I was kind of mean to her. I told her some things I didn’t have to.”

Al rolled slowly to face him. Even that small movement caused him pain and he clutched at his belly as his internal organs settled. In the near-darkness, his large grey eyes were fathomless. “Why?”

“I saw Alfon Heiderich. He told me something really wonderful, but I can’t remember what it was. He kissed me, I kissed him, and she saw us and threw a big fit over it.”

“Oh.” Al seemed satisfied with his brief explanation. His eyes began to drift shut. “I’ve seen him, too,” he whispered. “In the church. He waved at me.”

Recognizing Al’s half-realized jealousy, Ed shifted himself up on one elbow and leaned to press his lips with great tenderness to his brother’s forehead and cheek. Al’s skin tasted of sickness and suffering. “These kisses are best,” he assured him in a confidential whisper, and added, “Brothers are better than lovers any day. Want to know why?”

“Why?” Al whispered.
“Because the hottest lovers are never completely altruistic. It’s really a business deal. The knight rescues the princess and takes her to bed. There’s something cold about it-- it’s only a trick of nature. But brothers help each other with no thought of things like that. No one else can ever take your place in my heart, Al, because there is no higher love.”

Al brightened so happily at this that it seemed all his pain had momentarily left him, and Edward knew he’d said the right thing. He went to sleep again feeling better about himself, but a pall was still cast on his slumber. He found himself wandering a labyrinth, searching for Winry behind every door, but no one else was there.

V.

Rain was falling again the next morning. The wind had gone, but it was pouring buckets. Ponds had formed in the streets and the gutters had turned into rivers.

Alphonse woke his brother by talking in his sleep. Ed lay for a moment and listened before sitting up. It sounded like a fragmented, one-sided conversation, and he wondered if Al was talking with Winry or a spirit entity, or if he’d gone delerious again. Al opened his eyes when he touched his shoulder.

“Are you talking to someone?” Ed said.

Al smiled. “I just saw Nina and Alexander!”

Not knowing what to make of this, Ed felt his brow. It was warm, but not too hot. “I’m glad. You look better, Al. How’s your stomach?”

“Better, like you say! It’s even growling a little. Listen.”

Ed leaned to put his ear to Al’s belly and smiled. “Hey! It’s starting to work again, Al! Do you feel hungry?”

“No. But I’m a little thirsty.”

Ed went out and soft-boiled three eggs for himself while making a little clear broth from some dried bouillon he’d found in the pantry. He ate quickly in the kitchen so Al wouldn’t have to watch, then took a little teacup of the broth to his brother. “Winry wants me to give you more electrolytes, of course. The stuff in this fits the bill.” He helped Al sit up and gave him the cup, then went back out and returned again with a large glass of milk. He pulled up a chair to the bedside, sat down, and, to his brother’s astonishment, grimly drank all the milk down in a single breath.

“Wow,” Al said weakly.

Ed put the empty glass down firmly on the bedside stand and crossed his arms. It was a challenge. “Your turn.”

Al sipped at the teacup, a little at a time. “It’s good. But it’s too warm. It’s hurting my stomach, Ed.”

“Let it cool a bit and then try it again. Do you feel up to talking a little?”

“Yeah. I guess.”
“OK. Can you tell me what happened? How you met Envy, and why you did such an incredibly dumbass thing as drinking that stuff?”

Al carefully leaned on his pillows. “I didn’t drink his blood. It was in capsules. That’s why I didn’t taste it. And I told you already. It wasn’t Envy I met. It was Dad.”

Ed sat quiet as his brother gave a brief description of what had happened with Rose, his jumping out of the car and wandering the streets, and his finding the old church. At this part of the story Ed began asking about the details, gently probing Al’s memory. “You say he used alchemy to make that stuff?”

“Yeah. Bottle and all.” Al rolled slowly to one side so he could sip at the broth.

“Didn’t that strike you as kind of strange, brother?”

“It did. But he said there was a reason we couldn’t do it.”

“What reason?”

“Because he was half dead, between the worlds, and we weren’t.” Alphonse finished the cup, but he couldn’t lean to put it on the stand. “Ed, can I have a little milk?”

Ed took the cup. “Not yet. Remember what happened last time. Al, you saw our father in human shape, but it was dragon’s blood that almost killed you, and then he attacked us in dragon form. Remember how you said Envy’s presence felt like Dad’s? How is he changing shape like that?”

Al frowned. “You act like you don’t believe me. Maybe he didn’t change shape. Maybe it really was Dad.”

“How can that be? I saw Envy devour him with my own eyes!”

They sat thoughtfully silent for a moment. Then Ed leaned to touch his arm. “Just let it go. It doesn’t matter anyway.”

“But it does.” Al was suddenly looking very tired and fragile. “Because it was Dad.”

* * *

The day went by very slowly. Al’s brief period of lucidity in the morning slowly gave way to a dream-state, and he began speaking with the various spirits passing through. Ed offered more broth to him throughout the day, and finally dared to give him a small piece of plain bread, and he was able to consume it. When Edward put his ear to his brother’s belly, he clearly heard sounds of digestion; but Al still wasn’t urinating as he should, and his hands and feet were swollen.

By that evening, the unusual rain was finally abating. Edward ransacked the pantry again and came up with more flour. He made himself yet another pancake and offered Alphonse more broth and bread. Then he washed the dishes. He did not dare to use any of the household lights, just one small candle, and as night slowly closed down over them, the house was cold and dark. He had accumulated a surprising pile of crockery and he spent half an hour washing it, drying it and putting it away. He was slowed considerably by being on crutches that didn’t fit him, but he didn’t want to put his leg prosthesis back on yet. He had stored the mechanical limb under Winnifred’s bed.

By the time he was done with the dishes and with tidying up the kitchen, it was so dark he couldn’t
see much at all except where the flickering moonlight, teased by the fast moving clouds, shone through the thin lace kitchen curtains. He was cold from using unheated dishwater and by the time he finally went to Winnifred’s room, he was shivering. He felt his way to the bed, speaking softly to his brother so as not to startle him. He pushed his clothes under the bed with his prosthesis and scrambled in.

Al was awake again. He spoke in a whisper in the dark. “There’s a ghost in this house.”

“Yeah?”

“I think he talks to Winnifred a lot.”

“She’s friends with ghosts?”

“Looks like it. He’s a little scary.”

“That’s something, coming from a Spirit Alchemist like yourself.”

“He likes to just sit there and stare.”

“Oh.” Ed shuddered.

Al turned a little toward him. “There’s some stuff I should tell you, Ed. I’ve learned something important.”

Edward wrapped himself in a tight ball under the goose down comforter. “All right.”

Al paused for a moment, resting and gathering his thoughts. “It’s like this. Spirits work a little differently in this world than in ours. At least the animal spirits do. Beauty’s showed me the way back through the original Gate to Amestris.”

“She has?” Ed was startled.

“Yep. So if I ever do die here, I don’t want you to cry too much. I’m just heading right back home.”

“Don’t say that, Al.”

“I’ll try and reincarnate there in a form you would recognize, OK? And I’ll do my best to guide you back, even if you have to live a lifetime first. But you’ll have to watch for me in your dreams. It could take me awhile to show up, but I promise I will.”

“OK. That really is good to know.”

The brothers were both silent and thoughtful for several minutes. Then Edward spoke quietly. “Al? Do you still think I’m crazy?”

“I think you’re getting a lot better.”

“Really?”

“I really do. I think being around Siegfried helped you somehow. And my being sick seems to have done something for you, too. Made you focus.”

“Poor Siggy. I hope he and Russell are OK.”

“I know. I miss him.”
“He’s one of the best friends we’ve ever made, isn’t he, Al?”

“Yeah.”

Another silence ensued.

“Ed. I just had a horrible thought. Did we lose that blueprint?”

"Yes. But it’s OK.” Ed rolled over. “Stop thinking so much, Al. You need more rest.”

VI.

Al woke again in the middle of the night in a very different mood, disoriented from a strange nightmare about dragons fighting giant bees. He babbled about it at length, repeating how real it had seemed and how terrifying it was, how his skin had been stung and everything went dizzy and black. As he tried to soothe and caress Al back to sleep, Ed thought that his brother’s body seemed overly hot, the surface of his limbs too rough. When he stroked Al’s skin, it made a faint papery sound like the slithering of a snake.

Startled by the turn of his own thoughts, Edward suddenly froze, the hair on the nape of his neck standing on end. “Al. Do you sense something?”

Alphonse struggled up on one elbow. “It’s Envy. He’s here.”

Ed swore softly.

“Get your leg on,” Al said.

“I can’t. It’s too late.” Ed pointed toward the window. He had boarded it up the previous day with some wood he’d found in the basement. Now a faint green glow could be seen between the cracks as something slid slowly past.

“Don’t talk,” Al whispered in his ear. Ed could feel his brother’s heart shaking his frame as Al clung to him. He put his arms around him protectively and they huddled together silently in the dark, watching and listening. The rain had abated and it seemed that they could hear the huffing of a great breath just outside. Then it paused. Ed held his own breath as a snuffling began on the other side of the wall. Soon it was replaced by a scratching sound.

“He’s trying to dig his way in,” Al breathed. Ed nodded.

Then the digging stopped. Envy made a snort of frustration and backed off. The green glow disappeared from the window.

“Now what was that about?” Edward slid quickly out of bed, rummaging quietly for his leg and socket housing. “Damn. I put the cotter pins on the kitchen windowsill.”

“Put it on anyway,” Al said softly. “I think I can walk that far to get them.”

“It’s too dark. Just wait here.” Edward sat on the floor, his stump extended in front of him as he wrestled with the housing. Snapping it on over the screws, he inserted the mechanical limb into its collar and locked it in place, ignoring the jolt of pain as the nerve harness connected. “I can walk on it, as long as I don’t knock the housing out of place.”
“What are you going to do?”

“Go get my pins. Watch that window, Alphonse.” Edward got to his feet, swaying a little at first. His stump felt better and he was able to put his weight on it.

“I’m coming with you.” Alphonse somehow slid out of bed—naked, bent double over his own arm, and staggering, his knees buckling with weakness. Ed paused briefly to wrap Winnifred’s pink chenille throw around him. “OK, I don’t blame you. Hang onto my arm and be careful.”

The house was pitch black and they had to feel their way along, passing through the open hallway and past the bathroom door. Ed’s skin was threatening to crawl right off his back by the time they reached the kitchen. He paused just outside the door, straining his senses, then pushed through, pausing again as he saw the dreaded green glow through the lace curtains. Al stumbled against him as he fell back a step.

“Shh. He’s out front.”

The brothers stood stock still, as if transfixed by the pale light of Envy’s phosphorescent scales. “He still doesn’t know for sure if we’re in here,” Al whispered.

“Looks like he’s following scent trails.” An idea struck Edward and he smiled grimly to himself. “If we can just hold out until tomorrow, I’ll leave him such a maze of tracks that he’ll never come back here again! Now, Alphonse, hold onto the doorframe and stand right here, if you can, while I get those pins.”

Swaying with weakness, Al looked back over his shoulder into the blackness. “I feel so heavy… The ghost is in the hallway.”

“Then invite him to the party.” Ed walked forward very quietly and cautiously, feeling with outstretched hands for the kitchen table. He had just made it to the window and had retrieved his keypins from the sill when several shots rang out in the yard. Cursing, he dropped to his knees, then sat on the floor, listening to a flurry and a rush of wind as Envy vanished into the night. He fumbled to quickly insert his pins, then started crawling on hands and knees back toward the hallway. He ran face first into the table leg, making noise, and swore again. Then he reached the door and got to his feet.

“There are lots of people out there,” Al said, nodding toward the window. Ed turned and was dismayed to see flashing lights. “Envy got careless,” he said. “Someone’s called the police. If there’s a neighbor or caretaker with a key, they might be wanting to check the place out. We’d better hide, Al.”

“The ghost wants us to follow him.”

“I’m gonna go get your blanket first. We might be hiding for awhile.”

Ed retrieved the blanket, trying to quickly arrange Winnifred’s room so it looked unused. He pulled the drapes as well as he could over the boarded window. There was nothing he could do about the kitchen ice box, but at least the dishes were all washed and put away.

Then Alphonse, walking unsteadily with his brother supporting most of his weight, led the way after the ghost. They ended up at the door leading to the cellar.

“I don’t like this,” Edward said doubtfully. There was a distant rattling in the direction of the living room. “I knew it!” he added. “Someone’s unlocking the front door. I guess we’ve got no choice.” He opened the basement.
The steps were steep, and there was only one handrail. They shut the door after themselves and Ed went down first, one step at a time, with Al following closely behind, hanging onto him with one hand and the rail with the other. Once they’d made it to the bottom, Al turned instinctively, still following the ghost. “This way.”

“But there’s nothing over there!”

“Yes there is. I’m getting a picture of a safe place.” Al was breathing heavily; walking was exhausting him. Noting this, Edward didn’t argue but pushed forward in the direction his brother indicated. Above their heads, they heard people in the living room area.

Ed stopped at a blank wall. Knocking on it softly, he was not surprised to hear that there was a space behind it. “You’re right as usual, little brother. Now how do we get in…?”

He felt around some molding in the dark until he found the latch, and the small door swung readily open. The brothers spilled into it.

Ed shut the door of the little room and quickly felt his way around it, disregarding caution. It was a bolt-hole, he realized, probably built during the previous World War as a safety precaution. There was a bench large enough to sleep on on one side, and he guided Alphonse there and made him sit down, holding his finger to his brother’s lips. He froze, still bending over him, as the footsteps came halfway down the cellar stairs. The little door was not fully shut and the beam of a torch swept over it, blinking through the crack.

“There’s nothing down here, Nana!” As the young woman ran back up the steps, Al let his breath out in a great sigh and slumped against his brother.

“That was close.” Ed unrolled the comforter and helped Al stand up again, spreading it beneath him and then settling him down on it. He hiked himself up on the bench next to him. “Lay your head in my lap, Al. We’re going to be here awhile.”

Alphonse lay down with another heavy sigh. “I’m so tired. I wonder if there are spiders in here.” Ed wrapped him warmly in the goose down. “I hope not. Surely there’s nothing for them to eat down here.” He paused, listening, as footsteps swarmed through the rest of the house. “They sure are on the hunt. Envy must have scared someone to death.” He smiled grimly, envisioning some housewife’s reaction to a dragon looking in her window.

“Ed? Did you leave my clothes laying where they’ll find them?”

“Nope. They’re under the bed. I’m just lucky I put away those dishes. They might overlook a cup on the dresser, but they never would’ve missed a full sink!”

Al settled in for a nap as they waited, and before long he was breathing evenly in deep sleep. Ed sat vigilant and alert long after the last set of footsteps had faded away. With the immediate danger past, he began to get much more uncomfortable with where they were hiding, and at last he gently woke his brother. “Hey Al. They’re gone.”

Al sat up slowly. “Oh. I was talking with that man.”

“You mean the ghost?”

“Oh huh. Boy, does he have a load of stuff to tell!” Al slid slowly off the bench as his brother hastily gathered up the blanket.
“You can fill me in after we get out of here, OK?” Ed pushed open the door and let them both out into the cellar proper. "Whew!” he said. “I was getting claustrophobic in there.”

“Winnifred’s family has been living in this house since before the World War. During it, they made that hiding place to shelter a sick man.” Al paused for a moment, then continued. “He was an American airman sent to fight in France, but he'd gotten stuck behind German lines. He died in this cellar only a few days before the end of the war.”

“Huh.” Ed carefully led the way through the thick blackness to the stairs, guiding Al’s hand to the rail as they began to climb. “I’m sorry to hear that, Al.”

“Even though he died, he was thankful there was someone here who wanted to protect him. So he’s made it his mission to guard and protect everyone who lives in this house. Even us. He repelled Envy several times already, and when he was trying to dig his way in too.” Al was panting as they climbed. “I told him our story and he promised to watch over us. We can go back to using Winnifred’s room as long as we’re here. He’ll definitely warn me if something’s not right.”

They made it to the top of the stairs and Ed opened the door cautiously, stepping out slowly. Al followed and stumbled. Ed managed to catch him halfway down and slowed his fall so he lit gently on his bottom. “You OK?”

“Yeah,” Al said sheepishly.

Momentarily leaving him seated on the floor, Edward went slowly around the great room, checking the door to make sure it was locked. After they settled Al back in Winnifred’s bed, Edward continued around the entire house before finally returning to his brother. Al was sound asleep by the time he climbed in again beside him.

Ed lay awake for another hour, listening intently to the abating storm and Al’s breathing before finally succumbing to exhaustion.

VII.

The next morning dawned bright and clear. Ed was up early, keeping a low profile in the kitchen as he cooked himself two more eggs. He was ravenously hungry, and determined that today he would go to the market with another of Rose’s coins.

Alphonse woke up half an hour later. “Ed!” he said with great excitement. “I just saw Nina and Alexander again! They’re OK! They know the way back too!”

Edward gave him a glass of chicken boullion and a piece of bread and Al was able to eat and drink with little difficulty. As he did, he told Ed more about their ghostly friend—his name, John Sampson, and that he had seen glimpses of more wars to come. “There’s a huge one going to happen soon,” Al said softly as he finished his broth. “He’s gone forward in time and seen it, Ed. There’s no stopping it.”

“I hope it’s not Huskisson’s doing.”

“Just like one person can’t save the world alone, one person can’t start a world war by themselves, either,” Al said philosophically.
Ed did not comment, but took his empty glass and substituted the enamel pan. “OK, brother. All I want right now is loads of clean yellow piss.”

“That’s not much to want.” Al worked on it as his brother took his glass back to the kitchen, but when Ed returned, all he had to show for his effort was a few ounces of coffee colored liquid. “That’s much better than nothing,” Ed said, taking it to dump. “Al,” he said as he came back into the room, “I’m going to have to go to the market today. Since Envy’s been scared off, it’s a good time. Is there anything you want?”

“Yeah. Some potatoes, if you can get them. I’d like to try a little potato soup.”

“Sounds like you’re getting even better. I’ll get some.” Ed bent to retrieve Al’s clothes from under the bed, then opened the bedroom closet to hang them up. “Winnifred’s left a ton of stuff here.”

“Let me see.”

Edward brought out a royal blue dress, trimmed with white lace. “Hey!” Al said. “She’s just your size!”

VIII.

"No." Roy said it flatly. "I can't help you with that, Winry."

"You owe me this, Roy Mustang," she said evenly through her teeth.

"I acknowledge that, on a personal level," he replied, walking around his desk. "I owe you that, and much more than that. But as a general in the military, I can't allow such a project to proceed. You're going to have to promise me that you'll drop it here. Otherwise, I have to put you in jail."

"If you won't do it for me, then do it for Ed," she said, ignoring the threat. "Everyone knows you were lovers." This was the ace up her sleeve, so her eyes went a bit rounder when he simply shrugged.

"I imagine pretty much everyone does know," he said. "But a little sex on the side can't compare to a homegrown terrorist threat, can it?"

She gaped, but not for the reason he thought at first. "Is that all that he meant to you? A little 'sex on the side'?! You should think before you act! You ruined my future with him!"

"I don’t think you ever had a future with him. And my relationship with Edward is not open to scrutiny, even from you." Roy came to a halt directly in front of her. She felt his emotion and backed up a step involuntarily, but he continued gently, almost as though he were explaining something to a child. "Edward’s a good friend and a brilliant alchemist. But no matter how much I might want him back, it doesn’t mean that any of us has the right to do something so drastic. What if you built a Gate, Winry-- and you’re lucky that I doubt your ability, because otherwise you’d be going into military detention-- but say you did manage to, only to let the hatred in that other world hemorrhage into our own? You saw what happened the first time, when Al did it. We could lose the country, even the planet, overnight. There are real reasons why I can't let you do it."

"So friendship doesn't matter any more. Or even guilt." She gazed down at the floor.
"Of course they matter." He reached as if to put a hand under her chin, then thought better of it. "Winry... Say you found a way to build a Gate. How would you ever find Edward and Alphonse in that other world anyway?"

"I'm still working on that. I'm... thinking that a good bioalchemist could use the Gate to find a way to track them down."

"A bioalchemist? Shou Tucker, perhaps?"

"I hope not." She shuddered violently.

"He's gone more insane than ever, they say," Roy said thoughtfully. "Wanders the Lior Sand Caves crying for his wife and daughter. He doesn't even realize he killed them."

There was a short silence.

Roy put a hand on her shoulder and she almost jerked away, but thought better of it. "I know you're wandering a kind of desert, too," he said kindly. "So I won't be too hard on you. I never heard a word of your idea for a Gate. Just take it and go, and don't bring it back here. And-- I do owe you, Winry. If I ever find appropriate compensation, I will give it to you. I promise."

"I know some appropriate compensation," she said immediately. "Give me Edward."

"What?"

"Edward. Promise me you'll never touch him that way, ever again."

Roy was clearly taken aback by her words, even momentarily stunned, as though all thoughts had been taken from him. For a very long moment he said nothing. Then: "If that is what you want, Winry, then I promise I will never touch him again. It's probably for the best, anyway."

She nodded briskly and showed herself to the door.

"Winry," said Roy, sitting down slowly on his desk. "If you ever do see him again, he's going to be angry with you over this."

"I doubt it," she said, and left.
Chapter Summary

Al’s recovery takes a strange turn when mysterious scales begin to appear on his skin, and we learn the reason why he must undergo such suffering. To ease his pain and give him hope, Edward teaches him the Seven Secrets. Meanwhile, Winry and Sciezka journey far into the desert seeking the Alchemist Shou Tucker.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Very vague descriptions of behavior which could be considered incestuous in our culture, but is considered educational in theirs. I wanted to explore this idea as well as I could, but the topic is delicate, so I chose to approach it with the lightest touch possible.

I.

Edward flipped his pigtails from side to side and posed coquettishly in the open door. Winnifred’s blue dress was a perfect fit, and he’d donned white stockings to match. Her shoes were one size too small for him and his live foot was a bit pinched, but that hardly mattered, because Al had fallen sideways on the bed and was clutching at his sore belly with both hands, tears of mirth streaming down his cheeks.

Ed grinned. “It’s really good to hear you laugh again, brother. Even if it’s at me.”


“Laughter is the best medicine.” It was an old Amestris proverb.

For half an hour Edward paraded back and forth, using the bath as a changing room as he modeled Winnifred’s clothes to his brother’s delight, and they decided that the first blue dress was the perfect disguise for Ed to use while shopping in public, in case the health authorities were looking out for them. When he finally flounced away down the garden path, Alphonse was still smiling.

* * *

Edward’s stump felt good and he covered several miles that morning, dress and all, wending around and through the local residential area. He had brought Al’s shoes with him tied to a string, dragging
them behind him in places to leave his brother’s scent trail as well. He made sure that his route was as confusing as possible, backtracking down alleys and sneaking through yards. He even circled the Golden Toad, noting as he did so that it sat shuttered and silent. A single frog was croaking in Siegfried’s garden.

Then he went to the market. The ease with which he passed as a beautiful young girl—even with faintly anemic touches of down on his chin—was useful, if disconcerting. He purchased bread, potatoes, an onion, salt, a little beef liver and some more ice. The load was heavy and it took him some time to return home with it. Coming back at last to Winnifred’s, he passed by the bedroom window and noted the great gouges in the earth left over from Envy’s attack. He had dug right down to the stone foundation of the house using just his snout.

Ed knocked lightly on the boards covering the window—their prearranged code—and after a moment Al answered in a soft voice. In a minute he had let Edward into the house, and Ed removed his dress and his leg. “Whew. That was an experience! Well, little brother, I’ve thrown our dragon a curve or two. He’ll have no clue now as to where we really are.”

Al returned without much comment to bed, where he fell asleep at once. Ed knew to his regret that his brother had exhausted himself worrying about him. Donning his regular clothes with relief and taking his crutches, Ed put the bread, of which he’d already partaken, away in the pantry. Then he began to peel a small quantity of the potatoes. In a little while he had a soup simmering on the stove, with milk and a little onion and salt. He put the liver in a frying pan with the rest of the onion and cooked it up for himself, hoping that the rich aroma didn’t make Al sick. It made a delicious meal, satisfying him as he hadn’t been for days. Afterward he took the soup off the heat and crawled into bed, falling asleep for a little while.

* * *

Alphonse stirred just as Ed was waking up again. As Al slowly and carefully stretched, Ed saw that the strange new roughness of his skin was visible in the light that squeezed between the boards over the window, falling over his hands and arms. It looked like a kind of fine, powdery eczema.

"I had another dream, Ed. I saw a huge dragon riding the wind. There were clouds and mountains below. Then I looked closer and I saw Winry on the back of the dragon. Her hair was flying."

"Hm," said Ed, yawning.

"I was talking to that ghost again, too. He says there’s some gold buried under this house, but you’d have to destroy part of the basement to get it."

“Humph. That would be a poor way to repay Winnifred. We should just leave her a note about it.”

“Yeah, I guess. Brother? I have to pee.”

Ed scrambled up immediately and Al laughed. “I knew that would wake you up,” he said happily as Edward handed him his pan. While his output was not the Rain River, it was enough to show that his kidneys had begun to function again.

Heartened by this, Al made short work of a cup of the still-warm potato soup, and his stomach hurt only a little. The food strengthened him, bringing a little life back to his eyes.

* * *
That evening, as Edward was getting ready for bed, he said, “Hey Al. I just now realized something. I haven’t heard you cough ever since we left the Golden Toad.”

“That’s right!” Al’s eyes went wide and he struggled to sit up. He coughed experimentally. “I don’t even want to!”

Ed bent, laying his ear to Al’s chest. “You sound good!” he said after a moment. He straightened. “Was it really Dad you met?”

“I told you it was. Now dragon’s blood is a very hot substance,” Al said thoughtfully. “Small amounts of it are sometimes used in poultices to burn out joint disease. That much, I know.” He looked at Ed in amazement. “It must have burned out my consumption!”

“It must have!”

They hugged each other. Then Edward paused. “But this doesn’t make any sense, little brother. That crap would have killed you if I hadn’t gotten it out of your stomach. Look what just a short exposure did to you.”

“I bet Dad can see the future like our ghost here can. He knew you’d save me.”

“Hm. Either that, or there’s some kind of parasitic relationship going between him and Envy.”

“What do you mean?”

Edward sat down on the bed beside his brother. “Well… Do you remember when we studied about chimeras? After Nina died?”

“Yeah. We wanted to know enough to be able to rescue any other people Tucker might have experimented on.”

“Right. How about those ‘spiritual chimeras’ in the back of the book? The accidental combination of two ghostly entities?”

“Wow.” Al blinked, considering this.

“Dad was killed just moments before the first Thule Gate was activated, so his ghost was in the immediate area. I thought Envy was vaporized, but what if the strength of his hatred enabled them to both survive as a single combined being?”

“Are you saying Dad and Envy wanted to cure me and kill me at the same time?”

“It’s possible.”

“Maybe I could talk to Dad in my sleep. Ask him about it.”

“No! Don’t do that.”

“Oh.” Al looked chagrined.

“You’re getting tired again,” Ed said gently. “You’re out of the woods now, I think, but it’s going to be a long haul back. Why don’t you let me rearrange those pillows of yours so you can have a nap?”

“OK.” Al sighed, then smiled at his brother. “I’m so glad I feel better.”
“I am too.” Edward stood up one-legged and began to gather the pillows into a single plump pile.

“I was so afraid I was going to leave you all alone here.” Al wriggled comfortably into the cushions. “Brother? When we get back to Amestris, let’s do some special alchemy together.”

“What’s that?” Ed climbed back into the bed and curled up facing him. The lone candle, sitting on a saucer near the door, barely illuminated their faces while casting deep flickering shadows across the room.

“You won’t have the activation key anymore when we get back, so let’s divide the Flamel cross and each put a piece of our soul into our respective halves. Mine into yours and yours into mine. That way we’ll always be together, no matter what. OK?”

“OK, Al. I’ll give you a piece of my soul anytime,” Ed said, with that cheerful confidentiality he reserved only for Alphonse.

Al sighed with happiness, snuggling safe and warm beside his brother. “Ed?” he whispered. “I’ve been thinking. When we get back home, and have normal lives again? I’ve seen more friends and brothers get separated by everyday life than by anything else. Let’s not allow that to happen.”

“What are you worrying about?”

“Well, I was thinking, if I marry Winry and you marry Roy, we might forget each other.”

“That’s stupid. We’re the perfect team and that’s the way it’ll always be,” Ed said.

“OK,” Al said, but there was a hint of doubt in his voice.

“None of those other brothers have gone through what we have. None of them have died for each other. Right?”

“Right.”

“Then have some confidence in us. You wouldn’t just run off somewhere to live with Winry and leave me all alone, would you?”

“Never!” Al opened his eyes, looking indignant. “I would never do that!”

“Well, I wouldn’t do anything to you that you wouldn’t do to me. I’m not going anywhere, Al.”

“How will we live then? I mean, in both worlds, they talk so much about families, but society’s really made to break them apart. When people get married, they leave their friends and brothers and fathers and mothers and go away. And they think you’re crazy if you don’t want to do it. They even have these psychological names for it. ‘Individuation’ and all that stuff.” Al heaved a deep sigh. “Think what some shrink could make the two of us sound like. ‘Co-dependents,’ for sure, and who knows what else.”

“Screw ‘em!” said Edward. “Psychiatrists are mostly just a racket propped up by the state, and as much as it prattles, the state really doesn’t care about families. It just wants more soldiers for its wars, and more little suckers to buy the stuff its corporate buddies are pushing. So let’s live together just the way we want and make our own society instead, and if we take others into our tribe and have kids with them, we’ll teach them how to avoid being used by the government. Wouldn’t it be fun?”

Al smiled at this.
“I mean it,” said Ed seriously. “We’ll live out our lives in the same house, just like we always have. There’s no reason to change. It’ll be you and me and whoever else we choose to make part of our family. Those shrinks can throw all the names they want at us—there’s nothing weird about it, and our kids will benefit from the extra security.”

“I like it,” Al said simply. “That’s how it should be—for us, anyway. But what about Roy? He’d never settle for living in Resembool.”

Ed snorted. “Roy’ll never marry me anyway, so stop worrying about it and get some sleep!”

II.

The night passed uneventfully, with no sign of Envy. Al slept soundly until late the next morning, waking up contented in the warm and comfortable bed. Although he was physically still very weak, Al’s mind was alert and he was ready to talk about the events of the past week over another mug of potato soup.

Edward stretched out at his feet on the bed. “I sure would like to know more about Dad, Al—whether he’s really been combined with Envy, or whether what you encountered was anything that’s ever been recorded before.”

There was a long pause. Alphonse contemplated the sun shining through the curtains. “Ed? How long are we going to stay here?”

“I’ve been thinking about that. It’s dependent on three things: when Winnifred’s family will be coming back, when you’ll be ready to leave, and when the Gate is activated.”

“Right. I don’t think we have to worry about Winnifred very much. The impression I got when I talked with her is that they mainly stay here when her parents are lecturing. She said they were about to go to Innsbruck.”

“I have no idea when summer semester ends, but surely you’ll be on your feet by then.”

“I hope so. Talking about school reminds me-- Have you heard anything more about Russell?”

“Of course not. I only heard what you heard—that his aunt is holding Fletcher over his head to make him do what the family wants.”

“OK. I guess I’m kind of mixed up.” Al grinned sheepishly.

“You lost some time. But those dreams of yours are useful.”

“Yeah. I know. I’ve been trying to remember the one where I saw them flying the halves of the Gate up to the mountaintop. They were using a fleet of dirigibles to do it in the dead of night.”

“Any idea where it’s at? Do you remember the shape of the peak?”

“It was pretty jagged. I could draw it, I think.”

Edward got up and rummaged in Winnifred’s dresser drawers, coming up with a pencil but no paper. He improvised a drawing surface with part of an old hatbox, and Al quickly sketched out the peak.
“Is this exact?”

“I think so.” Alphonse nodded.

“Hm. And you say the Gate is at the very top?”

“Yeah. It’s puzzling, since climbing there would be next to impossible, I think.”

Edward bit his lip. “They don’t intend to climb. They’re going to fly through it, just like the first time.”

“So did you ever tell Winry to warn Roy?”

“I tried. But ever since we had that fight, I can’t make contact with her.”

“I hope she’s not sulking,” Al said thoughtfully. “I’ll try talking to her next time I’m asleep.” He stretched and yawned, as though the very thought of it made him tired.

“We need to find out where that mountain is,” Edward said, glancing again at Al’s drawing. “But you’re going to be too weak to lead me to it for quite awhile.”

There was a moment of silence before Edward changed the subject. “Al, your ghost friend John Sampson’s seen the future, right? What exactly did he witness?”

Al’s face went sober. He picked at a loose thread on the comforter. “He showed me a little. It was horrible. Hundreds of thousands of people are going to die.”

“It’s that bomb. It’s got to be.”

“No. It isn’t. What he showed me had barbed wire fences in it. People were being held inside and they were starving to death. There were Gypsies and Jews and antisocials. They were killing them, too. I thought for a minute I saw Russell in there. I really hope I was mistaken, Ed, because if it was him, he won’t survive. It had nothing to do with any bombs that I could see.” Al looked up, frowning. “I think,” he said slowly, “One group of people got the idea they were better than the rest. I think that crazy guy you saw at the beer hall is going to be mixed up in this somehow. I remember seeing his name.”

Edward stared at him, shaken. “Adolph Hitler. Al, I haven’t talked about this much, but what you’re describing has to do with Hitler’s National Socialist Worker’s Party. They’re into racial stuff and they think the different kinds of people you mentioned are inferior. That’s what Heinrich’s into, remember?”

“Brother, we’ve got to get out of here before this starts. It’s too big. We can’t stop it. We’ll be lucky to save ourselves, and hopefully some of our friends. We can’t do anything else.”

Ed sighed. “Right now, I’m mostly worried about finding that Gate and Huskisson.”

“Once I’m stronger, we could go with Noaa and the rest of her folks again. She might be able to locate them for us.”

“That’s true. Though we had her looking for him before, and she came up with nothing.” Ed sat up, stretching. “It was so much easier when Alfons Heiderich was alive,” he said softly. “I helped him sort out his chemistry problems and just sort of rode along on his coattails. Even though the Society folks probably guessed we were together in a way they didn’t like, they were happy to use us anyway to further their ends. Especially him. They used him right up. And they had to be planning to
kill him anyway, because he knew their secrets. He threw away his life working for people who hated him.”

Al listened quietly. It was rare to hear Edward talk about Heiderich.

“Al. Am I missing something here?”

Al shook his head slowly. “Nothing,” he said gently. “It’s just this awful place.”

Heavy silence.

“Of all the crappy bad luck,” Edward said finally. “All the worlds I could land in and I end up here.”

“Listen. I can talk to Al Heiderich’s ghost. I might even be able to show him what Beauty showed me—the way to Amestris. Even though he’s dead, you could be together again.”

“No, little brother. Don’t do that. I don’t want anything native to this world leaking into our own. Even my lover’s ghost.”

“The animal spirits, like Beauty, go freely between the two worlds.”

“A kitten is not going to help further a war.”

“No. But I doubt Alfons Heiderich would, either, once he saw the big picture. I know you. You wouldn’t have been with him if he’d been that kind of person.” Al’s look was kind. “You at least deserve to say goodbye.”

Ed sighed. “Thanks, Al. But enough of this navel gazing. Right now we need to solve only one problem. Where are we going to go, and what are we going to do?”

“That’s two problems.” Al ducked the pillow Ed tossed at him.

In the end they got nowhere except to agree that they would have to stay where they were until Al was fit to travel or until Winnifred’s family returned, and that Edward needed to try to find work before Rose’s money ran out. Satisfied with the outcome of their rambling conversation, Alphonse fell asleep, and Ed sat for a long time contemplating the outline of the mountain.

III.

Winry put down the book and blinked her eyes hard. She'd been devouring information since she'd reached Scieszka's house. Five hours straight, reading about the strange new theory of physics that was all the rage at Central University-- a groundbreaking course that Ed and Al had in a very real way helped to create.

The thing about it that intrigued her the most was the parallel universes theory. She'd read it over three times. The idea that multiple worlds overlapping one another could exist at all was a stretch, but Edward and Alphonse had now proven it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Even more mystifying was the concept of consciousness having a direct effect on the universe, or rather, the universe itself being a product of consciousness, and each universe being just a little different, but with many aspects remaining the same-- including the people in them. The idea that there was probably another Winry somewhere in the world where Ed and Al had vanished was simultaneously reassuring and
unsettling to her.

Sciezka entered the room, carrying a snack tray. "Time to eat something, Winry. You can't learn on an empty stomach!"

"Thanks, Sciezka." Winry reached for some crackers and cheese. "Have you read this? It says our own awareness is the foundation on which the universe is built."

"Right." The librarian settled down beside her. "Therefore, at least to me, it would follow that finding Ed and Al is literally a case of mind over matter." She poured them both some tea. "Have you looked into the machine alchemy yet?"

"Nope." Winry took a sip of the tea and sighed, slouching in her chair. "For some reason, Sciezka, I keep thinking of that monster Shou Tucker. I'm afraid it means something, that I keep thinking of him."

"I'm sure it does. You said Roy mentioned him?"

"Yep. Brought him up when I mentioned I'd need a bioalchemist."

"Was it a suggestion?"

"I'd like to think not."

"But you're really not sure."

"He told me where Tucker was and what he was doing."

Sciezka nodded sagely. "Sounds like a little under-the-table help, if you ask me."

"You think so?"

"I do. I wonder if it was just his impulsive side that made him say it."

"He's usually quite calculating."

"Not really. I've seen him make some pretty funny mistakes." The librarian smiled to herself.

"Damn," Winry said softly after a long moment of tea and silence. "I think I see the situation now, but I was hoping it would be anyone but Tucker. He is the creepiest thing."

"You don't have to take Roy's suggestion, if that's what it was."

"I think I do. Sciezka, didn't Tucker have quite an estate here in Central before he went mad?"

"I don't know. I could look it up for you."

"OK. I know Ed and Al stayed at his place for quite awhile. That's how they made friends with his daughter Nina."

"Oh. Right. I'll just have a look in the Central tax files after lunch. You're thinking he might be able to provide your funding, but what could you offer him in return, Winry?"

Winry put her hand decisively on the physics book. "His wife and daughter back," she said flatly.

"What?!" Sciezka almost spat out her cracker.
"Think about it. You've read about the new physics. You know that there are parallel worlds like the one Ed and Al are lost in. In those worlds, we all have doubles, and that means Tucker's family is probably still around. Just-- somewhere else."

"Oh, Winry, you wouldn't!" Both of Sciezka's fists were clenched to her mouth in horror.

"Don't be silly, Sciezka. Of course I wouldn't. But all Tucker would have to know is that they exist somewhere, and that if we could make a Gate, he could find them again. I would think that would be worth working on, don't you?"

"Winry, that's brilliant! Your bioalchemist and your funding all in one package."

"You'll have to thank Roy, I'm afraid. As much as I abhor that man, he can be useful sometimes."

"What next? Are you going to stay here and learn machine alchemy, or go find Tucker?"

"I'd better look for Tucker. I can study on the way."

IV.

Next day, Alphonse was sitting in a chair in the great room, taking the afternoon sun and breathing the fresh air from a partially opened window, when Edward came darting through the kitchen door. “Al! I’ve got myself a job already! I start work tomorrow!”

“That’s great!” Al said, straightening up as Ed skidded to stop nearby. “Doing what?”

“Re-roofing a house down the block. One that lost its dormer roof during the storms.”

“Excellent!” The two brothers high-fived, but then Edward hesitated. "Al, have you noticed your skin?"

"Eww." Al was taken aback as he stared at his own forearm. He held it up in the bright light. "It's like dandruff, but worse. What is it?"

Ed took his wrist and scrutinized it closely. "I don't know. Maybe your skin just got really dried out or something. Let me give you a bath."

"OK. I could use one anyway."

Starting the coal-fired heater would have been a dead giveaway that someone was in the house, so Edward warmed multiple pots of water on the gas stove instead. Alphonse was moving much easier now, but he was still weak. His knees were shaky as he stepped into the tub, and Ed helped him get comfortably situated. Then Ed unveiled Winnifred’s toiletries. “Which do you want, little brother? Roses or gardenias?”

“Roses, I guess,” Al said, wrinkling his nose. “Boy, would Winry laugh if she could see this!”

As Ed was helping lather Al's arms and torso, he said, “I went past the Golden Toad again today. It’s still closed. The windows are all boarded.”

“I’m really sorry about that. When Siegfried was there, it was such a great place,” Al said wistfully.
“I hope he’s OK,” Edward said. He began to scrub Al's back gently with a rough washcloth. "I don’t know if that stuff is going to come off. I wonder what it is.”

“Rub harder.”

“OK.” Ed was silent for a minute as he concentrated on his task.

“Do you suppose this could be leprosy or something?” Al asked.

“No. It’s some kind of side effect of the dragon’s blood, I think. That OK, brother?” Ed said solicitously as he carefully poured warm water over Al's shoulders.

"It's fine. Did it come off?"

“I think some did.”

“That’s good. I hope you'll you wash my hair for me.”

"No problem.” Edward unbraided the matted brown plait with some difficulty and began to separate Al's hair with his fingers. "Wow. What a mess.”

“Sorry,” Al said apologetically. “I didn’t even try to untangle it before, because it won’t unless it’s wet.”

“This is a project all its own. Winry would love it.”

“I made contact with her last night, but I haven’t been able to actually talk to her again,” Alphonse said thoughtfully.

“I noticed. Do you think she’s really still sulking?”

“No. It’s more like she’s really, really busy. I think her mind is all taken up with building a Gate, Ed.”

“Mm. OK, Al, I’m going to suds you up and untangle you later.” Edward slipped his hand under the nape of Al's neck as his brother sank backwards with a sigh into the lukewarm water. He began to thoroughly scrub and massage Al's scalp.

"That feels so good," Al said, closing his eyes. Ed smiled as he worked, happy to be able to comfort his brother.

“You know, I’m worried about her,” Al said. “Last night she showed me some of the weirdest things. She didn’t mean to. She didn’t even know I was there. It’s like she was practicing some really bizarre form of alchemy.”

Edward blinked. “Uh-oh. That’s a bad sign. Winry using alchemy is like giving a kid explosives. Remember when we were little and we tried to teach her to make her own dolls?”

“How could I forget? She blew the roof off the clubhouse. This is different, though. It’s big league stuff. I think she’s trying to make portions of her Gate using alchemy.”

Ed shook his head slowly. “I hope she’s got a good teacher.”

Al snorted. “Sorry, Ed. I don’t think she’s got a teacher at all. That’s why I’m worried.”

"Well, it’s not good to worry too much, so let's not think about it any more right now. What matters
"Most to us is that we have a place to stay while you're getting better."

"Yeah. But you know, I almost hope Winry really is learning alchemy. I always thought she could, even if she is a little reckless."

"If she could just learn it without killing herself and everyone around her, I think she'd end up as a very innovative alchemist."

"Really? Do you really think so, Ed?" Alphonse seemed to take the remark personally.

"Yes. Can you sit up now?"

"OK." Al grabbed the edges of the tub and pulled himself up as Ed leaned to pick up a bucket. "Here comes the rinse!" Al laughed and squealed like a child as Edward poured the water over his head.

When they were finished, Ed helped his brother out of the bath, got him dried off and wrapped him in a large warm towel he'd left hanging in the sun. He had him sit on a chair in front of the mirror while he carefully combed and braided his hair again. During the months he had spent in this world, Al's wavy locks had grown long, trailing past his shoulders and down his back, and they had turned a rich brownish gold, the color of cherry wood. Edward smiled at him in the mirror. "You're turning into one handsome buck," he said. "If we ever get back to Amestris, Winry's going to be surprised."

"We'll get back one way or another. You just wait and see." Alphonse glanced down at his arm. His skin had dried and the white powdery surface had returned. "Ed, why don't you get an empty bottle or a glass plate from the kitchen? We might be able to use it as a magnifying glass. I want a closer look at this stuff."

"All right."

Ed returned shortly with a round glass paperweight. "I found this in one of the upstairs bedrooms. It's made to magnify fine print."

Al extended his arm, resting it on the marble countertop. Ed set the paperweight on a particularly rough spot of skin.

"Ed?" Al said after a moment. His voice had dropped to a shaky whisper. "Is that—? Are those--? Scales--?"

Ed looked up and nodded solemnly.

"Oh, no." Al's face went white.

"Al!" Ed said, pushing aside the paperweight and quickly grasping his arms. "Don't let this get you."

"How can it not? This is the Dragon Transmutation!"

"That's right. Though how it could happen here, I don't know."

Alphonse sat and wept in despair with his face in his hands. At last Ed walked him back into the bedroom and had him lay on the bed. He threw open the shutters on the garden side window and let the sun in. Then he sat down wordlessly by Alphonse and began to rub his back to comfort him.

"Why, Ed?" Al's voice held the same tone it had when Beauty had died. "I don't want this. I don't want to be a dragon."
“I know. I know.”

“I don’t understand. Why do I have to go through this? Haven’t I been through enough?!”

“The best way to think about it is that it’s Nature equalizing herself. Besides, Dad didn’t have any alternatives. If he wanted to cure your consumption and save your life, he had to expose you to Envy’s blood. And that meant taking this risk.”

Al’s breath came in little hiccups. “But Ed. It’s supposed to be incredibly painful. And no one’s ever managed to change themselves back.”

Edward said nothing, only continuing to soothe him.

Alphonse struggled to sit up. “Why aren’t you more upset? You don’t even look surprised!”

Ed shook his head slowly. “I’ve been anticipating something like this. In fact I think it was inevitable. For five years you lived in a nearly indestructible form. You suffered no pain and no sickness. Now Nature’s correcting that imbalance in a hurry. We’ve both heard the stories about the ancient alchemists who transmuted themselves into nearly immortal beings, only to regret it when they changed back later. Remember when I told you being human hadn’t caused your sickness? It didn’t. Being nonhuman did.”

Al collapsed again with a bitter sob, curling up on himself.

“Be strong, brother. We can get through this too,” Ed said quietly. “I know we can.”

Edward continued to quietly comfort his despairing brother, caressing his limbs in silence until they were completely relaxed, just as their mother had used to do. After awhile Al’s weeping stopped, and his swollen eyelids grew heavy.

“Let’s take a nap,” Ed said softly at last, drawing the drapes. He covered Alphonse warmly with Winnifred’s comforter and lay down beside him.

* * *

Ed found himself lost on a strange battlefield. It was like nothing he’d ever experienced, but he knew that this was what Alphonse had already witnessed. Under a grey sky, corpses stretched as far as the eye could see, yet he knew the fighting raged on unabated just over the hill. He struggled to bend the lucid nightmare to his will and exit the hellish scene, but everywhere he turned there was more and more death, until death was all he saw, and the faces of the fallen were, every one, the face of his own brother. The sky began to lower until the clouds were just above his head. He began to suffocate.

Then, for an instant, he thought he saw Heiderich’s face. *It’s only a story. Remember?*

“Alfons?” Edward shook himself violently and staggered forward through the gray mist, tripping over bodies. Then he was at the top of a hill. The clouds were gone and he was looking out over a ruined land.

“It’s going to happen and no one can stop it.”

Ed turned on his heel. His father, dressed in combat garb, sat on a wrecked gun battery.
“Dad? Or Envy?”

Hohenheim shook his head. “Edward, I know you’ve never found it easy to trust me. But you have to believe me. You and Alphonse have to get out of this world as soon as you can. You don’t belong here.”

“Al loves you and you poisoned him.”

“It wasn’t poison. It was the blood of his oldest brother. More powerful and magical even than your own. Strong enough to kill him, but also to transform him. If you had just let it go unchecked, he would have become a dragon overnight. As it is, when Alphonse manages to take flight, then you can leave this world.” As if illustrating his own words, Hohenheim became a dragon with golden scales glittering like a carp’s. Edward did not blink as he flew off into that broad gray sky. When he looked down again, the corpses had disappeared and he stood in a field of flowers.

V.

“I think I’m finally getting the hang of this.” Sciezka depressed the clutch pedal and shifted effortlessly as she turned the four-wheel-drive truck off of the main road and started across the trackless sand, following the dashboard compass. Winry had purchased the vehicle on the cheap at a military junkyard, and her first alchemic undertaking had been to repair it.

“Me, too.” Winry regarded the tiny machine part she’d created with a critical eye. It was her twenty-fourth transmutation attempt this morning and she was determined to persist until she got it right. “This gear looks good, except I haven’t got the right number of teeth on it again. Maybe I should start from scratch.”

“Why not? The more you practice, the more you’ll learn.”

Winry put down her project and rummaged in the ice chest at her feet. “Are you hungry, Sciezka?”

“A little.” Sciezka smiled as Winry leaned to pop a fresh strawberry into her mouth. “I’m really glad we stopped at that bazaar,” she said. “They had some excellent fruits. Those melons were the best I’ve ever seen or tasted, but they were out of season.”

“They grow year round out here. We can grow muskmelons in Resembool if we have a hot enough summer, but they’re pretty sorry compared to these.”

“I’ve never lived in a small town,” Sciezka said wistfully. “What’s it like?”

Winry bit into a strawberry. “I wouldn’t trade it for anything. Life’s more real in Resembool. In the big city, you see a lot of false facades. There’s less of that in a small town. Less affectation. If everyone knows you, you can’t very well pretend to be something you’re not. I know that Edward, especially, would have become a very different person if he’d been raised in Central.”

“How so?” Sciezka headed toward a lone tree on the horizon.

“You know him. He’s egocentric at the best of times. At least in Resembool, he didn’t have too many people to show off to. Just our moms, me, and his brother. In the big city he would have been hailed as some kind of child prodigy and he would have had crowds following his every transmutation. It probably would have inflated him beyond repair.”
“I see. So, Winry, have you come to a decision yet?”

Winry sighed, reaching for another handful of berries. “Sciezka, there’s something I haven’t told you.”

Sciezka glanced briefly toward her as if startled. “What?”

“I’ve been communicating with Ed and Al.”

To her credit, the librarian did not throw on the brakes but rolled smoothly to a stop in the shade under the tree. It stood proud and lonely, with prayer flags and ornaments flying from its weathered branches. Sciezka turned in her seat to face her friend. “Did I hear you right?”

Winry nodded. “I’ve been talking with them in dreams. They’re having a lot of trouble. I’m afraid they won’t last long enough for us to rescue them.” She looked away.

“And…?”

Winry looked back again, brushing her hair out of her eyes. “Ed’s been cheating on me, and Al nearly died. I still don’t know if he’s OK.”

To her credit, Sciezka did not question the validity of Winry’s story. “That’s terrible!” she exclaimed.

“You know what the worst part of it is?”

“What?”

Winry bent to pour a mug of cold water. “Do you want something to drink?”

“Sure. I’ll have a cheese sandwich too, please, if we’ve still got some.”

Winry handed her the food and drink she’d requested and poured another water for herself. Sciezka waited until she got settled again. Then: “Winry?”

Winry took a long swig of the water. “I wish this was wine. OK. Here goes. Sciezka, Edward’s last boyfriend was named Alfons and he’s a dead ringer for our Alphonse. It was his other-world self.”

Sciezka choked on her cheese sandwich. For a minute there was a flurry as Winry pounded on her shoulder blades. After everything was cleared up, the librarian gasped, “Winry! There must be some mistake!”

“Nope.” She shook her head once, left to right.

“But— he can’t! The Elrics aren’t like that!”

Winry rolled her eyes. “You asked me pretty recently what difference it would make. Besides, they’re pretty lax on that kind of thing here, at least in the city.”

“But I didn’t— that’s not how I meant it!”

“Well, technically, the other Al isn’t his brother. But he might as well be.” Winry sighed, resting her chin on her palm. “I wonder how our Al’s dealing with it. His burden’s been heavy enough already.”
Edward sat up suddenly. It was deep night, and the moon was shining through the window. Alphonse was sitting upright next to him, his eyes gleaming in the dark. Ed caught his breath as he turned towards him. The hair on his nape began to crawl. “Al? Alphonse?”

Al spoke in a dreamy monotone. “Ed? Is that you?”

“Of course it’s me! Al, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. Something’s happened to me. Edward, where are we? Where’s Noa?”

The last question made Edward’s breath stop. He moved to take his brother by the arms, leaning to gaze intently into his face.

“Ed?” Al said faintly. “Please tell me I’m not dead.”

Edward had heard of love turning suddenly to rage, but he had always thought he could never experience such a thing. He drew a deep breath. “You are dead. A year dead, Alfons. Now get out of my brother.”

“Is this your brother?” Heiderich lifted Al’s hand, gazing at it with fascination. “He’s not very strong.”

Edward fought to stay calm. “No. He’s not. Please leave his body before you hurt him.”

“—No! Ed, wait!” It was the voice of Alphonse, struggling through to the surface.

“Al! Are you all right?” Wondering how he could ever defend Alphonse against the spirit world, Ed embraced him with desperate protectiveness.

“I’m OK. I let him do this.”

“But why?!”

“It’s our chance to say goodbye.” As Alphonse uttered these words, the timbre of his voice became a little lower, and Edward knew that he was once again in the presence of his erstwhile lover.

“We said goodbye a year ago.” Ed spoke the words grimly. “Alfons. I loved you then and I love you now. But I love my brother more. Now get out.”

Al’s voice—his brother’s voice—was raw and pleading. “Edward. No one’s ever managed to reverse the Dragon Transmutation. I might not be a human ever again.”

Edward blinked as Al’s motive became clear. He held him at arms’ length and searched for the right words. “Al. You will be human again. Both of you will. It’s only a matter of time.”

Consensual relations between siblings were not punished in Amestris. Nevertheless, Edward found the thought of using his brother’s body as a proxy for his lover’s a repulsive idea, even with Alphonse’s active encouragement. It wasn’t so much the thought of sense pleasure with Alphonse that he found undesirable—after all, they already knew and trusted each other intimately-- but the idea of having such contact with the dead.

Ed drew a deep breath, fighting down the emotions that were surging violently within him. “Go with
my love, Alfons,” he finally said. “We’ll say goodbye again in our dreams.” A deep pang went through him as he kissed his brother, and though he was not a Spirit Alchemist, it seemed to him that the sigh spilling from Al’s lips was the last breath of life for Alfons Heiderich.

“Oh, Ed.” It was Alphonse; the spell had left him, and he slumped weakly in Edward’s arms. Ed was taken aback as he glanced sheepishly up at him. His little brother was as red-faced as he had ever seen him. “I really said that, didn’t I?” Al’s voice was weak. “About my not being human again?”

“Yes, you did,” he said calmly.

Alphonse squirmed. “It’s not that I think of you the same way I think of Winry. I don’t. It’s just, how do you know if I’ll ever really be myself again? I feel like I’m falling down a well, like… like this is my last chance at being human, and I’ve missed so much.”

Ed sat back, regarding him with great kindness, yet at the same time deeply perplexed. There was an awkward silence.

Finally he said, carefully, “Well, Al—what happened to ‘just be my brother?’”

“Ed, you have to remember—I was stuck in that stupid suit of armor for five years. I said once they were the best years of my life, but they were actually the worst. Then, when you died right there in front of me—that was the moment when I realized what I’d lost, and that nothing else would ever be like what we had together. You and I have our own kind of thing, Ed, that nobody else can share.”

Edward nodded quietly.

Alphonse drew a breath. “I admit, I never thought of it in quite this way before… but I’ve never been faced with the Dragon Transmutation before either.” He looked sheepish. “I guess I’m just being stupid. Or desperate. It’s like you said—brothers don’t ever think of things like this, do they?”

Edward did not reply. As he continued to regard him with a kind but penetrating gaze, Al looked away uncomfortably. “Let’s just forget I ever said anything, OK? I started out just trying to help you and Heiderich, but I guess it’s wrong.”

“No. It’s not wrong,” Ed said, and drew a deep breath, trusting his heart to guide him through this difficulty. “But we don’t want to damage what we’ve already got, and we don’t want to hurt Winry any more than we already have. Right?”

Al didn’t answer. Rarely had either of them felt the awkwardness around each other that they were experiencing now. The silence stretched on.

“Alphonse,” Ed said gently. “We need to slow down. Let’s sleep on it, OK?” He patted the mattress beside him. After a moment Al lay down, very red-faced. “I’m so sorry,” he mumbled, and turned his back to Edward.

“I’m not. I’m glad you said what you did.” As Edward settled down again, he added, “By the way, Al— you heard what I told Alfons Heiderich. I don’t want him near you ever again. No matter how friendly you are with spirits, that’s death-energy. You’ve got to promise me you won’t allow him to possess you any more.”

“I was just trying to help you. Both of you.”

“I know you were.” Suddenly Edward felt like crying. His abrupt sendoff of Heiderich had hurt him badly.
He was brought back by Al’s soft, low voice. “Ed? I promise. Are you OK?”

“Yeah. Let’s get some sleep.”

* * *

In the morning, Ed woke to find Alphonse standing in a corner, fists clenched at his sides, staring out through the cracks in the boarded window. “Those alchemists you talked about?” he said without looking around as Edward swung his legs over the side of the bed. “The ones who were almost immortal, and then they changed themselves back? I know what happened to them. They couldn’t stand it anymore. They killed themselves.”

Shocked, Ed landed abruptly on his feet and moved to stand beside him. The thought that Alphonse might want to kill himself rather than endure any more pain was not something that had ever crossed his mind; but now, with a sudden stark flash of realization, he saw that it was true.

“Al. They might’ve had everything, but they didn’t have what we’ve got. We can get through this.”

Eyes red and swollen, face streaked with tears, Al looked at him despairingly. “Wasn’t it enough that I already had to be so sick?”

“When you’re a normal human you get hurt every day, brother. You get colds and cat scratches and headaches and hiccups. After awhile it all adds up. I told you before, I was waiting for something like this to happen.”

“Ed, I can’t bear it. I just can’t bear it. You could have told me!”

“I didn’t want to discuss it because I didn’t want you to be frightened.”

“Are you saying I’m some kind of coward?”

Edward shook his head. “No! But if you try to kill yourself, you will be.”

Alphonse flung himself on his brother with a wail, fists flailing. Ed embraced him with a grunt, bowing his head and bearing the pounding blows on his back with love until they finally slowed and stopped.

Clinging to him, Alphonse sobbed brokenly on his shoulder.

“Al. Al. I know you feel trapped and desperate. So do I. But please don’t do anything so stupid. If you kill yourself, you’ve destroyed us both, and your own last chance.” Edward spoke urgently, breathlessly, as he hugged his brother tightly to him. “There’s still hope. There’s still a future. Some of it’s wonderful. Remember last night? Remember what we said?”

“Why did I do that last night. How could I be so stupid!” Al wailed.

“It wasn’t stupid at all. It was a basic need. I just had to figure out how to address it, and I have.” Ed pushed him gently to arms’ length, catching him with a kind eye. “I’m sorry I took so long, Al, but I wanted to get this right.”

“I don’t understand. What are you talking about?”
“What if I were to teach you the Seven Secrets?”

The room became very still. Suddenly self-conscious, Al disentangled himself from Ed’s grasp and sat back on the bed. “You would do that?” he heard himself saying dully.

“The question is, would you like me to?” Ed got up and moved to sit down beside him, shoulder to shoulder.

“I-- I don’t know,” said Al. “If it’s only because I wanted you to, then I don’t think so.”

“If you’re about to turn into a dragon, I want to be close to you while I can,” Edward said. “Just like you want to be close to me. Then, no matter how long it takes before you’re finally yourself again, we’ll have those memories to sustain us.”

He glanced to his brother and found Al’s face a mask that he could not read. He felt another twinge of fear; but the tears, at least, had ceased, if only from surprise. That was a good thing, and Ed continued, tenderly and honestly: “I missed you so, Al, back when you were in the armor. I missed your face, I missed the smell of you. I missed you just like you missed me. I used to dream of how I’d hug you when you came back. Did you know that?”

Alphonse shook his head slowly, side to side. “No. But I dreamed of that too.”

“I know you did. We’ve been through too much together to not share our dreams, Al.” He raised his live hand to gently brush Al’s cheek, his voice lowering almost to a whisper. “So please don’t think you were wrong to say what you did last night. I just needed some time to catch up with you.”

Al gazed down at the floor, his eyes large and dark, and spoke haltingly. “They’d kill us here if they ever found out,” he said.

“Yeah, well, don’t let the Earth world get to you. They’re crazy, plain and simple-- no sense of context. Look what happened to Siegfried and Russell over one stupid kiss. But in our own world, no one would raise an eyebrow if I taught you the Seven Secrets, would they?”

Al looked up again. The Secrets were part of coming of age in Amestris—the sacred advice and teachings that every boy received, but which had been denied him due to circumstance. Sometimes they were delivered by special female teachers or Shin priestesses, sometimes by a close friend or even a relative. Boys who were inclined toward other boys had their own special rituals. Either way, Alphonse had not realized that Edward had gone through any such rites. “That’s right,” he said. “It’s traditional for them to be passed down that way.”

“Yup. Even from brother to brother, when they’re very close. In our world, people might look sideways if we were moon-eyed lovers kissing in Central Square, but it also would be considered pretty weird for me to not educate you in the basics. I’m so sorry, Al-- I just never thought of it before, but it’s time and past time for you to have your turn!”

Alphonse closed his eyes, releasing a sigh that had probably been pent up somewhere for years, and leaned back into him slowly. “I don’t want excuses.”

“I’m not making up excuses.” Edward embraced him gently. “I’m just trying to say that anything that goes on between you and me is OK as long as we both want it to happen. So don’t feel stupid for wanting what you want, Al. Now having a death wish—that’s stupid.”

Alphonse managed a shaky laugh and Edward grinned.
“The first part of the First Secret is simple science, Al. It’s the basic scientific observation made in Amestris by Professor Muller over four hundred years ago— that sense pleasure is not only for breeding. That discovery helped cause the schism that resulted in the Enlightenment and the disappearance of many fundamentalist religious sects, including some which still exist here. Muller realized that sense pleasure is also for communicating, relaxing, and bonding, and it has other therapeutic uses too. If we can help you get through this Dragon Transmutation with it, that’s a very appropriate use of it. Now put your hands on my hands.”

The two of them sat crosslegged on Winnifred’s bed, facing each other in the morning light. The sun was shining softly through the open garden window, and the soft sound of the birds outside was like faint, half-heard music. “This is the second part of the First of the Seven Secrets,” Edward said formally as he raised his palms a little to receive his brother’s. Al’s bare skin was cool and slightly moist; Ed rubbed it with his thumb and the microscopic, nascent scales glistened like mica.

“Will this even work here?” Al breathed. His eyes were wide with anticipation, the grief and horror of the previous day already almost forgotten, as Edward intended.

“Sure. We’re going to use our life forces for all these exercises, Al, and that certainly exists in both worlds. Now press down on my palms so we make good contact. That’s right. Breathe deep… I can feel your life energy circulating in your hands. It gets stronger with each breath you take, and fades a little in between them. Can you feel it?”

“Yes,” Alphonse whispered. “I can feel yours, too. It’s even circulating in your automail. It’s so strong!”

“In this world, there’s an art called Tantra which is similar to this, but it’s not quite the same. Keep breathing deeply, just like you are. Deeply and evenly. That’s right. I want you to concentrate on both of our energies. Now try to draw them back together into your body through your hands, through your arms, right into your heart… that’s good… and feel what happens when you do.”

Over the next few days, as the Dragon Transmutation took hold, Alphonse did not despair. He was, in fact, barely conscious of the early stages of the transformation, distracted as he was by all the wonderful things that Edward knew. Each of these vital, intimate secrets Ed now taught him with meticulous care, with an honest eye toward Winry’s future benefit, and great pleasure for them both. But even with these bright times of wonder and happiness to carry them over their pain, Edward was surprised at how vacant his own heart still felt—a constant ache. He had failed Heiderich. No matter how he and Alphonse tried to distract each other from their situation, it was always with him—the knowledge of a faithful friend left to fade away alone in the dark. Often he sought for him in his dreams, but they were grey and empty. Heiderich had disappeared into the mist.

VII.

Over the next couple of weeks Alphonse’s life force was depleted more quickly than they had anticipated, and having completed only four of the Seven Secrets, they were forced to cease using
their bodies to ward off the hopelessness that lingered so near. Still, the sweet sensual bond they had forged lingered for a time like sunlight fading into winter, and sometimes one would catch the other smiling gently at him in the dim evening light.

They waited as Al's condition slowly got worse. His skin began looking stretched, shedding small white flakes. He developed a very sore lump over his tailbone that made it difficult for him to sit down, and his joints, especially his hips and shoulders, began to ache so that he would groan softly at night in his sleep. Edward was beside himself with worry and showed it by steadily losing weight as he rushed back and forth from Winnifred's to his odd jobs, trying to work and nurse Al at the same time. He had managed to extract a promise from his brother of no more suicidal thoughts, and Alphonse held to it, at least relieving him of one burden.

Because Al's condition looked like leprosy, he stayed well hidden, venturing only as far outside as the thickly-hedged inner garden, where the sun, blocked by the roof and the tall apple tree, shone only at its zenith. The brothers had agreed between themselves that the doctors of this world would never be able to treat such an exotic condition, and that if Al went to a hospital he would just end up quarantined as a scientific curiosity. The only person who just might be able to help them, Siegfried, still languished behind bars. Edward tried to keep apace of any developments on that front by intermittently phoning a couple of Siegfried’s old friends, including August the metallugist. Meanwhile, the Orichalcum key and cross remained inert, indicating that nothing further was occurring with the Thule Gate.

"So you really think this transmutation has nothing whatsoever to do with alchemy?" Alphonse lay on his back in the grass in his small patch of sun, squinting up at it narrowly from under his arm. Ed sat nearby in a thoughtful pose. His muscles had become as hard as rocks from lugging tiles on the job, and he sported a short, downy blond beard.

"That's right. They haven't discovered DNA in this world yet, but my bet is that this is some kind of Life Sewing that's not dependent on alchemical arrays. Whatever it is, it's occurring naturally, Al. And I bet it occurred naturally in Amestris, too." Ed glanced at him hopefully. “That might be why no one's been able to reverse this kind of transformation before.”

“Because everyone thought it was alchemy and went looking for the corresponding alchemical formulas.”

“Right. Only there are none.” Edward chewed his lip, frowning. “It's possible a Life Sewer could do something about it alchemically, though, if they understood the transformation process.”

Al sighed. “I wish we had Siegfried here. Even if all he did was make observations, they'd be so valuable.”

“Yeah. He has an incredible insight into how things work.” The sun had fallen behind the thick hedge and mosquitoes were already coming out. Edward scrambled to his feet and gave his brother a hand up. “This is driving me crazy, Al! We're stuck here day after day, when we should have left weeks ago. It's like our hands are tied. I'm just glad I found that job. You're so ravenous, you're eating up our funds as fast as I earn them.”

“I can't help that. Turning into a dragon's hard work.”

Ed glanced sideways at him as they made their way into the house. Al’s eyes, still recognizably his under slowly-growing brows, were anything but happy.
The Endless Caves of Ishbal were a natural labyrinth, a buried oasis running for hundreds of miles beneath the desert, inhabited by poisonous sand eels and giant rats. Nobody came there except the occasional hermit or naturalist, so the local guide had been deeply dismayed when two bright young girls from the other side of the world presented themselves at his doorstep.

"Well," said Winry as she and Sciezka stood before the entrance. "At least we're better armed than we've ever been before." She was holding an electric pikestaff which she'd managed to create during the previous days' travel.

"That's because you learned Machine Alchemy so fast," Sciezka replied absently, glancing around. "I knew you had latent talent, but I never imagined you'd pick it up like that."

"I played quite a bit with Greater Alchemy with Ed and Al when we were young," she said wistfully. "I just didn't see how to apply it to my work until now. Let's get out of this heat, Sciezka."

"OK. Watch for sand eels."

Winry advanced first, slowly, pikestaff held low and at the ready, but the sand at her feet stayed still as she led the way into the caves. Once inside, the floor turned to solid sandstone like the walls, evidence of a sea existing here in the distant past. Great fossil plants and whale bones punctuated the stone surfaces and Sciezka exclaimed in wonder. "I can see why the Life Sewing alchemist would end up in a place like this!"

"We're not sure he's here, Sciezka. The witnesses who think they saw him could be describing another monster entirely. Lights, please."

Sciezka switched on the lamp she was carrying, and small precious stones in the cave walls glittered faintly. "According to the map, we've got miles to go."

"Right. And this is just the first cave. There are hundreds of them, and some are interconnected. If our luck's bad, we could be here for months. If our luck's really bad, we might never find him at all."

"Don't start talking like that. We'll find Tucker because we have to."

Al's transformation proceeded with agonizing slowness. The pain grew much worse, beginning to come in episodes that lasted for hours, punctuated by days when he seemed to be fit and there was little pain at all. His teeth and jaws seemed to give him the most trouble as they began to rearrange themselves in increments, and Edward became used to making up hot packs to lay on them as needed. Meanwhile, the lump over his tailbone swelled larger and grew red hot, until one morning it finally burst, ruining Winnifred's fine linens with a flood of bloody pus. In its place was a delicate tail.

The thousands of nascent scales now adorning Al's skin were growing steadily, milky and
pearlescent, and they began to turn his skin colors of grey and cream. After a horrified morning glance in the bathroom mirror revealed a pale, half-human face with the jaws and teeth of some creature straight out of the primordial nightmare, Al began refusing to look at any reflective surface, shielding his eyes with his arm when passing by metal or water. Meanwhile, the silent pressure on them to leave Winnifred’s before they were discovered was steadily increasing.

On the morning of the first day of August, Al's teeth were going through another growing phase and he was writhing on the floor in intense pain. Edward had made a hot pack and was holding his brother's head in his lap as he applied it to his jaws, when Al suddenly burst out: "I can't stand it. I can't stand this torture any more. I'm going to kill myself and you can't stop me."

"Please don’t do that!" Ed said earnestly. "You know what they say about suicides. They can never find their way home."

Al writhed again, his stub of a tail whipping the floor as he burst into tears.

"It's time for some morphine." Edward mentally thanked himself for the hundredth time for bringing along Siegfried’s medications. Now he reached for the bottle and carefully put a few drops under Al’s tongue. "There. Things will be better again in a little while."

Al's face had changed a great deal in the last few days, and while Ed couldn't say it was an improvement, it wasn't ugly either— at least to him. Others might disagree, he reflected, as he touched what looked like two small horn buds on his brother's head. They reminded him of something else, the most disquieting aspect of the transformation so far. It had been the gradual disappearance of Al's testicles. Edward had tried to reassure him, saying dragons probably carried these parts inside their bodies just like snakes, but that fact in itself was not overly cheering either.

"What if I get lost right here?" Al asked after awhile, his eyes glazing a little as the powerful painkiller took effect.

"What do you mean?"  

"What if this isn't just my body changing? What if I lose my mind and try to kill you?"

"Even if you do, I’ll understand. And you won’t have any more luck than any of those other creatures who’ve tried to kill me in the past. Less, in fact, because your heart won’t be in it." Edward smiled reassuringly. “Your mind may change, brother, but your heart never will. That’s a promise.”

X.

The days passed underground with excruciating slowness. Winry and Sciezka soon adopted a routine—get up at the alarm, turn on the travel lamps and unzip the tightly sealed tent door. Eat cold food out of cans. Walk around the tent with the electric pikestaff, checking for sand eels and scorpions before folding it up. Winry once disturbed a huge, blind scorpion, causing a flurry before Sciezka flattened it with one of her books.

After two or three days in the darkness, the girls found themselves losing their sense of claustrophobia. After a week, they had traversed the first chain of sand caves without seeing a sign of any creature larger than the scorpion.
Working a common, textbook alchemy that turned sand into glass, Winry cut a tunnel into the next cave channel over, saving them miles of walking. As they entered, she was straining to see any evidence of tracks in the fine dust that coated everything here. Tucker's tracks were as unique as his chimera form and would be instantly recognizable, but the slash marks of the occasional sand eel was all that was apparent. She double-checked her pikestaff. It was fully charged. "This place is infested with eels, Sciezka. We have to be careful."

* * *

The cavern became cooler the farther they progressed, and soon both girls were pulling on their jackets. The stone walls grew slightly moist, and after another half hour of travel they heard the sound of water dripping into a pool. Coming up on it suddenly, Winry gasped as she saw several huge fish, pale white and whiskered, circling endlessly in the dark water. "What do they eat?! Sand eels?"

"Don't get too close to the edge," Sciezka said nervously.

The pool had an outlet, a rushing rivulet that led into a narrow crack in the rock. Something drew Winry in that direction and not along the main path. She paused to consult the map as Sciezka held the lamp above their heads. "They don't show where this stream goes."

Winry had just put the tip of her pikestaff in the water when something moved behind them and there was a splash. Sciezka screamed as the lamp went flying from her grasp and went out. "Sciezka!" Winry yelled. "Are you OK?"

"Yes. But I've lost my glasses."

"All right. Just stay where you are." As her eyes adjusted, Winry saw that the darkness was far from total. Vague shapes moved below her. The fish were luminous, as were patches of lichens on the cavern roof. She turned and reached out, poking Sciezka in the nose.

"Ouch!"

"I'm sorry. Can you get into my pack? I've got a spare flashlight in there."

"OK." Sciezka fumbled with the zippers and flaps of the lightweight pack, finally getting inside. "Got it." She turned it on. Her glasses were nowhere to be seen, but Winry bent to quickly scoop up the lamp.

"Be careful with that light," Winry warned. "Those fish must not be as blind as they look."

"They're probably not as blind as I am without those glasses. But how did they knock the lamp out of my hand?"

The answer came right on the heels of her question. A few feet away one of the great fish raised its head out of the pond and spat. Others followed immediately and for a few dizzying seconds Winry and Sciezka were surrounded by a rain of phosphorescent fish spit, all aimed at the spare flashlight. "Turn it off, turn it off!" Winry squealed, and her companion instantly complied. As the darkness fell around them again, the fish stopped their incredible attack.

"Sciezka. Did you see that?! They were spitting. They catch their prey by spitting at it!"

"Well I hope it's not poisonous or anything, Winry, what are we going to do? I'm useless without my
glasses!"

"I could try to stun the fish with my staff. Then we could look for your glasses."

"What if they won't stun? Or if they just get mad? I'm going to guess that my glasses fell over here--"
Sciezka took a careful step-- "and feel for them."

"That's not safe!" Winry said, frowning. "Stop, Sciezka! We'll think of something else. Maybe if I changed the wavelength of the light, they wouldn't see it, so we could use it."

"How would you do that?" Sciezka was fumbling along the cave floor.

"Sciezka, please stop! You're making me nervous. I could change the color of the light bulb using alchemy. Sciezka?"

Brief silence. Then Sciezka replied, a little weakly. "Looks like you were right, Winry. I'm sorry."

"What?"

"Something just bit me!"

XI.

"I'm here. I'm with you, Alphonse." Edward's voice, heavy with exhaustion, held a tinge of panic. He was lying full length on the bed, holding his brother in his arms. His hair had come loose out of its plait and was matted and tangled. Neither of them had slept for the agony Al had been going through as the change now spread with frightening speed through his internal organs.

"When you get back--" Al stopped, panting, his long red tongue falling over jagged teeth. His scaled, reptilian face was drawn with pain. "Please. Tell Winry I love her."

"You can tell her yourself, when we both get back," Ed said. "Don't give up on me, Al!"

Al's heart was malfunctioning, and had been for the better part of a day. It was racing, then slowing, punctuated with agonizing staggered beats and sharp pains that ran through his torso like taut wire strings. Both brothers thought that the transformation was not going to work, that it could not possibly continue and that Al was doomed, but Edward refused to give his fears legitimacy by voicing them. He leaned over Al's shoulder and continued to speak of the future. It might be the only way for them to ever get a glimpse of it. "Here's what we'll do, Al, when we get back. First, we're going to rebuild our house, right where it burned, and reclaim our lives."

Al screamed, kicking and lashing, clutching at his belly. Edward reached to gently close his jaws. "Shhh. People might hear. Next, you're going to marry Winry Rockbell and we'll all live together happily in our new house. Right? Right, Al?"

Al nodded a little, weakly. His breath was hissing between his clenched teeth, but he didn't scream again.

"Good. Then you and I are going to learn a new way of doing alchemy. One that doesn't depend on death. Between our alchemy and Winry's automail shop, we'll make a more than decent living, and you and Winry will be having kids. How many do you want, Al?"
Al didn't answer. His eyes were shut and his neck pulsed with a disturbingly irregular beat.

Ed was relentless. "How many kids do you want, Al?"

The pain let up momentarily and Al blinked dully, gazing at the ceiling. "Two or three, I guess."

"Sounds great. Boys or girls?"

Al looked back over his shoulder, trying to smile. It came out more like a grimace, but Edward understood. "Two brothers, just like us. One girl."

"All right. What are their names?"


"That's original."

Alphonse tried to laugh. It came out more as a cough and he sucked the new breath in painfully. Ed gripped his brother tighter. "I'm here!" he murmured urgently. "I love you, Al. Hold onto me. I won't let go."

Al only nodded, breathless with agony. Then, suddenly, he shuddered. It was a long shudder, the muscles contracting tightly, then relaxing completely. His head fell motionless, the glazed eye half open, a little blood running from his jaws where he had bitten himself. Thinking he was dead, Edward lay over him. "Don't be afraid, Al," he whispered urgently into his ear as his tears finally spilled over. "I'll be OK. Just go where you need to be. Go back home."

Al began to breathe again. Ed sat up, startled and, in a strange way, dismayed. The kind of pain his brother had been going through had to have an end, even if it was death. "Oh, Alphonse," he whispered.

In that moment he realized that he was looking, as Roy had once said, at “what was on his plate,” and nothing else was there. He could lie to himself all he wanted about how high and noble his aspirations were, and how selfless he had become, with all men his brothers. But above all the throng of humanity, above all of its tragedies and pettiness, its great wars and heroes and uranium bombs, nothing could ever matter more to him than his little brother, Al. His heart had finally spoken, shouting clearly over the confusion of his thoughts, and he knew then without a doubt that he was going home.
Back on the Road

Chapter Summary

Al's transformation into a dragon is nearly complete, and the two brothers can no longer stay at Winnifred's house. Meanwhile, Winry and Sciezka try to cope as an accident derails their plans.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: The victim in this chapter is a cow, and although the audience is spared most of the grisly details, the incident is still tragic. But Al can't help it if he's hungry... Meanwhile, "The fish started their ballistics" wins the prize as possibly the weirdest sentence I have ever constructed o_O;

I.

Winry's eyes widened in horror. "Sciezka!" She struggled with the lamp, but it was broken. Then Sciezka managed to turn on the spare light and they both saw it-- a wormlike baby sand eel. Winry lunged with the pikestaff, killing the creature instantly. Sciezka was on her hands and knees, clutching her right forearm.

The fish started their ballistics. Winry grabbed Sciezka around the waist with one arm and half-dragged, half-carried her back along the poolside and out of range. "Damn. That must have been a nest! Sciezka. How do you feel?"

"The bite hurts, but that's all."

"OK. The eel wasn't very big, so it probably didn't inject much poison. I'll get my kit." Winry unshouldered her pack. "Sit down on my jacket."

Sciezka complied without protest, giving her arm to Winry's expert care. The wound was very small, resembling a mosquito bite. Winry quickly applied a full treatment, suctioning the tiny wound and then applying a pressure bandage. "We want to slow down the spread of any poison left." Mature sand eels were deadly, but Winry was reassured a little as the minutes passed and Sciezka continued to show no reaction to the bite. "I think it's going to be OK," she said as she finished her first aid. She was acutely conscious of Sciezka's wide eyes silently watching her. "I think you barely got any venom, but I want to give you some antivenin anyway, OK?"

"All right. I'm so sorry, Winry."
"Hey. It's all right." After taking her friend’s blood pressure and finding it normal, Winry began to prepare the antidote, which came in powdered form, by pouring it into a small bottle of distilled water and gently mixing the solution. "This is going to slow us down. I don't want you walking for awhile."

"How long?"

"At least twenty-four hours. Sciezka, you’re not allergic to sheep, are you?"

The librarian gave a startled laugh. “Not that I’m aware.”

“Good.” Winry was preparing a shot of another liquid from a small vial. “I need to give you this first as insurance. It’s just a little adrenaline. OK?”

“OK.”

Winry applied the needle with the smoothness of long practice. "You're so much better than Edward at taking injections."

"You must be kidding me."

"Nope. He screams and cries and kicks like everything!"

Sciezka chuckled despite her predicament. "Somehow I can visualize that pretty well." Then her smile faded. "Oh!"

“Getting a rush?”

“Don’t mind me. I do the same thing at the dentist.”

Winry was reassuring. “That’s normal. Let me see your arm again.”

Sciezka held it out. Winry wrapped the limb tightly with a strap near the shoulder and began to probe for a vein.

“Are we going to have to spend the night down here?"

"I think so. Our guide won't be back for weeks anyway, and I can’t carry you with me if I have to go to the surface to use the emergency radio. I say we pitch our tent right here.” She found the vein and pierced it, installing the IV line.

"I don't want to stay here," Sciezka said tightly.

"I doubt if I can carry you very far.” Releasing the strap, Winry paused, holding up the IV bottle and adjusting the drip. "Why don't you just rest while these antibodies go in. Prop yourself up on my pack and keep the bite lower than your heart. I'll just sit here and try and think of a way I can use alchemy to solve our problem."

"OK." Sciezka lay down, arranging the coat beneath her more comfortably and resting her head and shoulders on Winry's pack. Winry, constrained by having to hold the IV, moved in a limited circle around her, laying down another of her weapons-- eel repellent. The special alloy in the small metal balls she was scattering would react adversely with the creatures' skins. It was a modification of a copper slug repellent ball which her grandmother Pinako had invented for her garden. When she was done, she settled down beside Sciezka to wait and think.
Alphonse lay comatose and unresponsive during the long night. The shape of his body looked oddly crooked under Winnifred’s now stained and tattered sheets, his shoulders and hips appearing disjointed. His breath came roughly yet evenly between jagged teeth. A pool of saliva was collecting on his pillow.

Edward sat quietly in the darkest corner of the room. He was clutching the Orichalcum key, deep in thought. Hohenheim of Light had said to him in his dream that when Al was ready to fly they could leave this place. Edward didn’t want to put too much weight on anything he experienced in such a strange vision, but at the same time he knew his father’s words could very well be significant. Alphonse was nowhere near ready to fly. He looked again at his brother.

Al’s eyes fluttered momentarily open in his unconscious state, almost as if he were responding to Ed’s attention. They were turning a weird shade of milky blue. Ed didn’t know what to make of it, and he almost didn’t care. It wasn’t that he was ceasing to feel for his brother, but he was getting badly burned out, struggling so hard to take care of him. He looked away and sighed, turning the pendant over and over in his hand.

“Roy,” he said softly. “I hope you realize the battle isn’t over. I hope you’re watching the sky.”

* * *

“Winry? What’s wrong?”

Winry’s arm had grown tired and she had constructed a small IV stand by turning the sand at her feet into glass. Afterwards she’d curled up for a short rest, not intending to sleep; but here was Alphonse, bending over her with a concerned look. To her mind, he appeared as he always had.

“Al! You’re OK! I’m so happy to see you!” Then her face fell. “Sciezka’s been bitten.”

They were in Siegfried’s study, before Heinrich had ransacked it. Alphonse was standing by the fireplace with a book. “Need some help with your alchemy?”

“Yes,” she said eagerly. “Teach me, Al.”

* * *

Ed looked quickly toward the bed again as his brother began to mutter in his sleep. Putting the key away under his shirt, he got up to lean over him. “Al?”

The reptilian head—it was beginning to look like the head of a small dragon now, except for the cherry ponytail—moved a little as Al began to speak in his sleep. “Auris. Thetis. The circles have to intersect, you know,” he said under his breath. Alphonse was performing alchemy.

“Hm.” Ed sighed and finally lay down beside him. He’d missed two days’ work already, and he had no intention of returning to the job as long as his brother remained in this dire state of flux. But Al’s stomach had healed completely and he was starting to eat dragon-sized quantities of food, and Rose’s coins were dwindling. If Ed couldn’t work, they would be gone inside a week, and what would they
“Winry?” said Sciezka. She reached out tentatively with a shaking hand to touch her friend’s shoulder. Winry started and sat up quickly. “I’m so sorry, Sciezka. How are you doing?”

In the dim glow of the shielded lantern, Sciezka’s eyes were large and shining with unshed tears. “I’m scared,” she said softly. “I don’t feel so good.”

“OK,” Winry replied, getting up and checking the IV. Almost all of the liquid had gone in. “You could be getting a reaction to the antidote rather than the poison,” she said.

“I don’t think so. I’m starting to get a really bad headache.”

“That is a symptom of a sand eel bite, all right.”

“Do you think the antidote is defective?”

“No. Rockbell Automail has a really good supplier. Though usually we don’t order stuff like antivenins!” As she spoke, Winry was taking her friend’s blood pressure again. “Sometimes a bite will take a lot of antivenin to completely neutralize it. If your headache doesn’t get better soon, I’ll give you some more. Meantime, I think we should radio Alex Armstrong in Lior. They keep a special aircraft there for emergencies.”

“Does that mean you’re going to leave me all alone here? Oh, Winry, please, please don’t!” Sciezka’s voice bordered on panic.

“I could try making the tent into a travois, and pull you behind me,” Winry said. “But it would really slow me down. It’s your choice to make, Sciezka. I don’t want to leave you, either. But I’d make it to the surface a lot faster if I did.”

“Don’t. Please, don’t.” Sciezka clutched at her hand. Winry grasped her by the arms and pulled her into a brief hug. “OK. It’s OK. I’ll try to do alchemy. I’ll make a hand cart.”

* * *

It was an ambitious undertaking, but in the end it proved to be beyond Winry’s budding powers. She was unable to concentrate deeply enough to effect the necessary alchemical transmutations and they were losing too much time. Not only was Sciezka’s condition gradually worsening, but Winry kept glancing over her shoulder, as if feeling another presence nearby. A couple of times, as she was trying to think out her array, she jumped as she thought she still heard Al’s voice addressing her.

After a futile ten minutes, she gathered up her most necessary items: her heavy medical kit, which she fastened to her belt, the lantern and some water, and the pikestaff. “OK, Sciezka. I’m not good enough yet with the alchemy, so let’s just see how far I can carry you.”

Once Sciezka was situated upon her back, she knew she wouldn’t make it. The librarian was not a large woman, and Winry was quite strong, but, ultimately, she just didn’t have the muscles. It was
unfair, but true. Irked by her own biology, she staggered forward, kicking the loose sand in front of her to startle away the vermin. “I hope we’re not out of luck,” she gasped. “You’re so heavy, Sciezka!”

“Oh, please don’t say that!”

Winry did not reply for a moment as she struggled on. Then: “I’m really angry at myself. I should have gone to radio Armstrong as soon as I got the antivenin started.”

“It really hasn’t been very long at all. Don’t blame yourself,” her friend replied. “Besides, you’re an automail technician, not an emergency worker.”

“My parents were both. I should remember what they taught me.” Winry fell silent after this, but she made it only three hundred feet down the tunnel before she staggered and halted. “Sciezka,” she gasped. “I can’t do it.”

“Winry!” Sciezka cried, clutching at her frantically as her friend lowered her carefully to the ground. But Winry’s voice was firm. “Sciezka. Be reasonable. We need to get you airlifted, so I have to use the radio. To use the radio I have to be above ground. I can’t carry you and we have no transportation. I have to go, and you have to stay here. That’s all there is to it. I could try to make a passage from here up to the surface by using alchemy, but I’m afraid of causing a cave-in if I mess with the ceiling.”

The librarian stared at her with glassy eyes. The look was partly terror, partly the venom at work. Winry’s hopes that the tiny bite might be harmless were proving false, and her trust in the antivenin, misplaced.

“I’m going now,” she said gently, placing Sciezka’s flashlight in her hand. “Don’t be afraid. You’re safe if you don’t move from this spot.”

Great tears began to flood down the girl’s cheeks. “Oh, Sciezka!” Winry cried and knelt to embrace her tightly. “I promise I’ll come back right away.”

“Winry,” Sciezka whispered. “Please be careful.”

“I will. Don’t move, Sciezka. I’ll be back soon.”

Getting up, Winry took off at a run down the long tunnel, but she hadn’t gone more than a few hundred feet before she heard Sciezka scream. Swearing profusely, she turned and headed back, but when she neared Sciezka’s location she halted. Her friend had collapsed face down on the cavern floor, and looming above her like an apparition from a nightmare was Shou Tucker.

* * *

In the late summer and early fall of each year, salmon ran up the Rain River, and when they did, Winry had always gone fishing with Ed and Al. The salmon were surprisingly difficult to catch, for when they left the salt water to spawn, their appetites disappeared. Lures had to be used which enraged the fish, tricking them into striking. One day Winry had hooked a huge buck. After a protracted battle, during which Edward and Alphonse alternately cheered her on and did ‘helpful’ things like grabbing the line and throwing rocks in the water, she managed to get her prize up the steep bank, only to be confronted at the top by a hungry bear. Most girls would have screamed and run away, but in this case, it was the two young brothers who fled the scene in panic, leaving her cursing after them. She dealt with the brute by throwing it Edward’s lunchbox, and had made it
safely home by herself with the salmon. The most striking thing she remembered about the incident—besides seeing Edward look utterly sheepish afterwards—was the incredible stench of the bear.

Shou Tucker had that same stench. Perhaps that shouldn’t have been surprising, considering that half of his dreadfully twisted self was a great shaggy beast. As Winry rushed forward and gathered up Sciezka in her arms, he shuffled closer, snuffling as though he should be able to smell them, too. Living down here in the caverns, he had discarded his disguise, and the horrific results of his Life-Sewing accident were on full display.

When he was almost on top of them he paused, regarding Winry with a curiously tilted gaze. When he spoke, it was in a rusty, disused whisper. “Do I know you?”

Tucker really had lost his mind, or at least his memory, it seemed. “Please,” she said, ignoring the question. “Can you help my friend? She was bitten by a sand eel. The antivenin isn’t working.”

“Antivenin?” He loomed closer. She didn’t draw back. “There is no antivenin for these sand eels. They’re special.” He giggled. “They’re mine.”

“What do you mean, they’re yours?!” Winry demanded. “Are you telling me you’ve messed with them?”

Tucker’s eyes gleamed. “They’re my first line of defense. They were very effective against the bounty hunter Mustang sent after me.” He drew his lips back over his teeth. “He was just like you. He thought a standard polyvalent antivenin would work against their bites.”

Winry drew a deep breath. “My friend and I are not bounty hunters.”

“But you were looking for me. I heard your whispers.”

“Yes. I’m working on a very special project and I need your help.”

Tucker turned his back at once—or was it his front? It was hard to say. Winry found herself uncomfortably facing what looked like a shrivelled, disused prong. Or maybe it was just a misplaced tail, she thought, forcibly wresting her mind away from its worst nightmare.

“I don’t work on ‘projects’ anymore,” he said flatly.

“You modified these sand eels, didn’t you?”

“Child’s play.”

Winry’s thoughts flashed back to Nina and Alexander and she cringed at his choice of words. “If that was so easy, why won’t you help my friend here?”

Tucker turned back. “Why should I? I don’t know who you are, or what you really want.” He frowned. “Quite possibly you’re something I should leave to die here.”

“Have you heard of the Gate between the worlds?” Winry asked bluntly.

“I have more than heard of it,” Tucker said suspiciously. “I have seen it with my own eyes. Every good alchemist has. It knows no time or space. It contains all that there is.”

“Yes. It does. Tucker, the universe on the other side of that Gate is a mirror of our own. The people we love are there!”

There was a momentary silence. Winry bit her lip, thinking she had dropped the bombshell
prematurely. In her arms, Sciezka stirred a little, groaning softly. She was beginning to tremble—
going into shock, Winry saw.

“I know who you are now,” Tucker said suddenly. “You want the boys. The two alchemists.”

“Yes. And you want your family back. They’re there, Tucker. Beyond the Gate.”

“Are you quite sure?” She thought she heard his voice trembling. “There is no mistake?”

“There is no mistake. But to get them back, we need a Life Sewing alchemist. I heard rumours you
were here and came to find you. Now please—won’t you help Sciezka?”

Tucker hesitated for one more moment. Then he reached with his great beastly arms to lift the girl
away from Winry’s embrace. Carefully he draped her over one of his massive shoulders. Then he
began to shuffle away. Winry scrambled to her feet and followed him.

IV.

It was morning. Ed was working in the kitchen. The still, humid sun was slowly rising in the garden.
A large spider had spun a web directly over the kitchen window and as he watched, an almost
invisible gnat got caught in it.

Ed thoughtfully stirred the soup. It was time and past time for them to leave Winnifred’s. They’d
almost been discovered twice by the hired gardener trimming the lawn and hedges. But Alphonse
was going through hell, and changing his environment could be the final blow.

Ed sighed. This would be the third day he hadn’t shown up for work, and he was certain that he had
lost his job. They were down to their last coins. He had just decided that he was going to have to call
August the metallurgist and beg temporary shelter when he heard Alphonse utter a terrible scream.
Ed dropped his spoon and rushed out of the kitchen.

Alphonse had fallen out of bed and Edward gazed in utter horror at his little brother's deformed
figure as it lay fully revealed on the floor. Al’s body seemed to be stretching and elongating; his
shoulders and hips appeared to be shifting from their sockets as his limbs arranged themselves for
efficient crawling.

The keening was caused from his skin splitting. It had burst open along his chest and hung loosely
from his ribs, moist and clean, like an eggshell freshly emptied. Underneath it, Al’s new skin, white
and glowing, was revealed. As Ed stared, Alphonse howled again. His eyes were clouded and blind.
He rolled and struggled, instinctively trying to escape the shroud of his own dead flesh.

Edward shut his open mouth and waded in. "Al! Al! It's all right! Let me help you!" He flicked open
the switchblade he'd built into his arm. Al somehow saw it and began to cringe backward, claws
scrabbling on the hardwood floor. "It's all right!" Edward said, kneeling. "Just let me cut that stuff off
you!"

Al's snout fell to the floor and he snuffled like a pig. Gingerly Edward cut away the dead skin. It was
pulled very tight around his middle and as Ed cut the remaining connective tissue it gave way with a
pop. Immediately the crying ceased.

Ed collapsed by his brother's side. "Al. Can you hear me?”
“Yes.” Al’s voice was miserable.

“You’re just shedding your skin. It’s normal for growing dragons. Now put your head down again and I’ll help you. I’m going to grab the old skin and I want you to start backing up when I tell you to, OK?”

Alphonse nodded slowly, a string of snot hanging from his nose. Ed leaned in to grasp the rapidly drying skin. It felt very thin and fragile in his fingers, but as he gave the nod to his brother and Al started pulling back, he realized that it was incredibly tough. He dug his feet into the floor as Al continued backwards, and the skin began to give. Edward pulled with all his might and the skin turned inside out, coming off of Al’s neck and head like a singularly possessive article of clothing. It got stuck at Al’s bony jaws and he began to whimper with pain. Ed gave one last yank and the skin tore off, sending him tumbling and making his little brother yelp.

Ed got to his feet, looking at the skin he still held in his hand. “That’s amazing, Al! I’m going to keep it. It might come in handy for something.”

“You can be so gross sometimes,” Alphonse said resentfully.

“You should talk. Lift your arm, brother.”

Al lifted his right forelimb from the floor and watched as Edward stripped the old skin from it as neatly as a long glove. They repeated the sequence with the other forelimb. Then Ed had his brother turn around, and they removed the outgrown skin from his waist, hind limbs and tail with the same method. As they did so, Alphonse glanced down at himself, then stared. He sat down on the floor with his legs apart and spoke in a stricken voice. "Ed! Everything's disappeared now!"

Ed bent to look. "Oh!"

"What is that?" Al sounded horrified. "It looks like girl parts! I'm not changing sex, am I?"

"No, you're not. Reptiles have this. So do birds. It's called a cloaca. A single opening that does everything."

"Oh, wonderful." Al pulled himself together with great weariness. His eyes had unclouded when the old skin had come off over them, and he picked morosely at himself, removing shreds they’d missed.

"I'm sure all the important stuff is still in there somewhere." Ed forced a smile. "At least it's well protected."

"Yeah, but now I'll have to go to the bathroom like Winry."

"It won't be forever," Ed said firmly as he helped his brother up, looking him over. Al’s breasts had also vanished, and the two smallest fingers and toes on each hand and foot were disappearing. His gleaming new scales were taking on an iridescent sheen. "How's your heart?"

"It's running good now."

"Can I listen?"

"Sure." Al straightened, pushing his chest out a little as Ed bent to lay his ear on it. "It sounds different," Edward said after a moment. "But how, I couldn't say." He turned Al around and listened again between his shoulder blades. "Yep. Definitely different." Then he stepped back. "If I remember right," he said, "Reptiles have a heart with three chambers instead of four. I bet that's what it was doing-- losing one chamber."
Al was silent for a moment as he laboriously pulled his trousers on. They barely fit anymore; he’d cut a hole in the seat for his tail. Then he said quietly, "I'm scared of changing back, Ed. I don't know if I can stand to go through all that again."

"When we change you back, we'll do it the right way. With alchemy," Ed said. "It'll be instantaneous."

Al regarded him, pleased. "So you've really decided in your heart that we belong back in our own world?"

"Yes." Ed said it with finality. "Roy was right all along, and so were you. We have to get back home."

Al gazed at him for a long moment. "You know," he said finally, "That almost makes all of this worth it. I'm so glad you're finally seeing common sense. It's good to be worried about this world, brother. I am too. But if we really want to help it, we have to take care of ourselves first. Right?"

"Right!" Their hands, one of metal, one with claws, clasped firmly, making a pact.

“Well, little brother,” Ed said after a pause, “It’s way past time for us to leave this place. You’re looking almost good enough to travel now. Think we can hit the road tomorrow?"

V.

It was amazing how fast Tucker could move, thought Winry as she breathlessly followed the monster who was carrying her friend away. Like the bear she’d met when fishing, his bulk effectively disguised his agility. He knew the tunnels so well, or else had such keen animal senses, that he needed nothing to light his way, and Winry was forced to stumble along behind him in the dark.

By the time they reached Tucker’s underground lab, Sciezka had ceased to tremble. Tucker lay her on a stone bench and bent over her. “She’s quite far gone,” he whispered. “She may be beyond our help.”

Winry rushed to her friend’s side. In the alchemical light of the laboratory, Sciezka’s face was bluish-white. “She’s not breathing,” she said. She hiked herself up on the bench to straddle her and began vigorous chest compressions. “Come on, Tucker!” she snarled. “You either help me bring her back, or you’ll never see your family again!”

Taking his time, Tucker began to draw a careful alchemical array in the sand of the cavern floor.

“I had a brother when I was young,” he said as he worked. “We weren’t twins, but we could have been.”

Winry leaned forward, pressing her mouth to Sciezka’s as she supplied her friend with oxygen.

“We were just like your Edward and Alphonse,” Tucker added. “But he died when I was nine.”

Winry did a doubletake and Tucker laughed bitterly. “No, Miss Rockbell. I didn’t do it. He had a heart defect.”

Winry bent urgently over Sciezka, listening for a heartbeat.
“My earliest experiments were on pigs. We lived on a farm, you understand. I wanted to see if body parts could be replaced. I met with some success, enough to keep me going. But in the end it was not enough to save my brother.” Tucker finished his array with a flourish and stepped back. “You might wish to get out of range, or there could be some unpleasant results,” he said.

Winry slid from the bench with a sense of despair. If Tucker’s alchemy failed, there was nothing left that she could do for Sciezka. “Oh, why were you the one to get bitten?” she murmured. She left the vicinity to stand “behind” the Life-Sewing alchemist, peering around his great bulk.

When Tucker activated his array, she was momentarily blinded. His alchemy was noisier than the Elrics’ and had more side effects, one of them being that his transmutations were not always contained. This, Winry already knew from long-ago conversations with Ed and Al. She held her breath, squelching the urge to cringe. It was when the light faded that she did so.

At first Sciezka looked dead, lying motionless on the slab. There was something different about her, and at the same moment Winry started forward, she opened her eyes and began to wail. It didn’t sound like her—in fact, it didn’t even sound human. Winry rushed to her as she thrashed about on the cold stone bench. Then she whirled. “Tucker!” she screamed.

“Please, let me explain,” he said hastily. “Even I don’t know how to neutralize the special venom of my sand eels, and I don’t yet know the exact configuration of DNA required to be resistant to it, either. To get that effect I had to modify several large sections of her DNA. I had to turn her into a human sand eel. I am sorry about the side effects.”

Winry turned back to her friend, who was growing increasingly frantic. Sciezka’s skin had turned hard and brittle. Something similar had happened to her hair, and her face was hideously distorted. Winry grasped her by the shoulders. “Sciezka! Calm down!”

“What’s wrong with me?” Sciezka gasped, clinging to her friend.

“We found Tucker. He’s changed you with alchemy to make you resistant to the poison.”

“What?”

“It’ll be OK. It was the only thing he could do.”

Sciezka looked down at herself. “But I’m not human any more,” she cried.

“Yes you are. It was just a few changes. Right, Tucker?”

He leaned over them and Sciezka screamed again. Winry turned her back to him, shielding her from the sight. “Don’t crowd her,” she warned.

“Oh. Living with no one else around, it’s easy to forget one’s own ugliness,” Tucker whispered mournfully. He shuffled back a few steps.

Winry had seen many horrific sights in her day—many war injuries and many missing limbs. Edward’s grossly scarred and maimed body was, in its own way, just as dreadful as Tucker’s. Yet Edward’s condition had always seemed a little more noble to her, though both he and Tucker had been ruined by their own unethical mistakes.

Sciezka was different, she realized as she gave her friend some breathing room. The librarian was an innocent bystander, stricken by accident. As she met Sciezka’s eyes and saw the depth of her revulsion at what she had become, Winry suddenly understood a little of the agony Edward had suffered over Alphonse’s transmutation into armor. Al, of course, had not been wholly innocent, but
Ed had led him into the experiment, and it had been Ed’s responsibility to restore him to his original state, just as it was hers now to restore Sciezka.

“Don’t worry, Sciezka,” she said firmly. “This is only temporary. Right, Tucker?” She glared at him.

“Right,” he breathed, hesitant to cross her.

There was an awkward moment as the three regarded each other. Finally Winry put her arm around Sciezka. “Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes,” she said tearfully.

“Good. Tucker, is there any place here where we can have some privacy?”

“Of course. This way,” he gestured.

Winry helped Sciezka to her feet. She stood awkwardly, adjusting to the inflexibility of her new, chitinous skin, but after a moment she responded to Winry’s urging. Slowly they followed the Life Sewing Alchemist out of his lab.

VI.

Edward and Alphonse left Winnifred’s house late the next day, leaving behind them no gold, but a heartfelt and honest letter of thanks. Of course, it didn’t mention dragons, Orichalcum or the Gate, but it did discuss Heinrich, and had an abbreviated version of what had happened at the Golden Toad to clarify what had made the brothers so desperate as to break into a strange house. At first Edward was not keen on the idea, seeing it as confession to a crime, but Al talked him into it on the grounds that these people deserved an explanation and might even appreciate the gesture. “They’re a kind family, Ed. And if we don’t explain ourselves, they might think Gypsies had been living in the house. We don’t want any of Noaa’s people getting blamed for what we did.”

One concession to the paranormal which they did include in their letter was information from and about the benevolent resident ghost, including his name and history, and the exact location of the cache of gold which he said was buried under the foundation. Al knew he had already been communicating with Winnifred. “She’s probably going to grow up to be a famous medium,” he commented as they composed that part of the letter. “John Sampson says he can talk to her almost as clearly as he can talk to me.”

By the time they were done explaining the state of the house on paper, dusk was beginning to fall. Alphonse, of course, couldn’t travel in daylight. He was too much a dragon now for any disguise to work. When darkness had covered the city streets, the brothers abandoned their comfortable refuge with a strong sense of regret.

They headed out, for the borders of town and the countryside beyond. Here was the least chance for Alphonse to be discovered, and the best opportunity for him to get the quantity of food he needed as a dragon. It was doubtful that Ed could earn enough money to keep him in meat; they might have to kill cattle or game for Al to survive. Edward was careful to keep an eye on him as they traveled, as Al was still in transformation.

The stars shone brighter in the midnight sky as they crossed the Isar river bridge and left the city behind them. The brothers stopped under a tree to rest and breathe the sweet country air. “I don’t
mind saying how much I miss Resembool,” Ed said at length. “I know I used to get restless when I went back there, but right now it’s the one place I want most to see.”

“Yeah.” Al’s head dipped in agreement. He was sitting awkwardly, his back to the tree. Even situated like that, he towered above his brother. “So, Ed,” he said presently. “Are we going to try to find that mountain, or what?”

Edward shifted to look up at him. “That would be a good idea, but the question is, are you ready to go a distance? I figure we have to hang out here in the lowlands until you get your growth.”

“I wonder when that will be, and how big I’ll get.”

“It shouldn’t take that long. Dragons grow practically overnight.”

“Right. Still, every day we lose makes us less likely to be able to use the Thule Gate.”

“I don’t think they’re in a hurry. They got the crap beaten out of them the last time they tried to take over the motherland. They’ll take their time now and try to get it right. Who knows, conquest might not even be their intent anymore, since that crazy Eckhart’s out of the picture.”

There was a momentary silence. Some water creature splashed softly in the river. Off in the distance they heard a cow lowing.

“What bothers me right now is that I can’t seem to contact Roy.”

Alphonse frowned. “You can’t? I thought you warned him.”

“No.” Ed shifted his weight uncomfortably. “After we’d learned to talk with Winry, I’d assumed I could communicate with Roy, but when I actually tried, it failed.” Edward finally stood up again, brushing dirt and leaves from the seat of his trousers. “It’s like he was listening, but didn’t want to hear.”

“How weird.” Al stretched out again onto all fours. Though he alternated between this and the usual upright posture, this was now his favorite mode of walking as it was becoming the most comfortable. It also lowered his curious profile, enabling him to have more of a chance of passing unseen.

* * *

They found a good hiding spot in a large dry culvert under the next bridge. It wasn’t that far down the road, putting them within two miles of the outskirts of town. There was a cold draft blowing through, but Ed was resourceful and used sticks to hang one of their blankets across the upper end of the large concrete pipe. Laying out the stained and tattered goose down comforter they’d taken from Winnifred’s, they wrapped themselves warmly in it and went to sleep without further discussion.

VII.

When Sciezka was finally asleep, Winry went looking for Tucker. He’d shown them into a small, dimly-lit cavern off of the main lab. His scent hung heavy in the air here, and she had correctly surmised that this was his quarters. As she left the room, she noticed that the large trunk he had in the
corner was standing open, but she didn’t go near it.

He was seated at a stone table in one corner of his lab, silently contemplating something in his hand. As she drew near, he looked quickly up. “Ah. Miss Rockbell. Is she better?”

Winry drew a deep breath and sat down opposite him. “I wouldn’t use that particular word, but she did stop crying. She’s asleep now.”

“Good.” He nodded gently. His eyes were fixed on her, and when she met them with her own steady gaze, they didn’t look away.

“What do you have there?” she asked.

He handed it over. “A picture of my Nina.”

Winry examined it. “I remember her, from when Ed and Al were studying at your place.”

“Yes.”

Winry knew what had happened to his daughter Nina and her dog, but she avoided even thinking about it, instead choosing to put down the picture and reach into the knapsack she was carrying. She produced a book. “Here.”

“‘The New Physics.’” Tucker reached for it eagerly. As her hand brushed his massive claws she barely managed to repress a shudder of revulsion. Their eyes met again and she looked quickly at the floor, horrified at herself. “Ed and Al have proven this theory to be true, as far as it goes. I think I understand it, and I’m ready to begin building a Gate.”

“Building a Gate?” Tucker stared at her.

She nodded firmly. “That’s right. I can build a Gate, with your help, but I need resources. The question is, how do we find our loved ones once we do? That’s another thing you have to help me with. You’re a Life Sewing alchemist. We need to be able to detect their DNA at a distance, through the fabric of a world that doesn’t allow for our kind of alchemy.”

“Doesn’t allow it? How do you know this?”

“Ed told me so. You know that he came back briefly, right? Well, there’s no alchemy in the other world, Tucker. That’s why they’re stuck there.”

Tucker paused. Then: “By ‘no alchemy,’ I assume you mean that the laws of physics are slightly different there,” he said. “Rather than the populace simply not having alchemical skills.”

“I don’t know what the problem is.”

“Hm. That is a complication. You realize, Miss Rockbell, that if the laws of physics differ between the two universes, Edward and Alphonse may be affected by it in ways you wouldn’t like.”

“I know.” Winry bit her tongue as she almost added that she’d been communicating with them on a regular basis, and that they’d told her this was happening. “Just another reason to get them back here where they belong.”

“And my Nina? How does she fit into all this? How can she be—over there?”

“From what Ed told me, I have reason to believe that death is somehow integrated with the Gate. People who have died here, like Maes Hughes, are very much alive in that other world. He told me
“So my Nina might really be there?” A flash of true excitement crossed Tucker’s face.

“I’m pretty sure she is, and her mother, too.”

Tucker was silent, turning a little away from her for a long, uncomfortable moment. Winry looked at the floor, the ceiling, the table. Then she noticed that his claws, resting on the stone surface, were clenched. She dared to look at his face and realized Tucker was weeping. “I have a chance,” he whispered. “A chance to atone.” He turned back to her. “And my little brother?” he said.

“Probably.”

He gave a great, gusty sigh and leaned forward. “Miss Rockbell. I am indebted to you for this information.”

She sat straight and unmoving. “And?”

“I will help you build your Gate.”

VIII.

“Hey, look, Ed!” A blast of hot dragon breath in his ear startled Edward awake. He sat up, blinking.

The morning sun was shining directly in his eyes and he raised his hand to shield his vision. In the golden glare he saw that the east end of their sheltering culvert opened out into a rolling swale filled with the tall brown grass of summer. A herd of perhaps fifty cows and their calves was grazing directly in front of them. Ed could sense Al was salivating, while ashamed of himself at the same time.

“Here’s a good opportunity for us to eat off the land, Al,” he said, quickly untangling himself from their comforter. While they’d brought as much ham and hardtack with them as Ed could purchase and carry, it would be necessary to save it for as long as possible by supplementing it with other food. Conservation was natural for Edward; he’d spent the better part of his short life on the road. Besides, Alphonse the dragon-boy would finish off everything they had in one or two meals otherwise.

“Don’t be ridiculous! There’s no way I can kill a cow!” Al was taken aback.

Edward looked at him and smiled. While Alphonse was indeed becoming a dragon, he had a ways to go before he became equipped with the kind of weaponry necessary for hunting. “That’s not what I meant,” he said patiently. “I mean, you like milk, and I can drink it to survive.”

Alphonse blinked.

Edward busied himself unpacking the large saucepan he’d brought along. Looking furtive, he crept from his hiding place and approached the nearest cow. “Uh, hi,” he said. It was a large brown cow with a delicate, almost deerlike face. She sniffed, flapped her ears at him and went back to grazing.

Ed bent, reaching under her belly to grasp one of the large pink teats gingerly. It was all he could do to keep from bursting out laughing as some untoward thoughts involving Roy Mustang crossed his
mind. In the next second, he was sitting on his bottom in the grass, the pan bouncing downhill with a clatter and Al’s laughter ringing through the still air behind him.

Ed got to his feet, almost reaching down to rub his automail leg. The cow had kicked his steel limb in the shins. He could only think he’d been very lucky it had been that leg and not his live one. “What happened?” he wondered, scratching his head.

“Your hand was cold,” Al said from the shadows. “Next time use your real one!”

Feeling incredibly stupid, Edward retrieved the pan and pursued the cow into a hollow thicket which contained particularly tender grass. She halted there and Edward tried again. Though he was rural-born, he had not been raised on a farm and was ignorant of milking, but he quickly learned the rhythm: squeezing the forefinger and thumb at the root of the teat first to close it off, then bringing the fingers successively around it until the stream of rich milk shot into the container. His hand got tired quickly, but at last he returned triumphantly to his brother with a full pan of fresh warm milk and cream. Holding his nose, Ed drank some quickly, but he gave Al most of it, and the young dragon didn’t complain, plunging his snout eagerly into the pan and slowly sucking it dry.

“How you can grow some on that?” Ed said when he was finished.

“I don’t know,” Al said, licking his lips. “I’m not a mammal anymore. But it was really good.”

They ceased talking, glancing upward as some vehicles crossed the bridge above them.

“There’s an old barn down the valley there,” Ed said, pointing. “It looks like it isn’t used anymore. I was thinking it could make a good hiding place.”

“It might be a lot more comfortable than this culvert,” Al observed. “Why don’t we check it out tonight?”

“OK. I wonder where Envy is, Al.”

Al shrugged. The effect was interesting. “It probably doesn’t matter, just as long as he doesn’t know where we are, either.”

IX.

After surprisingly little debate, it was decided between Winry and Tucker that they would set out for Resembool immediately. From her home office, Winry had easy access to several parts suppliers. If she approached each one with separate requests, the Amestris Central Intelligence Agency probably would not notice that someone was working on a large, complex, and probably suspect project. As Tucker fervently promised to underwrite the project, the only things left to establish with regards to building a mechanical Gate was where to get the Orichalcum which Ed and Al had both indicated Winry would need, and to find, or make, a building large enough to house the finished product. So, the next morning, Tucker, Sciezka and Winry all bundled into Winry’s vehicle at the mouth of the Sand Caves where it had been left, and they started for Resembool.

Sciezka was not very strong after her ordeal with the venom and her transformation, and the walk to the surface exhausted her. She lay in the back seat with her head in Winry’s lap, as Tucker insisted on driving. Winry was glad he was once more in disguise.
She looked down at Sciezka, dabbing her chitinous forehead with a cool, wet rag. “Are you feeling better?” she murmured.

Sciezka blinked. “Yes.”

Winry smiled tenderly at her friend. “Please don’t worry. Things are looking up.”

“I know.” Sciezka was whispering. She glanced meaningfully at Tucker, and Winry bent lower to hear. “Winry? There’s something I’ve been needing to say. I haven’t been honest with you.”

Winry, surprised, was about to ask what she meant when suddenly Tucker exclaimed and jammed on the brakes. She glanced up. They were passing through a swale between two large dunes, and a group of camel-riders was converging on them from the front. They did not look friendly; they were carrying weapons, and shouting for them to stop. “Are they Ishvarlans?” she asked, a little incredulously. Most of the Ishvarlan people were now refugees, and the remainder generally tried to live as unobtrusively as possible to avoid the wrath of the Amestrian army.

“It looks like it,” hissed Tucker. “Though it has been a long time since any Ishvarlan rebels have been reported in these parts.”

“I wonder if something’s happened,” she said nervously as the riders approached their vehicle.

If not for luck, or more than luck, they would have been caught in a few moments more and Winry’s plan would have been derailed. But at that moment the wind blew, lifting the riders’ loose robes, and she saw clearly the uniforms underneath. “Tucker! They’re military!” she exclaimed.

Tucker cursed and threw the truck into reverse, backing rapidly away as the riders closed in. Several halted their camels and leveled their weapons. A warning shot was fired behind them. Tucker ignored it. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a handful of seeds, throwing them in front of the vehicle. The instant they contacted the sand, they began to grow, visibly depleting the dune as they turned into a forest of green glass spikes.

“Wow!” Winry said. “How’d you do that without a circle?”

Tucker laughed grimly. “Everyone’s been doing that since Edward came along.” He turned the truck and sped back the way they had come. “It won’t take long for them to find their way around,” he said. “We need to get a head start.”

“Damnit,” Winry growled. “It’s that Roy Mustang again! I bet he was using me this whole time.”

Tucker glanced back in obvious surprise. “I thought he was a friend of yours.”

“You have to be kidding me. After what he did to my mother and father?”

“I hadn’t heard.” The Life Sewing alchemist stepped hard on the accelerator. Winry turned to look behind them and saw the posse galloping along the top of a dune, following them. “First he killed my parents,” she said. “Then he stole my boyfriend.”

Tucker said nothing, but glanced at her incredulously. They had overshot the mouth of the Sand Caves and were heading into rockier terrain. Winry recalled from looking at the map that this was the beginning of the Lior Badlands, a huge maze of water-carved sandstone, with multiple dead ends, punctuated with alkaline potholes.

She turned again to look behind them. “They’ve gone behind the dune.”
“They’re regrouping.” Tucker slowed a little, but kept on driving toward a distant depression in the horizon.

“Are you going into the badlands?” asked Sciezka.

Tucker nodded— rather, gave what passed as a nod. “I need to buy time, set traps—Mustang is highly intelligent.”

“What does he want you for, anyway?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps for his own pet project.” He grinned mirthlessly, a disconcerting expression in someone whose head was stuck on upside down. “Sometimes it’s not nice to be wanted.”

“I’m sorry I got you into trouble,” Winry said, almost meaning it. “That wasn’t my intention.”

“I’m sure it was not, Miss Rockbell. Especially since you are no friend of his. Like me, you want merely to be left alone to continue your research.”

“That’s right. We both want the same thing—our families back.”

Tucker nodded assent and drove on.

Winry was slightly disturbed at herself for how well she was interacting with the monster. It was akin to a phenomenon she’d read about in the Physician’s Journal, where someone who had been kidnapped would begin to sympathize, and perhaps even fall in love with, their kidnapper. She fancied that she understood Tucker’s longing for his loved ones, but it was still no effort for her to remember that he had been responsible for their loss. She glanced back again, but saw no sign of the posse. Her eyes met Sciezka’s, but the girl looked quickly away.

Edward had to use the blade he’d built into his mechanical arm to cut a path through the berry bushes into the abandoned barn, and by the time he and his brother crept inside, the moon was out, and the rural landscape was illuminated with pale blue light. They explored the place slowly and carefully, relying on Alphonse’s dragon-senses to avoid obstacles.

Earlier, Ed had done some reconnaissance. The dairy farm was situated on a hundred-acre rolling slope above the Rhine. It was bisected by a small stream which had been dammed in several places to make drinking ponds for the cows. The farmhouse and its large garden was located at the upper end of the long hill, and in the early evening the cows had trooped en masse to a new barn located near the house, where Ed assumed they were milked. A separate area contained the calves. Ed knew they were destined to be veal for the well-to-do. A large field nearby was in nearly ripe feed corn—a great source of food, if they could get it without tipping the farmer off.

Ed had seen only three people on his scouting trip—the gruff old farmer, covered with whiskers, his fat wife, and one farmhand who might have been their son, so the odds, he thought, were pretty much in his and Al’s favor that they’d be able to hide there for awhile. Ed had shuddered at the thought of trying to conceal a rapidly growing dragon in Munich. The only thing that really worried him were two large dogs who accompanied the farmer everywhere, but the abandoned barn was at the foot of a half-mile slope, hundreds of yards from the house.
“Hey, brother! Look! Fresh water!” Alphonse nosed at a continuously running trough.

“Good.” Ed looked up through a hole in the roof at the moon. “This end of the barn is pretty leaky, but that stall over there seems dry.”

“Right. And the berries growing over the whole thing will help keep out the rain anyway.”

“And prying eyes, for that matter.” Ed shrugged out of his large pack and dropped it heavily on the floor, pulling out the tightly bundled comforter. “We’d better figure out an emergency exit strategy though.”

“OK. But I’m getting real tired, brother. I need a nap.” Alphonse grabbed the comforter in one claw and started dragging it into the dry stall.

Ed followed, waving away spiderwebs with his automail. “So do I. I think we’re pretty secure here.”

They bundled themselves onto the goose down. Even though it was only late August, the nights were cool, and the mornings were sometimes filled with fog. Alphonse had discovered the previous night that he could coil his long dragon body around his brother as they slept, protecting him as well as exchanging warmth. As they arranged themselves in this comfortable manner, Ed sighed. “I wish we knew what’s happening with Siegfried,” he said, settling down to rest his head on Al’s uncovered flank. A thin ray of moonlight, descending where one shingle was off the roof, made a large patch of his brother’s hide shine like mother-of-pearl. He traced the scales with one finger and Al snorted like a horse. “That tickles!”

Ed smiled, rearranged the comforter so it covered most of Al and himself, and closed his eyes.

XI.

Tucker had been in the Badlands before. As the cold desert dusk began to cast long shadows from the twisted rock formations on the canyon floor, he took one last turn, drove up a slight incline and stopped the vehicle. “We have to get out here,” he said in his trademark whisper. As Winry helped Scieszka, he leaned to lift their food and gear out of the back seat.

Once out of the truck, Scieszka looked around warily. “What is this place?” she murmured.

Tucker came up beside them and dropped their provisions. “There are many entrances to the Sand Caves,” he said. “There is one nearby. We have only to conceal the vehicle before we proceed on foot. We will cross the desert underground.”

Loathe to use circle-less alchemy unless pressed, he picked up a stick and began to slowly and carefully draw an array in the sand. As he did so, Winry took Scieszka aside.

“OK,” she whispered. “I’m just a country girl, and I’m a little slow in the intrigue department, but Mustang knew we were friends. Since you still work for the military, you must be under orders to report back on anything he tells you to. The minute we’d left the caves, you told his little posse that we’d found him and where we were. So give me the radio.”

Scieszka didn’t try to deny it. She looked at the ground, tears welling up. “I didn’t want to do it,” she whispered. “But he said I had to, or he’d put me in jail.”
“Sounds like him.” Winry waited, hand out, until Sciezka rummaged in her pocket and came up with a tiny transmitter.

Winry took it. “That the only one?”

Sciezka nodded.

“Good.” Winry placed it on a rock and crushed it under her heel. Then she smiled kindly. “It’s OK, Sciezka. That was a tough position to be in, especially with everything else that’s happened to you.” She opened her arms and Sciezka stepped tearfully into them.

“You’re crying too much lately,” she whispered, gently brushing Sciezka’s wire-stiff hair back out of her large, insectoid eyes.

“I know. It’s just—“ Sciezka was interrupted by a very strange sound. She looked over Winry’s shoulder and her eyes widened even further. Winry turned.

The truck had disappeared. Tucker still stood over his array, hands pressed firmly together as he continued to work a mysterious, invisible alchemy.

Winry and Sciezka came a little nearer. “Tucker, that truck was mine!” Winry said angrily. “What did you do with it?”

He spoke without looking at them. “I made some of my special bacteria. They eat anything I tell them to instantly, including metals and gasoline. Now that they’ve done their job, I’m destroying them before they get out into the larger environment.”

Winry’s hands went to her mouth in horror as she imagined what would happen to the world if Tucker’s bacteria escaped his control. “Isn’t that irresponsible?”

“Not really. You see, I always engineer failsafes into my work. They wouldn’t live long enough to pose a danger to civilization, but I don’t want them discovered and utilized by other alchemists.” He dropped his pose, dusting his huge shaggy hands together. Taking his stick, he began to sweep it across the churned-up area where the vehicle had recently stood, smoothing the sand so that the trail of tire tracks stopped abruptly, as if the truck had vanished into thin air. Then he turned to them, addressing Winry. “Now that you’ve ascertained how Mustang’s men learned what we were doing, we may proceed with reasonable confidence.”

Both girls blushed. “You overheard us?” Winry said, and Tucker nodded.

“Please don’t be angry with me,” Sciezka quavered.

“Oh, I’m not. I have plenty of experience with the ways of the military. Come along now.” And he turned his ponderous bulk and started off.

**XII.**

Edward and Alphonse lived uneventfully for several days in the old barn on the river. There was one nightmarish incident where Ed, after gathering a handful of swallow’s eggs for a snack, cracked one open only to expose a little premature bird which quickly died. Reproaching himself, he put the rest of the eggs back in the nest.
Each night, he snuck out to gather corn, slipping into the field at its lower end and trying to pick just one ear off each standing stalk. With milk taken in the predawn hours, and some bits of cured ham out of Ed’s pack for flavoring, they concocted a kind of corn chowder that was satisfying, if bland and eventually boring. The barn provided plenty of shingles and wood for a small nighttime fire, extinguished long before daybreak, which allowed the brothers to cook their food. But Edward soon noticed that Alphonse was not growing as rapidly as a dragon should.

On the fourth evening, Edward crept back into the barn with his shirt stuffed full of corn only to find his brother lying, abject and shivering, on the cold, damp floor. His whiskers, which had sprouted the previous week, were limp, plastered back against his scaly muzzle, and his skin had lost its luminous glow and looked bluish in the pale light. “Ed,” he whispered. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I feel so weak.”

Edward dropped his bundle and knelt by Al’s side, exclaiming in dismay. “Your heart’s beating too fast, brother!”

Al sighed. “I wish I had some meat,” he murmured, almost to himself. “I bet that would make me feel better.”

“I think you’re right,” Edward said. “Dragons don’t grow forty feet long on a few ears of corn. They eat meat, and it looks like meat’s what you’ve got to have.”

Al raised his head, pricking his now-mobile ears forward. “But Ed! This isn’t a beef ranch. It’s a dairy farm! If we were to somehow kill a cow, that farmer’s going to miss her right away!”

“I know. But we’ve got to deal with our troubles one at a time, right? And right now, you’re so weak that if we were discovered, you couldn’t even run away. A good meal of beef would fix that pretty quick, I’m betting.”

Alphonse lowered his head back onto his arms, salivating a little at the thought. “Well, brother… If you could arrange it, I think it would help a lot.”

“All right. You just lie low and conserve your strength.” Ed forced a smile. “I’ll have you some prime steak in no time.”

* * *

The dun-colored cow was fat, lazy and trusting. Edward led her into the dilapidated stall and tied her up. She stood blinking calmly at him in the moonlight, with large liquid eyes.

Ed admitted his misgivings to himself as he eyed the animal. He’d learned how to do many interesting things during his short life, but slaughter was not one of them, nor did he wish it to be. In the past, he’d killed only small game and, when necessary, chimeras and homunculi. Now Alphonse was a desperately starving dragon, and it was vital that he be fed, but he couldn’t yet go hunting on his own. Ed’s heart pounded with dreadful emotion as he tried to think out the best way to kill the cow.

With little knowledge of bovine anatomy despite his rural upbringing, he decided that his chances of a clean kill were best if he slit the animal’s throat. He positioned himself at the side of his victim and drew a deep breath. It seemed reasonable to apologize in advance—especially as he was from a world where animals were sometimes much more than they seemed. He put his live hand on her forehead. “I’m sorry, cow, but I have to feed my brother. I hope you understand.” Then he brought
his switchblade quickly and deeply across the neck where he thought the jugular would be.

It didn’t work the way he wanted. By the time the animal was dead, Ed was shaking from head to foot. Covered with blood and stench, he staggered to lean with both hands against a nearby wall and vomited the curds that same cow had so recently fed him. He left the barn still retching. At last he made his way to the nearby river and plunged clothes and all into its icy waters. As his heartbeat slowed and his mind began to replay the horrible scene, he nearly wept. It wasn’t regret—he would do it again, for Al—but he felt with great certainty that he’d committed a grave crime. At last, numbed by the glacial water, he slogged slowly up the bank, back to the barn.

Al was waiting for him, anxious and trembling, at the other end of the long structure. “No one’s come looking, but I heard a dog bark. Ed?” The little dragon’s voice dropped low and he nudged his brother urgently with his nose as Edward dropped a ragged, bloody slab of meat in front of him. “I heard. I know it must have been really hard for you. Thank you.” Alphonse leaned into his brother as he wolfed down the fresh kill.

“Yeah. It was, Al.” Edward took solace in caressing Al’s scaly cheek. “But I’ll do better next time. I know where to strike now. Go and eat the rest before it gets cold.”

“I feel better already.” Al had already finished the large chunk. He looked up, his eyes much brighter. “I’ll save you some.”

“Don’t bother.” Edward wandered to their stall as his brother eagerly slithered away. Stripping off his clothes and hanging them on a broken rafter, he wrapped himself in their comforter and sat down heavily with his back to an upright post. As he waited for Al to return, he began to ponder how to cover up their crime. He knew that even if he found a better way, the cow-killing couldn’t continue. Not only would the farmer be out with a hunting party (which he quite possibly would be anyway) but Edward didn’t want any more such stains on his hands. Killing a trusting animal was an absolutely different thing from slaying murderous chimeras. He nodded off knowing that the farmer himself probably killed a number of his cows every year, and he wondered how the man did it and still lived with himself. He remembered a friend of Granny Pinako’s once saying that a good farmer grieved for every animal he slew.

Then, just before he slipped over the edge of sleep, Ed remembered that in this world, unlike his own, many of the major religions rationalized the killing of animals. In that one stroke he understood a large portion of what was wrong with almost everything he saw here, the reason for Eckhart’s madness, and the purpose of the Thule Gate—for whenever humans were called by nonhuman labels, what was to prevent worse in a world that so blithely sanctioned slaughter? He started awake again, blinking, as the ugliness of the situation struck him. Then, as his heart slowed once more, he sighed, fingering his Orichalcum key.

Rose’s religion was one of the culprits in the matter, claiming that animals had no souls. She had asked him to take its special book to Amestris, and he had promised to do so. But what a weapon it would make in the hands of the government! He wasn’t ready to hand anyone that kind of power—and he feared those who already possessed it.
The Man With the Golden Cane

Chapter Summary

The real action commences now, as Ed and Al are driven from their hiding place in the old barn. Winry finds herself making a deal with a devil, and in the Earth world, Edward does the same.

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Gore, death, and violence, and mild descriptions of rough sex.

I.

There were no earthworms in Lior’s desert regions, but sand eels were a little like them—long, segmented and muscular. One of the major differences was, of course, the exoskeleton, for sand eels were insects that had lost their legs over the eons as they burrowed snakelike in the gravel. The thorax, where the legs had been, was smooth and leathery. It made a good saddle, and that was where Tucker had started with his alchemy. Over the course of a few hours, he’d used a well-developed technique to transform three eels into sand horses. There was something about their makeup, said Tucker, that made them amenable to manipulation. As Winry had watched him in amazement, it had become obvious to her that he’d done it before, and that others had done it long before him—because sand horses, though very rare, had been seen in this desert for hundreds of years.

Traveling with a Life Sewing Alchemist was different than anything she’d ever experienced. Tucker was incredibly creative, turning any DNA that existed in their surroundings into novel and useful forms. He’d already provided for their refreshment with musk melons he’d made from a desert plant, and now he’d speeded their journey by fashioning mounts from eels.

At first the girls had refused to get on the creatures. Winry complained that there was no way to steer, but Tucker had only laughed. “Sand eels are driven by scent,” he said. “Mine is a female and I’ve enhanced its pheromones. Your two animals will follow wherever mine goes.”

“And where are we going?” Sciezka had asked.

Tucker glanced at Winry, and she replied, “Even though the authorities might go looking for us in Resembool, I still want to go back there. It’s not only my home, it’s Al’s and Edward’s, and they will naturally be attracted back to it. My intuition says the location of the Gate in this world will affect whether or not they get back here safely.”
“Women’s intuition is not to be taken lightly,” Tucker had murmured. “You are probably quite right. Well, then. Resembool is a long way off, and these caverns will take us far out of the way. We’d best get going.” And he’d straddled his sand horse, waiting only long enough for the girls to mount theirs before goading them forward at speed into a cavern under an overhanging rock.

* * *

They had been travelling for hours. Exhausted, Winry clung to the back of her mount. Ducking low as the tunnel roof sloped down, she glanced back, then ahead. She knew Sciezka had to be in back of her and Tucker, in front, but all she could see with her now-dim flashlight was the rock so close overhead, looking like a pale coral reef, covered with lichens and little scuttling things. Then she was startled as the low ceiling suddenly yielded upward to a vast blackness.

She leaned back, trying to slow down the sand horse. “Tucker!” she called, and could tell from the echo that the chamber was huge, though her eyes could not penetrate the dead blackness. She closed them, fighting down a sense of suffocation, then looked back toward where Sciezka should be.

There was no answer. Winry gripped her sand horse with her knees, trying to stand a little taller in the “saddle” as she shone her quickly dimming flashlight into the darkness. “Hey, guys!” she yelled. “Where are you? Answer me!”

The sand horse began to slide steeply downhill. Then it rolled and she fell off, landing with a grunt half under the creature on a hard stone surface. She managed to hang onto her flashlight at the expense of her elbow, rolling quickly to get to her feet. Shining the light where she’d landed, she saw a clean expanse of limestone. Her steed had vanished utterly, as if it had disappeared down a hole between one heartbeat and the next.

She looked around wildly. “Sciezka!” she bawled. “Tucker! Damn you! Where are you?!?”

But there was no response, only a silence so dead and so vast that she knew intuitively she was the first person to break it in thousands of years.

II.

Ed woke abruptly in the early morning hours. He was still sitting slumped against the post. Alphonse had not returned. He picked himself hastily up and hurried down the center aisle of the long barn only to find his brother deeply asleep, a contented smile on his dragon face, near the scant remains of the cow. Ed noted that Alphonse already seemed longer and larger, and his middle was grossly swollen with his recent meal. A portion of the hide lay bundled neatly up nearby, and when Ed opened it, he found several choice pieces of beef, including a generous portion of the liver, arranged inside. Edward smiled despite himself and repackaged his share. He had a feeling that even if he managed to pull the shades over this farmer’s eyes, he’d still be needing that meat afterwards.

Of the cow, not much was left. Ed had not thought to collect her blood and it had all soaked into the ground. If the days stayed hot, the stench of it would soon attract all sorts of vermin. A few large bones lay here and there, thoroughly gnawed and licked clean, but aside from those and several large pieces of hide, the entire animal had vanished. Ed glanced again at the little dragon, his eyebrows rising into his hairline. Feeding his brother was going to be even more difficult than he’d thought. He
was already beginning to regret the way they’d done it the previous night, as the more he thought about it, the more precarious their situation here now seemed to be.

Al did not stir as Ed began to pick up the bones and bits and lay them on the largest piece of hide. He used his switchblade to saw loose a long ribbon of it, with which he tied up the offal into a bundle. Then he hesitated. “Al? Al!” But a newly-gorged dragon was nearly impossible to wake.

Ed had several choices. He could make a shovel from some old implement parts he’d found lying in the barn and bury the remains in the soft earth; he could throw them in the river and let the current carry them away; or he could take them elsewhere. Edward was not into agriculture, but he knew his farmers, and if this one was anything like his old neighbors back in Resembool, the moment he realized he had a missing animal he’d be out searching for it with his dogs. If Edward were to leave the offal scattered near the river as though a predator had gotten the cow, (which was exactly what had happened,) the search might stop there. Otherwise the whole farm would quickly be turned upside down, and the discovery of Alphonse would be all but certain. Edward hefted the offal over one shoulder, picked up the old wooden shovel-handle he’d found and started off. He didn’t like leaving Al asleep without telling him where he was going, but this time there was no help for it.

Moving with his customary wariness, Ed exited the barn by his usual route, a hidden trail he’d cut through a tall patch of ripening blackberries on the river side. He and Al had figured out that this barn, so close to the floodline, had probably long ago been part of some kind of boat house. It made things handy for him now; he had only a few feet to go before he waded into the river.

It was always dangerous for him to enter the water with no backup from his brother, as he couldn’t swim. Even if he could, he would be impossibly weighed down by his heavy automail. Were he to step in a hole, he’d have to throw away his burden and perhaps his limbs to fight for his life. During the course of their adventures, Al had already had to rescue him several times. Fortunately, the river bottom here was made of silty sand and gravel washed down from the nearby mountains, and it remained firm under his feet as he slowly waded downstream, feeling his way with the shovel handle.

After he’d gone two hundred yards downriver, putting a bend between himself and their hideout, he unshouldered the offal at a heavily-trampled pasture corner where the cows usually drank. This would be the logical place for a predator to hunt. Untying the hide, he tossed the waste piece by piece onto the muddy bank. His logic was that if the farmer could find the carcass of his missing cow relatively easily, he then might not conduct a search of every corner of his property. When he was finished and had thrown the hide after it, he hesitated. He wasn’t fully satisfied; there were no tracks here other than those of the cows, and he didn’t know what kinds of carnivores might be frequenting the German wilderness. If it was anything like his own world, the biggest threat here would be from wolves and bears, but he hadn’t heard much about either since he’d been here.

After standing in thought for several minutes, he decided this was the best he could do and started back upstream. When he got back to the barn, he used a tree branch to thoroughly sweep away his tracks at the shore, and he carefully bent the berries back in place so the narrow trail he’d made to the water was not visible from land or river. Then he crept back into the old building and began rummaging in his makeshift pack for some hardtack. Alphonse was still deeply asleep.

This part of the building, where Edward had slaughtered the cow, was very much broken down and most of the roof was gone. Ed was uncomfortable with his brother sleeping so soundly in such an exposed place, but there was nothing he could do about it. As he ate, he made a small sundial from a shingle, drawing an approximate clock in the dirt of the stall floor. The sun hadn’t risen high enough over the rotten walls to hit it yet when he sat suddenly straighter as he heard the farmer calling his dogs to heel in the distance. He got up restlessly, and crossed the center aisle to creep along the uphill
side of the building until he found a good vantage point.

By now the cows had all been milked; he could tell from the emptiness of their udders as well as their daily departure to the distant corners of the pasture. Evidently the farmer was not alarmed enough to pen them up. Ed began to wonder if he shouldn’t have just thrown the bones into the river after all when he saw the dogs beginning to bound down the hill, directly toward the barn. Then the farmer once more called them to heel as he disappeared out of Ed’s range of vision.

Edward slipped back to his brother’s side. They needed to be ready to move out quickly in case of imminent discovery. “Al!” he whispered fiercely, and tried to shake him. Then he sat back, startled at Alphonse’s new bulk. It seemed as though he’d already put on most of the mass of the cow; Ed could barely move him, and he was so deeply unconscious that he suspected even hitting him with a board wouldn’t wake him up. He quickly began to gather pieces of wood and fallen shingles, trying to cover over his brother’s pearly, shining hide. Winnifred’s comforter wouldn’t help much as it was also white. He ranged through the barn, gathering more materials and returning to spread them over Alphonse until nothing was visible of his brother except the very tip of his nose. He covered that lightly with a rusted old bucket. Then he sat down by Al, flipping out his switchblade, and sat quietly polishing the weapon with his sleeve as he listened intently. He’d had no idea that his brother the dragon would sleep so long or so deeply, and he realized that he and Al should have packed the cow out in quarters the previous night to a safer location.

For awhile, nothing happened. The sun hit Ed’s makeshift dial and progressed from one mark to another until it stood nearly at zenith. Then he suddenly heard the dogs crashing through the bushes near the riverbank, and at the same moment, Alphonse began to snore. Al snored loudly enough as a human to have kept his brother awake many a night. As a dragon with his snout in a bucket, the sound resembled a seriously ill chainsaw. Ed reached reflexively over to smack him, but he slipped and hit the old pail, adding his own percussion to the mix. He swore and yanked the bucket off his brother just as one of the farmer’s two great hounds came charging into the barn.

It was a puppy, a great big clumsy thing, all tongue and paws, and it was all over him, whimpering eagerly and not seeming to notice Alphonse. Perhaps dragons were so outside the ordinary that the pup didn’t even see him there. Ed scrambled to his feet in complete dismay. He’d been prepared for some ravening attack dog, not this. “Go home!” he whispered, frowning severely and pointing vaguely in the direction of the house.

The pup whined and sat down on Ed’s feet, causing him to stumble backwards and land heavily on his bottom. He lit with his automail hand on a board loaded with square nails, and they stuck out between his fingers as a stark reminder of what would have occurred had his other hand landed there. The pup jumped on him and started licking his face. “Hey!” he hissed, trying to shove him away.

Suddenly the young dog fell back, its face transforming with a look of surprise and shock as it gazed directly behind and above Edward’s head. Ed whirled in place, flicking out his blade. The pup turned tail and ran silently out of the barn.

Ed remained where he was, staring intently into the shadows. His skin was crawling; the dog had definitely seen something that he could not. After a long moment he got up, doing a quick three-sixty. Nothing, but his sixth sense was screaming that an alien presence was as near as his right shoulder.

Ed’s breath came short, and he picked his way quickly back to Alphonse. The dragon slept on undisturbed, a slight smile still on his face. After adjusting Al’s camouflage and taking one more long look around, Ed got down and slowly burrowed under the boards and shingles, not stopping until he
was safely hidden against his brother’s side. There he stayed, breathing slowly, every sense straining as he listened for the farmer’s footsteps.

They never came. After a long time had passed, he began to relax a little. He didn’t know exactly what had happened with the pup, or what it had seen, but in retrospect, it seemed a good thing. His tired eyes drifted momentarily shut against the darkness.

* * *

He was walking down the center aisle of a new, brightly-painted barn. Cows thronged on either side of him, waiting to be milked. He glanced up, noting that the roof had been repaired. The windows were set with isinglass. One was open, and looking out he saw the evening sun sparkling on the river beyond. Turning back, he stopped short. The cows were gone. Sitting in an armchair in the middle of the way was a young and handsome man with piercing eyes. He was wearing a strange helmet with large glass goggles pulled up on his forehead, and a kind of uniform Ed had never seen before.

“I’m Edward Elric,” Ed said. “Who are you?”

“I’m John Sampson. It’s good to meet you, Edward.” The man extended his hand, and Ed took it.

Suddenly they were above the clouds in a large plane. The German countryside drifted slowly by below them and Ed felt his breath taken away.

The pilot called back from the cockpit. “I’ve been speaking quite a bit with your brother, you know.”

“Yeah. Al’s good at that kind of thing.”

“Rather like Winnifred, I would say.”

“Yeah.” Ed didn’t know what to add to that. “Hey. I’m not dead, am I?”

Sampson laughed out loud, and they were back in the barn. It was empty and dark.

* * *

Edward felt an inexplicable chill and woke. Alphonse was stirring, grunting softly as he shifted position. Ed sat up, pushing away the boards. By the slanting of the sun, it was early afternoon. Nothing seemed to have changed; it was quiet outside. Al’s head, now about the size and shape of a horse’s, swung around to bump his leg affectionately. Edward saw that the blue film was back over his eyes, indicating another molt was about to occur. “Hey, Ed. You’re awake.”

“Hey, Al. I just had a talk with our ghost. He chased the farmer’s dog out of the barn while you were asleep.”


“You don’t seem surprised,” Ed snorted.

Al blinked. “He’s been with us since we left Winnifred’s. I thought you knew.”

“You’re the ghost expert, Al.”
“Sorry.”

Ed patted his brother’s snout. “Al, we have to talk. This place isn’t going to be safe for us much longer.”

“I know.” Alphonse rested his chin on his forearms. He now looked the very picture of a classic dragon, with his sinuous body, his long carp-like whiskers, and his antler-like horns. His wavy, cherry-wood hair was the only thing about him that hadn’t changed; there was just more of it. It was still done up in a proud ponytail, but it was very disheveled. Ed got up and straddled him just behind the ear fins, undoing the scrap of string that held it. As Al’s dragon-locks tumbled loose, he gathered them up, combing through them tenderly with his steel fingers before pulling them together once more. He took the string from between his teeth and wound it round the shining bundle, then tied it off. “There. Much better.” He leaned forward, between the horns. “You know, I really like you as a dragon, Al.”

Al sighed and looked away into the distance. “I don’t,” he said. “For one thing, as long as I’m like this, I’ll never marry Winry.”

Ed nodded slowly. “Of course, I’d rather have you back the way you were,” he said quietly. “I miss your human face, Al. I miss the face of my brother. But it was only there for a little while, and then it was gone again.”

There was a momentary silence. Then Al said, “I never really thanked you for all that stuff you did for me when I was sick.”

“Don’t worry about it, Al.” Ed changed the subject back to his current concerns. “You know, I’m afraid we’re going to have to leave this place as soon as we can.”

“I was going to say the same thing. Something’s up.”

“You feel it too? We got off too easy. I don’t know what that dairyman has in mind, but there’s no way he’s going to let a deadly predator roam loose on his land.”

“You’d think he’d check out this old barn.”

“I’m sure he has, as far as he’s been able. But you can’t get in here without a machete unless you know our secret path.”

Al looked up through the hole in the roof to the blue August sky. His eyes reflected it. “I wish I could fly, Ed. I’d carry us both straight to the mountaintop where the Thule Gate is, and we’d figure out how to go home.”

“I wish you could fly too, and get us out of here before something happens.”

Another brief silence.

“Ed? How am I ever going to get enough to eat?”

Edward smiled. “Hungry again?”

“Not yet! But what happens when I am? I’m going to get sick again if I’m not fed, but look.” He held up a claw. “My talons are still kind of soft. I can’t hunt.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take care of that one way or another. Most likely I’ll have to get another job.”
“That means we have to stay close to town.”

“Within a few miles of it, anyway. I might have to spend some nights away, so I don’t get exhausted going back and forth to work. Would you be all right with that?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’d have to be, if it was the only way.” Alphonse looked unhappy.

“That’s good.” Ed stroked his back comfortingly. “Well, I guess we’d better get ready to get out of here, brother. I’ll go make up my pack.” He swung his leg over Al’s neck as if dismounting a horse, and started back into the darker depths of the building.

“Ed,” Al called softly after him.

Edward turned, holding a cautionary finger to his lips.

“I have to go to the bathroom. Do I dig a hole, or what? What do dragons do?”

Edward stood stock-still for a long moment. Then he scratched his head. “Um… Yeah. Just dig a cathole as deep as you can.”

As Ed disappeared to gather his things, Alphonse sighed heavily, turned, and began to dig as well as he could with his half-hardened claws in the tightly packed earthen floor.

III.

When Winry changed the battery in her flashlight and took a look around the cave, her true predicament became quickly apparent. Her sand horse must have fallen through a crevasse, but when she shone her light upward the hole ended in rock. It was almost as though, pikestaff and all, she’d gone through some kind of interdimensional warp. Winry shuddered, mystified, as her suspicions immediately pointed to Tucker.

At least it looked like she was still in the immediate area of the others—she hadn’t been moved any great distance, as was shown by the fauna she revealed with her light. As was true of all the sand caves under this desert which long ago had been a sea, the sealed chamber where she was confined clearly bore the marks of water erosion, and the walls were filled with tiny fossil shells. As she swept her light around the small cave, rock spiders, the descendants of small marine crabs, scuttled and scurried away from the beam. These spiders, which were nomadic, ate sand eels, and where there was a swarm of them, she was less likely to encounter the latter.

Winry cupped her hands around her mouth to shout. “Hey! Tuck—er! Sciez—ka!” But she wasn’t sure if the faint sounds she heard moments later were echoes or replies.

By now, they surely had noticed her absence, but travelling as they had been in darkness, Winry thought that it might take them awhile to figure out where they’d so suddenly parted company with her. She sat down on the floor, her back to the wall. Checking the charge of her pikestaff, she crossed her legs and rested her chin on her hand.

She wondered if she knew enough alchemy to tunnel out of the chamber. She thought she could find her own way out of the main cave system, but she’d end up alone in the desert, and her supplies were running low.
She wondered if she could eat rock spiders, and thought wistfully that Edward and Alphonse would probably know the answer. They’d made more than one journey through the deserts of Lior. In fact, Alphonse had crossed the entire expanse alone and on foot while looking for his brother more than a year ago. She’d heard some things from the locals about that when she and Sciezka had gone into town to hire their guide. Alphonse had split the desert to create an inexhaustible fountain. Alphonse had made an oasis out of sand. Like his older brother, Al was an extremely good alchemist and there was probably more truth than fiction to these incidents, which were becoming part of local legend and folklore. Of course, the two brothers had already become part of the world’s folklore—the most powerful Greater Alchemists in living memory.

Winry bit her lip as she recalled her mind from drifting. Ed and Al were never going to get home at all if she let herself be delayed here. She thought she heard some sounds from above, so she got resolutely to her feet and yelled again.

This time she was certain she heard Sciezka’s voice. First it seemed to emanate from the ceiling, then from the floor, and she suddenly got the giddy impression that the little cave in which she was imprisoned was turning and turning in the dark. Her heart began to pound.

"Winry! Where are you!!"

She cupped her hands and shouted back with all her might. “I-- don’t-- know!!”

As if some hidden door had suddenly swung shut at random, dead silence fell. Winry paced back and forth several times, swearing at her situation, until she remembered that she really had no idea if there was even an unlimited supply of oxygen in this place. After all, she could see no exits. She forced herself to halt.

“All right, Rockbell,” she said grimly. “You’ve been studying alchemy. You know the basics. Now make them count.” She took her pikestaff and began tracing an alchemical circle into the soft, easily marked rock.

IV.

Alphonse had finally finished digging his hole. It was fairly large, nearly three feet deep, and he was just turning around to use it when something else caught his attention. He raised his head, looking left and right, but his pre-molt vision was not good. Then he realized what it was. It was a scent, carried to him on the afternoon breeze that was blowing through the barn—the scent of a lot of humans nearby.

Al stood on his hind legs, trying to get a glimpse outside, but the tall berries which had swallowed most of the wrecked old barn prevented him from seeing anything. He dropped back down on all fours and headed down the center aisle of their hideout. “Ed!” he hissed, but his brother was too occupied to hear. Al sped up, slithering like a snake between the old wooden posts. Then he froze as the gusty breeze blew once more through the barn, carrying with it smoke.

Edward came rushing out of their sleeping stall, dragging his pack. “Al! What’s that noise out there??”

His brother shot up to him. “Ed! Ed! They’re burning down the barn!”

“Follow me!” Edward headed for his first choice of exit: the little trail he’d slashed that led down to
the river, but as he ducked his head out of the barn, he froze. There was movement along the shore—several men, armed with firearms. He gestured Al back with his steel hand. “Wait! They’ve got guns!”

Edward turned, dropping his pack and jumping right over his brother’s back to run back inside, scrambling nimbly up the tallest remaining support post. From this vantage he could see through a large hole in the second-storey wall. There was a crowd of at least twenty more people in that direction, including the farmer and his family. They were advancing in two ragged lines, the first setting fire to the berry patch and parts of the fallen roof, the second backing them up with weapons.

The summer-dry shingles were already going up fast, the flames quickly gaining height. Ed shifted on the post to try to see what was occurring on the river side of things, and saw the redness of flames now sprouting there as well. He slid down to land heavily on his feet. “They’ve got us surrounded. They want to drive us out and shoot us,” he said grimly.

“What actually know we’re here, or is it just a logical deduction?” said Al.

“No time to wonder. OK, little brother, here’s what we do. These guys are going to be a lot more reluctant to shoot at a human than they would be at a dragon, right?”

“Probably,” Al said, already not liking the sound of this.

“They won’t ever imagine that a human and a dragon could be travelling together. I’ll go out on the uphill side and put on a good distraction, and the minute those guys at the river are out of the way, you head for the water, OK, Al? Go right through the fire if you have to. Don’t stay in here a second longer than necessary.”

“All right. Please be careful, Ed.”

Ed gave him a thumbs-up and turned away. He ran across the broken-down barn and began using his automail to kick his way through the rotten wall. Al watched him for a moment before turning back to the river side. The armed patrol was still standing there. Alphonse snorted in derision. If it were not for his too-vivid memory of Alfons Heiderich’s fate, he might have started out of the burning building prematurely. As it was, he was still there a moment later when Edward finally kicked through the wall only to have a section of it crash down squarely on top of him.

“Edward!” Alphonse leaped to assist his brother. The fire was spreading incredibly fast along the antique rafters, and he was forced to dodge a section of the roof as the structure slowly began to collapse. Laughter and applause could be heard distantly outside as the onlookers enjoyed the spectacle, unaware of the human lives trapped beneath.

Edward was semi-conscious, pinned beneath the burning boards. Al shoved his snout under them and flipped them away in a single strong motion. He grabbed Ed’s automail in his teeth and pulled his brother away from the flames. Al dragged Ed to the hole he’d just dug and dumped him in as the rest of the barn collapsed. He barely had time to throw his torso across the pit before several burning rafters came to rest over him, pinning him to the ground beneath a sheet of flame hot enough to melt glass.

Al groaned. The searing heat of the fire felt only like the summer sun to him, but whether he had enough mass to effectively insulate Edward, he didn’t really know. He did know that if he moved from his position over his brother’s shelter, Ed would die in seconds. Whether his brother had enough air to breathe or whether he was going to suffocate was also an unknown. Al shut his eyes as the heat grew more intense and the smoke, more poisonous. There were limits to what even a dragon could tolerate. His guts twisted with fear. Tail writhing, he voided involuntarily.
Then a wave of coolness seemed to wash over him. At first Al thought it was his senses malfunctioning; then he realized it was something rarer. “Thanks, John Sampson,” he whispered, as the ghost took his chilling stance right in the middle of his body, sharing the same space on different planes. Al knew he was doing his best to save Edward too.

* * *

The sun set as the old barn burned. By the time night fell, the swift fire was already dying down and the hunting party had long since moved on. No one contemplated the heap of smoldering timbers, and no one saw the ash-gray dragon coiled motionless beneath the wreckage.

Coming out of the trance that had helped him endure it all, Al suddenly raised his head, opening his eyes. He blinked, startled. He was almost completely blind now, but this was not the reason he was suddenly reacting. Someone was knocking on his chest. “Ed!” He slid slowly aside and Edward Elric, his shirt pulled up over his nose and mouth, peered cautiously out of the hole.

“Brother!” Al laughed softly and nudged him. “Are you all right!”

“Thanks to you, Alphonse, I just have some bruises. That was good thinking. Are they gone?”

“John Sampson says so. He saved our lives, Ed.”

“I felt that. He helped cool down our bodies. It was really weird, having a ghost inside me. Ouch!” Ed tried to climb out of the hole, but the residual temperatures were too much for him. “This is going to melt my shoes.”

“Grab my horns and I’ll pull you out. But watch out for that stuff there. I sort of… just went, and it’s all over my tail.”

Edward really looked at his brother for the first time and his eyes grew huge. “Al?” he said, and his voice grew faint with shock. “Baby brother? You’ve got some serious burns.”

“I don’t feel anything,” Al said doubtfully, and swung his head around to try to look at himself. “I can’t see much, either.”

Edward pulled himself quickly out of the hole using his automail hand and stood a few feet away, escaping the worst of the heat. Al crawled slowly to his brother’s side. He was caked with ashes. Edward brushed them gingerly from his back, his steel fingers barely touching him. Al’s skin was sloughing off in great, weeping, bubblelike blisters. In places it was scorched black. In others, it hung in sheets. Edward gasped. His eyes filled with tears, though most of the smoke was blowing away from them. “Al. Oh, Al. You’ve got burns all over.”

“Don’t panic, brother.” Al’s voice was kind. “First please pick up my Orichalcum pendant for me. The string’s burned through.”

Edward bent and scabbled for the still-heated artifact, retrieving it with his automail, then standing numbly as if awaiting orders. Al nudged him gently.

“Now can you help me down to the water? I can’t see right now.”

Edward led his brother the short distance to the shore. The moon was out, but Al no longer reflected it. He slid easily into the river, submerging himself completely for a long moment in the shallows. Then he surfaced, rolling over twice. “Ah! That feels better!” he sighed.
The water had washed off most of the ashes and residue. Ed ran his hands delicately along his brother’s hide, pulling off some of the loose material. “It looks like the heat just made you molt prematurely,” he said a little sheepishly. “Those blisters are where your old hide burned and shrunk, but you look OK underneath.” He breathed a sigh of relief.

“That’s what I thought. Please help me out of my skin, brother,” Alphonse said.

“Let’s get out of here first. I don’t want to take chances.”

“Good idea. I think we should go right down the river because it’ll leave no scent trail.”

“Yeah. You’re right.”

Al slid out into deeper water, swimming effortlessly. “Hold onto one of my horns and try to swim along with me, Ed. If you get too tired, just lay on my back and I’ll carry you. OK?”

“Whatever you say, brother mine.”

* * *

Ed and Al didn’t stop until they were several miles downriver. There they found a pleasant sandy beach at the edge of a forest. It had a clear view of the distant city lights.

Edward helped rub the old skin from Al’s body. It came off in large, ugly patches, revealing his new hide shining and undamaged underneath. The old scales over Al’s eyes were a little more problematic; they didn’t want to come off, but were so clouded and heat-damaged that he would remain blind until they did. Edward noticed as he helped to bathe his brother that Al’s outer eyelids automatically slid shut under water. When he pointed this out, Alphonse deliberately ducked his head under again, keeping them open. A few minutes of this softened the troublesome layer. He then found a log resting against the shore and steadied his head on it so Edward could work with confidence. Using the edge of his blade with great caution, Ed managed to loosen one of the large lense-like scales, then the other. With a little more soaking they came free, and Al’s eyes shone bright and clear once more.

At last the two brothers climbed out onto the bank and quickly found a good hiding place in a large shoreline thicket. Ed was shivering with cold by this time. “Strip down, Ed,” said Alphonse, and he did, hanging his clothes on a branch as his teeth began to chatter. “I’m gonna catch something from this,” he said.

“I don’t think so,” Al replied. Moving to take him in his forearms, he began to quickly lick him dry with his hot rough dragon-tongue. Ed’s eyes went wide.

Al was very thorough, nudging him into several ridiculous positions and eliciting a squeal of surprise as Edward’s bare bottom got the treatment along with the rest of him. With a mock-growl Al suddenly attacked his belly and Edward began to laugh as the scene devolved into a tickling match. “Stop! Hey, stop!”

Al ceased at once. “I bet you’re warmer now!” he said mischievously, and Ed, blushing, was forced to agree—his goosebumps and shivering had vanished, and his skin was mostly dry.

Alphonse pushed him irresistibly into the middle of the nest he’d made and wrapped him securely in his warm coils. “I need some sleep,” he said, and yawned hugely. His fangs flashed white in the moonlight. He sighed and rested his head beside his brother.
“Al?”

“Mm.”

“Are you purring?”

Al raised his head in surprise. “Yeah. I guess I am.”

“I didn’t know dragons did that!”

“I didn’t know either.” Alphonse smiled at this quirk in himself and lay his head back down, closing his eyes. The purring continued. Edward snorted, rolled over, and went to sleep.

IV.

Sciezka willed her sand horse to a stop as she suddenly realized Winry’s intermittent monologue had ceased. “Winry. Winry!”

Nothing. Ahead of her, she heard the slithering of Tucker’s mount coming closer. “It appears we’ve lost her somehow,” he said hoarsely. His voice whispered back from the darkness on all sides and Sciezka realized that they had entered a large gallery.

“How could we do that?!” she said indignantly. “She was right between us!”

“I don’t know. We need better light.” Tucker dismounted suddenly, feeling his way along the floor. As he did so, Sciezka turned. “Wait! I think I heard something!”

They froze, listening, but the sound did not come again. Sciezka turned back, but Tucker had vanished into the darkness. For a long moment she feared that he’d somehow disappeared like Winry, leaving her alone here, and her heart caught in her throat. “Tucker?”

A glimmer of light ahead of her, coming closer. It was Tucker, with a small glowing object in his hand. It was a green phosphorescent lichen. “I was planning earlier to illuminate our path with these,” he said. “Unfortunately, I have not encountered any until now.” As he began setting up his array with his usual methodical thoroughness, Sciezka checked her own light. It was the one she had dropped in her earlier encounter with the cave fish. Winry had used her limited alchemy to repair it before they had re-entered the sand caves. “I’m going to backtrack a little,” she said.

Tucker did not pause. “Then you will have to do it on foot,” he said. “Your sand horse will not leave the vicinity of mine.”

“Can’t you at least look a little concerned?” she snapped.

He paused in his work, glancing up. “Not yet. Winry Rockbell is a highly intelligent and resourceful young woman. She could survive down here for days. I will fashion us glow lamps, and then we will conduct a search.”

His tone of voice gave Sciezka pause, but she did not show it. “Well, I’m going back in the direction we came. I’ll stay within shouting distance.”

When Tucker, intent on his array, did not reply, she shrugged and started off. Immune as she was now to sand eel bites, they were no longer a concern to her, but Winry was. How could she and her
sand horse disappear so utterly between one moment and the next?

It had to be Tucker. She allowed herself to glance at her own hands and suppressed a sob. True, he had saved her life, but she was now grotesque. Though she’d heard a little about Shou Tucker from Winry and her friends, she hadn’t met the man before, and now she wished she never had.

It seemed that everybody caused her pain. That was one reason she preferred to live her life in the company of books. Books were a way to commune deeply with the outside world, yet they spared her the pain and difficulty of interaction. Of course, that was not the only reason she loved being a librarian, but it was a significant factor in her choice of career.

Even Winry, whom she regarded as her best friend, caused her pain, and not only now. She had misinterpreted Sciezka’s whispered confession earlier this very day and then cut it short when she had realized what Mustang had wanted her to do. But there were other things that the Colonel didn’t want Winry to do which Winry could have hardly guessed, and things that Sciezka had wished Winry would do, which she would have never imagined.

Sciezka’s hopes and dreams had all been vaporized on the day that Winry had confessed her love for the brothers Elric, but that did not stop Sciezka-- the thought of losing her pushed her onward into the dark. One hundred, two hundred, three hundred feet, pacing it carefully, with no sign of Winry.

Then she stopped abruptly, staring at the clean-swept rock. At her feet, stretching out into the darkness of the vast cavern, was a Grand Array—an alchemical design she recognized immediately from years of esoteric reading. She turned, putting her clawlike hands to her mouth. “Tucker!!”

V.

The next morning, Ed and Al sat by the river and discussed their plans. Alphonse had grown just during the last two days. Already he was feeling the tightness of skin that hinted another molt would soon be underway. He lay on some gravel in the sun at the river’s edge, his chin on his arm, and gazed at the distant city.

Edward sat naked on a log nearby. His clothes were still drying out in the faint morning breeze and his fine, pale hair was loose as he combed it out with his fingers. They were on a stretch of the river where no one lived, but he was on alert, as was his brother. “Stealing is more trouble than it’s worth,” he was saying. “It almost got us killed yesterday. It’s better if I just try to find some kind of work.”

“I wonder if there are any bridges nearby that we could lair under,” Al said.

“I’d rather find another old building.” Ed sighed. “If it were near a good road, I could hitchhike back and forth to town.”

“Ed? Why do you suppose our Orichalcum has been so silent lately?” Alphonse touched the tiny Flamel cross with a claw. It now hung around his neck on a tough braided string made of his own hair.

“Well, obviously, the Gate hasn’t been used yet.”

“But why aren’t they experimenting with it more?”
“I don’t know. Could be because of where they’ve put it.” Ed turned to his brother. “And that’s another thing. Al, do you have any idea where this mountain is? Even a general direction would help.”

“I know it’s not very far away, so it’s probably to the south, toward Austria.”

“Hm. That’s in August’s direction. I wonder if he knows anything about it.”

“He might. That shop of his has a great view. He might even be able to identify the peak.”

“Well, I wish we could go there right away, but he’s pretty isolated. We need to stay where we can best get you food, Al.”

“I know.” Alphonse sighed heavily. After a long moment of silence he spoke again. “Ed. We haven’t talked about Siegfried for awhile now.”

“I haven’t forgotten him, brother. I’d like to leave a message for him with August or Noaa—let him know what’s going on.”

“Oh, Ed, this sucks!” Al spat in frustration.

“It’s not as bad as it could be. We’re free and healthy and we need to stay that way. That’s what matters.”

“And we’re together. I should be more grateful for that.” Al was instantly remorseful.

“Yes, little brother. We’re together, and that matters most of all.” Ed sighed, looking across the river. “I just wish Siggy was with us, too.”

* * *

Throughout the rest of the day, Alphonse lay well hidden in the shoreline thicket while Edward, his clothes finally dry, scouted the nearby area. There was a road a few hundred yards away, and a railroad bridge spanned the river not far downstream, but that wouldn’t provide them adequate shelter. At last Edward crossed the trestle and found a thick forest of evergreens on a hilltop nearby. The branches of the trees were interwoven so densely that it was dark as night under their shade, though the sun was still shining brightly as Ed explored this silent place. On the east side of the grove, a small spring bubbled from a clear pool, and when Ed tasted the water it was sweet. There was no sign that any human beings had ever been here, though the deer paths were heavily trodden. “Well,” he said to himself, “This won’t work for winter, but as long as the weather holds it should be nice.”

Ed returned to his brother, and they waited until nightfall before making the crossing. Al considered trying to use the rail bridge, but then changed his mind. For a dragon who now weighed more than a draft horse, one rotten board could bring an accident. The river was broad and deep here, with slowly swirling currents that made it a little treacherous. As they swam across together, Edward had a bad moment when he somehow lost his grip on his brother and started to sink, but Alphonse quickly caught him up and shrugged him onto his back, where he clung, gasping, for the remainder of the trip. Fortunately they had had the foresight to tie his clothes to Al’s horns, and those made it over the river without being touched by so much as a drop of water; but once on the other side, they had to pause while Al dried him off in much the same manner as he had the previous night.

Alphonse liked the grove, and quickly made himself at home, circling round and round to create a
nest beneath the shelter of the largest tree. As they settled down to sleep in their usual fashion, he suddenly raised his head. “Edward. You lost your pack in the fire. You must be just starving.”

“Nope. I found some wild plums and some apples too, and I pigged out. I ate a couple of cattails down by the river for breakfast, remember?-- And then I caught a bunch of really fat grasshoppers,” Edward said contentedly.

“Ew. I guess I forgot how well you can live off the land.”

“How about yourself? Are you hungry yet?”

“No yet, but I don’t know how long dragons can go between meals.”

“I don’t know, either. I know snakes and lizards can go a long time, but I think it’s safe to assume that since you’re growing so fast, you’re going to need to be fed again pretty quick.”

“I bet you’re right.”

“That’s why I’ve got to go into town tomorrow, Al. I’ve got to earn some money.”

“It’s pretty far away.”

“At least we’re on the same side of the river. I think it’s a couple of miles at most. We’re probably so close I can come home at night. Does that sound good?”

Al bumped him gently with his nose. “That sounds very good.”

Ed smiled sleepily and put his arms around his brother’s neck. The gesture had a childlike quality to it that made Al purr. The calm, constant sound gradually soothed the two of them into a deep and peaceful slumber.

The Grand Array had not been drawn, as most alchemical circles were. It had been etched deeply into the rock with chisel and hammer, established soundly with supporting arrays, and made a permanent part of the sand caves of Lior. Tucker swept down on it like a vulture, gesturing Sciezka away. “Stay back! This array is still activated.”

“What is it used for?”

He raised his glow lantern, casting an eerie light across the sandstone floor as he scanned the artifact. “I cannot say. But it looks like this is an ancient laboratory. Rather like my own, actually--” and he gave an odd little giggle that Sciezka found quite unattractive. He continued, stepping very cautiously into the circle to read the notes graven along each echelon. “It looks almost like this had to do with dimensional phase shifting.”

“I haven’t heard of that.”

“The theory crashed and burned years ago after its main proponent died during one of his own experiments. I haven’t heard of anyone else trying to test it, but a hidden, isolated spot like this would do very well as an experimental site.” Suddenly he paused. “Listen! Can you hear that?”
“Hear what?” she said, beginning to be annoyed. “I don’t hear anything.”

He beckoned her closer, and she stepped into the array with reluctance. As she did, it seemed to her that she felt the air change around her and suddenly she was hearing an echo of Winry’s voice, calling and calling. It was coming out of nowhere. “Winry!” she yelled, trying in vain to determine her direction. “Where are you?!”

"I don’t know," she heard clearly, before something occluded Winry’s words, rendering them unintelligible.

“We’ll get you out!” Sciezka screamed, and turned again to Tucker. “Where is she?!”

Tucker shrugged. He was looking upward and around himself with keen, cold interest as the meaning of the Grand Array became clear to him. “She could be right next to us. Or she could be a million miles away.”

* * *

The moment Winry finished her simple array, she felt it flood with power from the surrounding rock. She smiled. She was good at anything she tried, and she was certain it was just a matter of time until she mastered alchemy. When Ed and Al got back, there would be a surprise waiting for them. She set aside her pikestaff and knelt on the floor. Clapping her hands together in the Elric tradition, she let her own power circulate and build within her. It was still somewhat uncontrolled, she admitted, but it was strong. She placed her hands on the array and connected with it. As she did, there was a great rushing as of wind, and the little cave where she was imprisoned seemed to collapse upon her from all directions at once.

She screamed, struggling vainly to disengage. There was power feeding back into her body, but it was not of her making. Her muscles were as paralyzed as if she’d just grabbed hold of a high voltage wire, but her mind was not, and in a flash she realized that the alchemical energy that was taking her over was from some ancient source.

Ed and Al had warned her about that years ago. They had used to enjoy giving her alchemical lectures, at least until she had blown up the clubhouse putting theory into practice, and one rainy afternoon they had told her all about the dangers of constructing new arrays over previously used ground. Alchemical energy had unique properties, and one of these was the tendency to stay where it was put, merging with the natural energy of the earth. Using this old power was possible, but very dangerous, because the earth gave it different wave properties, causing it to resonate on such a large scale that an untrained user could literally blow themselves up. The problem was avoidable by using quick and simple tests to check whether the selected alchemical ground had been used before, but Winry had not thought to do this in a place that was so obviously uninhabited.

She was floating now in the dark—travelling, she sensed, at great speed. She’d stopped screaming, she thought—or else she had left her body, as Alphonse was wont to do. White streaks in the corners of her vision might have been static, or stars for all she knew.

She was standing in a still, calm space. She glanced down at herself and saw what appeared to be her body, intact. Then she looked up and saw it. The Gate. There was no mistaking it. Even if Alphonse had not described it to her, she would have recognized it immediately, and with this realization came the knowledge that she might very well be dead. The horror of this settled heavily on her, darkening her vision for a long moment.
She shook herself. As Ed and Al had shown her so powerfully, even death was no excuse for abandoning the ones she loved. With tremendous effort, she took her mind off of herself and thought of her friends instead. Immediately things became easier.

She directed her attention to the Gate. She knew that it manifested in different ways for different travellers, and she saw it like a great wheel, the round hatch of some astral ship. She saw its border and she noted the markings thereon; she saw its center and realized its fathomless depth. She felt its impersonal intelligence, and she understood for the first time that the Gate was alive.

This was her chance to learn what Edward and Alphonse had learned. If she could return from such an encounter to the world of the living, she would become a master of her craft. But learning required that she open the Gate.

As she advanced on the monolithic entity, her feet seemed to touch nothing, and her walking was not. She reached out, daring to touch this foundational thing, this guardian of Life and Death, and knew that she was touching a god. Her fingertips stroked the mysterious surface, smooth as glass, and she understood that the Gate was of a substance unknown on earth. “I must see,” she whispered, as she felt its deeper-than-silent resistance. “I must.”

The Gate stayed shut. Winry drew a deep breath—that-was-not and rested her forehead against it. It was going to take more than need, more than bravery. More than her willingness to give up everything. More than her own ego. She closed her eyes and thought of Edward and Alphonse.

Then the Gate snapped open like the iris of a great eye and it was looking at her through a billion other eyes and Winry screamed and screamed.

VII.

Two days after Edward and Alphonse had found the grove, Al was starting to feel pangs of hunger. The deer were picking their way through the woods to drink at the spring in the morning and evening hours, but Al’s claws were still too soft for him to want to try to catch one. Ed had agreed with him that the condition of his talons was abnormal, and had decided he hadn’t gotten the proper nutrients early enough to harden them.

Edward had been gone since the previous morning and Al was now feeling very anxious, especially in the light of his brother’s suggestion that he’d be back before the day was up. Al hadn’t slept a wink all night long as he went through all the potential disasters Ed could have encountered on his journey back to Munich. As the long afternoon of the second day waned and the sun went down, Al left his resting place to sit at the edge of the woods, gazing toward the city.

"It's getting late," he said to himself presently as the first stars began to come out. "Oh, brother, where are you?" He felt like crying. Then a distant dog howled, bringing him to attention, and soon a short, pale-haired figure came into his field of view. Edward was lugging a considerable weight, he realized, and as he reached the trees Al ran to help. "Ed! What happened?! Oh, look at all that food!"

Ed looked very tired, and there was something not quite right about him, but it was subtle and Al was starving. As he exclaimed in delight and frolicked around him like a giant puppy, Edward began to smile, and by the time they had spread out their feast deep in the woodland glade in a patch of bright moonlight, he seemed to be his old self. "Where did you get all this, brother?" Al asked, wolfing down a half ham and crunching the bone like candy. "I hope you didn’t steal it, or we’ll just
"No. I'm not stealing," Ed said, and for a moment he looked tired again. "I lucked out," he said at last. "Got a filthy job no one else wanted, and they paid really well too."

"Was it slop buckets or something?" Al asked, wrinkling his nose. In its new configuration, this had quite an effect.

"Or something. Never mind now. I don't want to talk about it while we're eating. Anyway, we've got food for a week at least. Maybe by then I can find some better work." He patted the second half ham. "Just let me carve a little off this for myself, then feel free to take the rest, brother." As he flicked out his blade and started to slice the meat, Ed glanced up at him. "Did I mention how glad I am to see you?"

Al blinked at him, wondering how such a small person had managed to carry so much food for such a distance. "I think you might have," he said with gentle humor.

There was an awkward silence as Edward finished his carving and wrapped the ham slices in a piece of paper.

"Why don't you take a bath in the pool?" Al suggested.

Edward stretched long and hard. "Nah. I'm too tired. I need a good sleep first, Alphonse."

Al gestured with his head to a sheltered spot against the giant tree. "I've got a grass bed all ready for you," he said. "I made it last night."

"Yeah. I'm sorry about that. I meant to get back here a lot sooner. I hope you're not too mad at me, Al," Ed replied honestly.

"I'm not. But I really worried about you, brother. If you hadn't come back tonight, I would have followed you, whether I'm a dragon or not."

"Don't try it, Al. Always stay where I leave you, and I'll always come back."

Al devoured the remainder of the ham as his brother slogged up the slight incline to their tree. By the time he joined him there, Edward was already asleep. Al coiled himself around him as usual, then gingerly investigated him with his nose, sniffing at his clothing and hair as he tried to get a clue about what his brother had been doing. Ed's clothes had been washed with soap. The residue, a sickly floral odor, clung to them strongly, masking out any other odors and even Edward's own familiar scent, rendering Al's sensitive sense of smell useless. Al finally sighed and lay down his head, closing his eyes. His belly was satisfied, but his mind was not.

VIII.

Out of a dark nothingness, pain. Winry's back arched, the eyes boring into her, the information pouring into her brain. Then she collapsed. Her back hit cold stone and as her heart gave a great thump, she realized with a start that she had returned to her body. In the next instant the crushing pain returned and she realized someone was applying heart massage to her chest. She raised one hand weakly, trying to whisper. "S- stop. I'm OK.”
“Winry?! Winry?”

She opened her eyes and found herself staring into the faces of Sciezka and Tucker. Tears were flowing freely down Sciezka’s cheeks, and her eyes were traumatized. Tucker, suddenly aware of his nearness to her, moved back.

“Are you all right? Can you sit up?” Sciezka helped Winry up slowly. Her head and heart were pounding and she leaned heavily on her friend.

She sat silently for some time, while Sciezka fussed over her and Tucker withdrew to study the Grand Arcanum she was still laying on. For that was what it was, Winry realized with her newfound knowledge. She’d ridden right into the middle of it and it had activated at her presence, transporting her instantly to who knew where. But how had she returned?

“Tucker?” she said hoarsely. “Did you rescue me?”

He turned to her quickly, glow lantern in hand. “Yes,” he replied in his voiceless whisper. “I managed to decipher this array.”

“It’s a Grand Arcanum,” she said, “But unlike the one that Ed and Al know. This one was intended for interdimensional teleportation. I tripped it accidentally.”

Tucker stood for some moments stock-still, staring at her expressionlessly. Then he moved several steps closer. “You’ve seen it, then? The Gate?”

She nodded slowly. “The Gate really does hold all knowledge.” Then, as she realized what she’d said, she smiled. “Including the knowledge for using this array to get us back to Resembool without Mustang knowing about it!”

“Really? That’s really possible?!” said Sciezka.

“Only in theory,” said Tucker, but his eyes were gleaming. “This is most fortuitous, Winry Rockbell!” he continued as he approached her. “In the spirit of Equivalent Exchange, will you share this information with me?”

After the terror of being so lost and alone and then facing the Gate, Winry was shaken enough that even Shou Tucker seemed a friendly face. She reached up to catch the huge, hairy hands he offered her, and he pulled her to her feet. When she swayed, he steadied her. “Sure, of course,” she said after a moment. “Equivalent Exchange.” She looked up at him. “Thanks for saving me.”

“Of course.” Tucker bowed and ushered her to stand on the edge of the array as Sciezka followed them. “Shouldn’t you rest first?” the librarian asked plaintively.

“I’m OK,” Winry said shakily. “Besides, there isn’t time. My memories from the Gate are already fading. Now, both of you—listen to me. Sciezka, I want you to remember every word I say.”

IX.

Ed ate a ham sandwich for breakfast the next morning with his brother looking on. He wasn’t very talkative, and Al’s attempts to inquire about his previous days’ work went ignored. At last Alphonse gave up and changed the subject. “Last night I had the weirdest dream, Ed. I’ve been wondering
about it ever since.”

“What was it about?”

“Well, it was about Tucker.”


“The same. And Winry. I dreamed Tucker was dancing with Winry in the desert.”

“Whoa.” Ed finished his ham and rye in thoughtful silence.

“It’s funny.” Al sighed heavily. "When I was back in our world, all I dreamed about was you."

Edward smiled kindly. "It's whoever you're missing," he said. "Believe me, I feel the lack of Winry too."

There was silence again between them for some time as Ed slowly consumed some plums. Then Al cleared his throat. "I have something I’ve been wanting to ask you, brother. Back in Amestris, when you were going to leave without me, you told me to take care of her. Have you really given up on her?"

"Al, I thought it was understood. You’ll get married to Winry and I won't stand in your way," Ed said gently. "Assuming, of course, we ever get back."

"And if I ever get back to being a human-- again. That's not what I asked. Please answer me, Ed. You really don’t love her any more?"

Ed sat for a long moment, trying to plumb his feelings. Then: "I do still love her. I just really don’t like it when she comes onto me. You know what I mean." He grinned sheepishly. “It’s kind of like having a randy sister!”

“She’s never come onto me.”

“Turn back into a human and just wait a couple of years. But as to your question, I think what really clinched it for me were the boys in Berlin. Believe me, after partying with them, girls are really, really boring!”

Al snorted. “How do you know? I mean, knowing the Seven Secrets is one thing, but they’re just techniques. Experience is something else. How you do know girls are boring?”

Ed leaned back against the tree and belched comfortably. “Because I was in love with one once.”

Alphonse was flatly astonished. In Amestris, sex between males was taken as a given, at least in the city. It was part of growing up. Often it was considered to be experimental play-acting, and it was usually not regarded as very significant unless the participants loved and married each other. But an independent-minded woman was highly valued and respected, and when a man was accepted by a female his social status increased. Edward’s claim carried the same kind of weight as if he’d suddenly said he was a military general—and was only slightly more likely. Alphonse dropped down on his forearms to be at eye level with his brother. “I don’t believe it. You have got to tell me. Who was it?”

Ed grinned and shook his head. “I don’t have to say.”

“Ed!!”
“OK, OK. It was Rose, in our world.”

“Ah hah! I knew it!” Al rolled over in delight. Teasing out his brother’s secrets—and Ed had some good ones—had always been one of his favorite pasttimes.

“Yeah, yeah.” Edward was blushing a little. “So you see, I do know what I’m talking about, and believe me, guys are much more fun. Girls have nicer bodies, except they’ve got no prong, but they take all of this stuff way too seriously. They seem to think that one little prod means you’re indebted to them for life or something.”

“Well, whichever you like best, at least you’re always the same species—unlike me.”

“We’re going to fix that, Al.” Ed reached to pat his snout. “It’ll be OK.”

“Was Rose your only girl, then?”

Ed shook his head.

“Really? Was the other one Winry?!”

“Ask her when we get back. She’ll tell you the ugly truth.” Edward sighed. “I know I’ve been a butt, and I’ve treated her pretty bad sometimes. I don’t know how to say it, but even though I do love her like a sister, she’s such a pain to be around. Really, Al, you can have her!”

Al was stricken. “Are you going to have a problem with our plan then? I mean, for us to all live in the same house? I was counting on that.”

Ed looked a little surprised. “Why no,” he said gently. “Not at all, brother.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“I hadn’t thought about it very much. We have a lot to do before we’ll ever get to go home.”

“I think about it all the time,” Al said. Suddenly he turned away and went down the hill to sit by himself. Ed gazed after him, disturbed. Since he had returned from his short stay away, Al had grown increasingly moody. Edward wondered if it was just part of his becoming a dragon, or whether it was something else entirely.

X.

It was still dark in Resembool when Den began to bark, but Pinako was already up, and she showed no surprise whatsoever when Winry came trooping hastily in the back door with the transformed Sciezka and the disguised Tucker in tow. “Hi, Granny,” she said, stooping to pat Den on the head as he followed them in the door.

“It’s nice to see you back, Winry,” Pinako replied, in the same cordial manner as if the girl had just come home from school. “I see you brought some friends with you. Is that you, Sciezka?” she added, peering into the librarian’s new face. Sciezka nodded shyly.

“Winry?” said Pinako. “What is the meaning of this?”

“It’s not her fault,” Sciezka said hastily. “I got bitten by a sand eel.”
“I’d never heard that sand eels had such alchemical talent. Winry, who or what is this great hairy thing? It’s shedding!”

“It’s Shou Tucker, the Sewing Life Alchemist,” she replied tartly. “You’ve heard about him.”

“Hm. I see his ways finally caught up with him. Good morning,” Pinako said coolly to Tucker, who bowed as well as he was able. Turning back to the stove, she began to heat more tea for her guests.

When they were all seated at the kitchen table, Winry launched immediately into a detailed account of their adventures—how she’d journeyed with Sciezka to Lior, found Tucker, seen the Gate and used the Grand Arcanum to travel back to Resembool in the blink of an eye. “We actually got here at midnight,” she said. “We landed in the back field, but we were so weak we couldn’t make it in.”

“Unfortunately, this form of teleportation is only useful as a last resort,” Tucker whispered as he delicately clutched his teacup between his claws. “It’s draining and quite dangerous.”

“Why did you use it then?” asked Pinako. “Was it Mustang?” She uttered the name with derision. Roy Mustang had killed her son on orders from his superiors when Winry was only a child.

Winry nodded. She hadn’t mentioned her little ‘discussion’ with him at the beginning of her journey. “He’s after Tucker. Those camel riders were his men. They would have found a way to dog us all the way back unless we gave them the slip somehow. I was beginning to think we couldn’t do it. I… have the feeling he wouldn’t receive my building a Gate very well at all,” Winry finished carefully.

“He would think it a danger to Amestris.”

“Is it?”

“In the wrong hands, it could be,” she admitted.

“There’s something else, Winry.” Sciezka had been sitting quietly in the corner next to the window. Now she leaned forward, her masklike face intense. “Something I know, but haven’t told you. Some of the top brass don’t want the Elrics back.”

Winry’s face went blank with shock. “They—don’t--?”

“Of course,” whispered Tucker. They all turned to him.

“Edward and Alphonse are among the most potent weapons on the planet,” Tucker said. “But they have minds of their own. That’s what the military doesn’t trust.” He looked away, out the window. The sun was just rising.

Speechless, Winry gazed in mute appeal at her grandmother, but Pinako shook her head. “He’s right, dear. That’s military logic.”

“Then what happens when they get back?”

There was a long and heavy silence.

At last Winry got up, slapping her hands to the tabletop. “When Ed and Al were here, the military found plenty of ways to put them to use. There may be a few people who don’t want them back, but I think most everyone else would be glad to see them again. Besides, it’s a big world, with plenty of places like this, where they can live quietly out of sight.”

Pinako snorted. “Be realistic, dear. They’ll know Edward’s back within an hour of his arrival, and as for Al, some folks believe he’s the Messiah. There’s even a cult dedicated to his return. You’ll never
“Grandma—are you going to help us?”

“Of course I’m going to help you!” Pinako grinned fiendishly and turned back to her kitchen. “I’m making some pancakes. Winry, just tell me what you need,” she continued as she reached for a mixing bowl.

Winry tried to help her grandmother but was waved out of the way as Pinako bustled here and there. “Well, Tucker’s going to buy the materials, but we don’t have a source of Orichalcum yet.”

“Orichalcum!” Pinako almost dropped the empty pipe she had clenched between her teeth. “You might as well ask for uranium. I can’t help you there.”

“I know. Then there’s the problem of the site. Something tells me it needs to be here, in Resembool, or Ed and Al won’t make it back. But it’s going to be a big project, and it needs to be hidden from the military. We can’t use our surgery or basement because they’re too small. Besides, those are the first places Mustang would look.”

Pinako mixed the batter vigorously with a wooden spoon. “What about old man Macky’s barn? The loft’s filled with hay, but since he sold his cows, the main floor’s standing empty.”

Winry frowned. “Well, it’s not exactly a clean room.”

Tucker spoke up from the table. “I can arrange a static shield over the area that not only will eliminate dust, but will act as a cloaking device against any spying alchemists.”

“Sounds good,” Pinako said as she put down the bowl and set the skillet on the electric cookstove. “I’ll go over to see him this afternoon. I’ll tell him we need it to warehouse a project.”

“Can you trust him to not mention it to anyone?” Sciezka asked nervously.

Pinako nodded vigorously and Winry snorted. “Are you seeing him again?” she said suspiciously.

“None of your business if I am! But I know I can rent that barn from him.”

XI.

Three days later, Edward left for the city again. Alphonse did not try to talk him out of it, but he did deliver a gentle cautionary lecture. “Dragons don’t think much like humans, brother. I’m both right now, but I’m turning more into a dragon every day. I can feel my mind changing shape to fit my body, and I’m not sure what I’ll become. So if you want us to be as safe as possible, you’ll come back just as soon as you can, even if you don’t make any money at all. OK?”

Edward had hesitated at that, wondering if he’d heard a veiled threat of some sort, but Al had looked kindly at him, and he left after hugging his brother and promising he’d return quicker this time. He did, coming back early the next morning with another load of food that included more ham, a large slab of bacon and a bag of beerwurst, which Alphonse devoured with a quiet and philosophical attitude. When he was done, he curled up with Edward and again tried to find out where he’d been working and what he’d been doing. But, as before, Ed ignored his queries, pretending to fall asleep, and, as before, Al could get no clues from his fresh-scrubbed scent.
The two brothers slept the rest of the morning away under their tree in the grove, but in the early afternoon, Edward began to dream. In his dream, they were back working at the Golden Toad. Alphonse still wore the face that he’d been born with, and he was very angry.

"What have you been doing, Ed?" Whenever Al took that tone with him, Ed was always a little amazed at the intensity of the fear it evoked. He rolled over slowly, with the difficulty of movement so often found in dreams, to see Al standing at his bedside. With a lucid twinge of humor he noted he was sleeping on the bar. He heard himself speak as though it were someone else talking.

"I was working a job to make us some money."

"What kind of job? Brother? What kind of job? Those bruises. How did you get them?" Alphonse was speaking with their mother’s voice.

Slow as molasses, Edward got to his feet. The weight of gravity wanted to pull him backwards. "Just shut up, Al! I don't know what you're talking about, so leave me alone!"

"I will not! I have a right to know what you're doing out there because you're my brother!"

"What are you insinuating, Al?"

"I know you!" Al shouted. "I know you'll do anything to feed me! Anything!" And he struck Ed unexpectedly, full across the face.


"What is wrong with you?!" Al stood over him with clenched fists. "Why can't you get a real job?"

"There are no real jobs, Al," Ed said. "If I don't take the money where I can get it, we're going to starve." Tears were streaming from his eyes. For a long moment he and Al just stared at one another. Then Al’s face changed into a monster’s, and he opened his mouth to roar.

* * *

Edward roused with a great gasp and sat straight up. Then he relaxed abruptly, shaking his head. Alphonse was snoring, each intake of breath roaring like the distant voice of some fantastic predator.

Ed had managed to disentangle himself from his brother’s coils and was taking a quick bath in the spring when he suddenly sensed Alphonse was awake. He turned to see the dragon silently regarding him from the shadows. "Al?"

"Edward."

Ed made his way to the shore and hauled himself out to sit on the moss in a patch of sunlight. "I had some pretty weird dreams just now," he said, almost apologetically. "I was wondering if it was the beerwurst. How about yourself?"

“Edward.”

Al shook his head slowly. “No,” he said calmly. “I didn’t have any strange dreams.”

Sighing inwardly with relief, Ed grinned and flopped back on the ground. Al made no offer to dry him this time, but just sat there. Ed had a strange feeling that he was being weighed and measured, and did his best to ignore it. “Al? If I can work just a day or two more, I’ll be able to buy a new gun. Then I can shoot deer for us, so I won’t have to go into the city any more. We can travel to August’s
place cross-country.”

“That’s a good idea. I wish you’d thought of it before.”

“Me, too, brother. But it’s been so long since Siggy took my pistol that I kind of forgot about the option.” Even as Ed spoke, putting an arm across his eyes to shield them from the light, he felt a pang of fear chilling him all over. It was not fear of his brother the dragon, but fear of himself. His first flash of thought regarding the gun had not been about shooting deer. It was only a reflexive response, he knew, but he didn’t like the way things seemed to be turning.

“Al?” he said again. “Are you OK?”

Alphonse slid forward and nuzzled him gently. “I’m OK,” he said softly. Ed sat up briefly to stroke and embrace his brother’s scaly head, and all the fearfulness dissolved.

* * *

Two days later, Ed set out on his third journey to Munich with a determination that dismayed Alphonse. It was the same kind of look he’d seen in Edward before he marched resolutely to war or punishment. As he watched his brother vanish across the fields in the direction of the city, Al knew it was going to be a very long day.

Containing himself with some difficulty, Alphonse waited until the night was well advanced and the moon was rising. Then he left the woods, following his brother’s scent.

The trail led in a straight, purposeful line across several miles of forest and agricultural land until it reached the city outskirts. Then it took to the road. Al followed it cautiously, darting from shadow to shadow, until the road became a paved street in a well-to-do neighborhood that he recognized. This was the area Ed had brought him to on the day he had learned to drive.

Conscious of his pearly scales gleaming in the moonlight, Alphonse crept with his belly to the ground. His arms and legs had rearranged themselves to be much like the limbs of a crocodile and it made keeping a low profile easy. He slithered over the cobblestones with the sinuous grace of a snake. Ed’s scent trail was recent here and following it was easy. He went round a corner and found himself at the front gate of a rich estate.

Al stiffened, raising his head. He’d heard something. It was Edward’s voice, faint but clear on the still air, sounding pained—or passionate. “Looks like I was right,” he murmured to himself as he swarmed effortlessly over the wrought iron gate and across the stones toward the elegant brick home. As he’d covered the distance between the grove and the city, he’d noticed that his own body was feeling very light and strong, and that running felt like swimming through air.

Still sniffing out the path though it was obvious now where Edward was, Al slid out of the glare of the last street lamp. As he drew close to the building, his sensitive nostrils picked up on a foul tangle of sweat and blood. He snorted with surprise. “Something’s definitely not right about this.” He came to the nearest window and reared up, trying to peer in, but it was dark. Then he heard sounds coming from the balcony. Edward was up there, he realized. The other voice, which he almost thought he recognized, was dark and malicious in a honeyed sort of way that made his skin begin to crawl.

Al darted through the shrubbery to the lawn below the balcony, his whiteness flashing briefly through the leaves. Winding his body around one of the support beams, he hitched himself up it quicker and more gracefully than any human could have. He pushed his head over the rail behind a
potted plant, parting it slightly, and his jaw dropped in horror at what he heard and saw.

Edward lay on a silk-appointed bed in a dimly lit room beyond a glass paneled door. His artificial limbs lay cast aside on the floor, and his small, mutilated body was crushed beneath the heavy weight of a larger man. Edward’s head was turned to one side and he was gasping desperately for breath, but Alphonse saw clearly that it was not from passion, and that the dark stranger was no lover but a thief. Then he did a doubletake as he realized he knew Ed’s tormentor. It was Huskisson—none other than the inventor of the uranium bomb—fatter and even uglier than he remembered him, but nevertheless the very man his brother had been desperately seeking ever since he’d first arrived in this world almost three years ago. “I don’t believe it!” he whispered. It was obvious from the rich surroundings that he’d been admirably successful in selling his bomb, and it was equally obvious that Edward had sold himself not only for food, but to try and learn who had bought it.

Al watched, dumbfounded, as the man began to lick Edward’s shoulder scars with greedy haste, sucking and nuzzling the remaining flesh. Surely he recognized Edward, Al thought, and was gloating to find him as powerless in this strange world as he himself was not. Crushed under his weight, Ed uttered a choked cry of agony, his remaining hand clutching the silken sheets. Then, to Al’s utter astonishment, he managed to turn his head a little farther toward his assailant. The man’s tongue left his shoulder and began to lick his face, eagerly lapping up his tears, and Edward, sobbing with pain and revulsion, allowed it.

Alphonse reeled and nearly fell backward off of the balcony rail. “Ed! No! No, this can’t be!” Then he lunged forward. Across the intervening space he shot like a lightning bolt, bursting through the glass with a deafening roar. Edward’s tormentor didn’t even have time to look up before his head was crushed like an eggshell in Al’s jaws and his naked body was flung jerking and twitching to the floor. Al followed it down, snarling and shaking it like a furious dog as his brother futilely screamed at him to stop, and blood sprayed around the room.

When Al was done mangling his victim he rounded on Edward with red eyes and loose flesh hanging from his jaws. Ed stood before him on one leg, naked, speechless and paralyzed as Alphonse lowered his head and began to growl dangerously, his dragonish fury rendering him inarticulate. Making no attempt to fight or to flee, Ed straightened his spine, seeing his death in the other’s face. Al, tail lashing violently, gathered himself to spring.

“It’s OK, Al. I still love you.” Edward shut his eyes just before his brother’s jaws closed on him.

* * *

Edward woke up slowly to a familiar sensation. It was rough but invigorating, like a hot towel sweeping leisurely up his limbs, across his body, and along his arm, leaving a trail of coolness and comfort in its wake. Carefully, he opened one eye.

It was still night, and the full moon was shining brightly down. He could see trees at the periphery of his vision and knew they were again in the woods. He was lying on his back in Al’s forearms, and the dragon was methodically bathing him with his long tongue. As he gasped in surprise, Al rolled him over without a word and the cycle began again, starting at his remaining foot and working its careful way up the leg, over the thighs, buttocks, back and shoulder, and continuing all the way up until it finally stopped at the hairline. Al paid special attention to his scars and the areas most fouled by his attacker, but Ed knew what he was doing had less to do with comforting him and more with simply erasing the man’s offensive odor—which to a possessive dragon’s nostrils, must be both overpowering and infuriating.
Ed didn’t dare say a word. The rage had vanished from Al’s eyes, but he knew in his heart that he had done something unforgivable. At last, with a disgusted snort, the dragon pushed him away into the grass. Edward rolled a few feet downhill before managing to stop himself. He was more than naked—he was still missing his artificial limbs, and though he pulled himself up with dignity to face his brother, he knew that the image he cut was pitiful. “Al?” he managed, his voice timid and faint.

“I am so disappointed in you, Edward. You were my hero. I didn’t think you could ever do anything so wrong.” Al sighed heavily, his head and neck sagging.

Edward bit his lip and looked away. “You knew what was going on the whole time.”

“I hoped I was wrong, but I know you too well.”

“Al, you just killed a man back there. Whatever I’ve done, at least I didn’t go that far.”

“Yes, I killed a man. Tell me honestly, Ed, that you would not have done the exact same thing if you were in my situation.”

Edward looked down at the grass.

“Ed, why didn’t you just tell me the truth? Why didn’t you tell me you’d found him, and what you were going to try? Why the dishonesty? Aren’t I still your brother?”

“I—I don’t know why. Except that yes, you are my brother, and I guess I just wanted to protect you from this. I hated it,” Ed continued. “I hated it worse than anything. He—he really liked my missing limbs, Al. The scars and everything. They turned him on.”

“That’s sick!”

“Oh, baby brother, you don’t know the half of it,” Ed said wearily.

“I’m not a child anymore, Ed. I know what goes on in the world. When are you going to stop treating me like I’m still a little kid!”

Edward was taken aback. “I—I’m sorry, Al.”

There was a heavy silence that lasted for some moments. At last Ed spoke again, softly. “I apologize if I’ve been patronizing. But ever since Mom died, you’ve been my reason for living.”

“There’s a difference between doing what you’re supposed to do as a brother, and going too far,” Alphonse replied. “You’ve come close to crossing that line any number of times. I never said anything because I liked the attention. But this time you’ve finally done it. You should get yourself some different motivation, Edward, because I won’t be a party to your prostituting yourself.”

“Extreme circumstances call for extreme measures,” Ed retorted, as a burning blush of shock and humiliation worse than anything the predator had induced in him flooded across his skin. “What was I supposed to do, just throw away my chance of learning what happened to the bomb? You fixed that, didn’t you? Now we’ll never know who he sold it to! And you’re taking too much credit for my actions!”

“I’d rather take no credit at all,” Al said disgustedly, and turned away.

Ed flailed and clawed his way up the hill. “Al!” he shouted, his face still burning. “Don’t forget! You killed someone! People will be looking! They’ll know whatever did it isn’t human!”
Al dipped his head down to the grass, scooping something up. In another moment, Ed flinched as his automail limbs landed heavily nearby. Then he scrambled for them. “I can’t help you put them on,” Al said, still not looking at him. “And I know they’ll be looking for me. That’s another reason I have to go.” And to Ed’s astonishment, he gathered himself and sprang into the air. He didn’t come down again, but began swimming clumsily away on the currents.

Edward lunged up on his remaining foot, reaching futilely out for his brother. “Al! No! Come back! Come back!” But Alphonse did not reply, eeling his way past the treetops like a white snake through the grass, the full moon glancing from his mirror-bright scales. In another moment he had disappeared, and Edward fell to the earth, shocked and sobbing. Then his breath caught, and he looked up as he suddenly remembered—Hohenheim had said that when Al learned to fly, then they were going home.

XII.

Winry set down the circular saw and flipped up her safety shield with a sigh, shaking the sawdust out of her hair. It seemed she’d been cutting boards forever, and this morning she’d had to change blades, but she’d finally reached the last piece of lumber. Beyond her, in the dark depths of the barn, Sciezka pounded more nails into the platform and scaffold that they were constructing.

It would have saved a lot of time and work if they’d only dared to do some simple alchemy. A complete structure could be raised in less than a day by a talented architectural alchemist. Edward Elric had once reconstructed a large inn during a single night. But big alchemy made big noise on the subtle planes, and no one knew what kind of sophisticated spying techniques the Amestris military was using on civilians these days. Winry wasn’t going to risk finding out the hard way.

“I’m taking a break, Sciezka,” she called over her shoulder as she turned, then squeaked as she ran abruptly into Tucker.

“Excuse me,” he said, grasping her arm. “I wanted to inform you that I’ve made the necessary calls, and I’ve located a source of Orichalcum.”

“Oh.” Winry’s voice was small as she stared at his great paw still clutching her slender wrist.

“It’s only a day’s journey from here. Quite fortuitous. An alchemist named Augustus.”

“I think I’ve heard of him somewhere. Tucker, that’s wonderful news!”

“Quite.” He glanced beyond her at Sciezka, who was still hammering. “Walk with me. There is something I need to discuss with you.”

Slowly they paced the perimeter of the barn’s interior. It was a huge structure, measuring nearly two hundred feet long and half again as wide. They had hung old burlap bags over the windows, and the interior was as dark as any cellar, save for the perpetual worklights Tucker had set up.

For several minutes he said nothing, and Winry felt a chill that she could not explain. When they were out of earshot of Sciezka, he stopped and turned toward her. “Before we begin amassing the materials for the Gate, I wish to confirm our contract.”

Winry straightened her back. “Right. You wanted to be able to conduct certain bioalchemical experiments on the premises.”
“Yes. It is necessary. Now I must explain further. My experiment necessitates certain laboratory conditions, among which is a living womb.”

“A what?” Winry couldn’t quite believe what she’d heard. She stared blankly at him.

“For this project, I cannot use an animal,” he whispered. “It is vital that I use a human female.”

Winry’s mouth went dry. He had warned her, she now realized, when they had discussed their deal in the Lior sand caves—but all she’d been thinking about then was how to rescue Alphonse and Edward.

It wasn’t as though she could suddenly reject Tucker’s funding or his help. Even if Pinako had a dragon’s hoard to spend, she still needed his expertise. There were no other certified bioalchemists in Amestris, and even though she’d seen the Gate, Ed and Al couldn’t wait long enough for her to learn it herself—if she ever could.

She turned away, dizzy and feeling sick. “Wh—what are you trying to do?” she heard herself asking, unbelievably.

“I have an ongoing project, which until now has failed repeatedly due to my lack of a proper host. A child needs to be born, Miss Rockbell. A special child.”

Winry gasped for breath, trying to keep from fainting. “A—child?”

“Yes, Miss Rockbell.” Tucker’s voice was surprisingly gentle.

“Well—if your family’s really in the other world, Tucker, why would you need another child?”

“Our contract says nothing about my having to explain myself. Will you honor it, or not?”

“I-- Give me some time. This is a shock.”

“I understand. I will go to Augustus for the Orichalcum, and return within twenty four hours. Please make your decision by then.”

Tucker turned away without further words, leaving Winry still gasping. She leaned forward, hands on knees. One part of her was saying that it was logical, that Tucker’s request was somehow scientifically reasonable; the other part of her was paralyzed with fear and disgust. What would Pinako think, she wondered, then immediately realized that her grandmother would kill Tucker if she ever got wind of his proposition. For that matter, so would Ed and Al.

“Winry? Are you OK?”

She jumped. Sciezka’s new face, peering out of the shadows, looked like a monster’s emerging from a cave. Winry managed a shaky smile. “Yeah. I’m all right. How’s it going?”

“The platform’s finished. I thought we might go get some lunch.”

Winry sighed and stretched, trying to calm herself. “I’m not hungry right now. Why don’t you go ahead? I need to do some planning.”

Sciezka looked at her doubtfully. “Did Tucker upset you? You look so pale.”

“No. Not really. He’s going to get the Orichalcum now, and he’ll be back tomorrow afternoon, so I have to chalk out the initial array between now and then. It’s quite a job. I guess I was just feeling kind of scared about it.”
Sciezka took her arm. “Don’t be. I know you can do it.” The two girls walked slowly back to the completed platform. It was perfectly level, measured twenty-five feet on all sides and was shored up with railroad ties to support the heavy weight of the great machine Winry was about to build.

“Sciezka? I feel like I’ve been very neglectful of you,” Winry said honestly. “You’ve been through so much, and here I am using you like a day laborer.”

“I don’t mind. Helping my friends keeps my thoughts off myself.”

“Right. Still, just as soon as Ed and Al are safe, we’re going to find a way to return you to your normal state. It’s only because they’re in such danger that I’m working on this first.”

“I understand. Please don’t worry, Winry!” Even in her transformed state, Sciezka still had a winning smile. “Now I’m going to your grandmother’s to eat. Are you sure you don’t want me to bring back some lunch?”

XIII.

Morning. Edward had shivered all night naked in a fern brake, after making himself a nest out of the foliage and finally huddling under a deep pile of leaves and dead grass. At least he’d somehow managed to reattach his limbs by himself.

Alphonse had not reappeared. Ed hugged himself, wondering if he’d lost his brother for good. Al was normally not judgemental, but Ed could see how the youth had been shocked by what he’d seen, and probably shocked by his own actions as well. It had all been ugly—very ugly, he reflected. He was still hurting both mentally and physically, and he felt like crying. His little brother was now a murderer for his sake.

Still, Ed was nothing if not resilient, and he knew very well that if the situation were reversed and he found someone raping Al, he would kill the perpetrator without a second thought.

As the sun rose, he emerged from his shelter with his teeth chattering and started off at a brisk walk, trying for a short time to avoid thorns with his bare foot before finally halting to cut himself a piece of bark for a makeshift shoe, tying it on with long strands of his own hair. The only item he had left besides his automail was his Orichalcum key, so clothes were his first order of business. After he took care of that, he was going to find his brother, the wayward dragon, and knock some sense into his thick head before somebody saw and shot him. Briefly he wondered again where Envy was, and pondered what would happen if his two brothers met. He put the thought out of his mind as non-constructive and continued on.

But something else was disturbing him. In the short hours he’d managed to sleep the previous night, he’d been plagued with nightmares. He would have thought they would be full of dragons, but instead, it had been Winry he’d dreamed of. In the dreams, she wasn’t calling for help, or running from an enemy, but he’d seen her eyes—just her stricken eyes.

XIV.
The day had passed with excruciating slowness, but Winry’s mind was racing as she waited in the dark cellar for the unspeakable monster who would be her lover. Her heart was pounding, but not from anticipation, and her body shook with terror. Still she stood firm. She was not to be outdone by the grand deeds of Edward and Alphonse; she was well aware that the two brothers had died for each other, and the least she could do was to make her own sacrifice to get them home again. It didn’t even involve death, although she knew instinctively that she would never be the same again once Tucker had touched her. She shook the thought of him out of her mind and concentrated hard on Ed and Al.

Alphonse. Wise, sweet, kind soul that he was, everyone who met him knew he’d already lived many, many lives. There were plenty of theories bandied about behind his back as to why he was even still here, on this plane of existence, rather than dwelling in the higher, non-material realms. Some held that he preferred to stay here out of his love for the suffering world. Some said he was the next Messiah. But Winry’s favorite theory was that he was here just to teach and protect a particularly naughty child called Edward. After all, Ed kept him so busy he hadn’t had much time to get involved with anyone else.

And yet, in his darkest moment, when he had thought that he was dying, his words had been: “I wanted to marry you, Winry.” Her heart filled again as she recalled his anguished look, and she swore to herself that when he returned, she would make him a promise. As she envisioned herself taking his hands and pledging her future self to him forever, she could see Edward standing proudly by his side, as a true brother should.

Object of her childhood fantasies, Ed had always been the more dashing of the two and still was. His fiery golden eyes and charming scowl had dominated her dreams for many years, and, though it was difficult to admit it, she could see why he turned so many heads wherever he went despite his elfin size. Edward was beautiful in a wild kind of way, with his stray locks of pale hair and his surprisingly well-muscled physique, but his truest beauty lay hidden within. It was his heart, brave and passionate and filled to overflowing with a profound love for the world and everything in it. He sometimes didn’t use it right, or even use it at all, and his reluctance to express it was downright immature. But when his love won out over his turbulent and stubborn nature, he shone like the sun, and everyone who witnessed it was both warmed and illuminated.

Winry breathed deep, feeling the remains of that warmth coursing briefly through her as her fearful mind returned her to the outside world. Tucker was coming into the room now, and now was the moment when her love for them would be tested.

She said nothing as Tucker entered, quickly turning her gaze to the floor, but she couldn’t help but to get a glimpse of that ugly little prong-thing as he briefly turned his “back” to her to lock the door. Winry was a surgeon and a nurse as well as a mechanic, and she’d seen enough to remain unfazed, but this image had figured prominently in her nightmares of late. She steeled herself to feel only contempt, but then, as he turned again, she glanced up, and her knees almost buckled underneath her. He wasn’t going to use that sorry little thing after all. The body of the monstrous apelike beast to which he was attached was very much intact.

Winry had not been raised with the concept of any gods hovering over her head, so her reaction was not laced with any such language. Instead she whispered, “Oh, Ed. Al. I love you. Don’t forget me,” feeling herself grow faint as Tucker’s great, stinking, shaggy arms reached out to swallow her up in their greedy embrace. He said nothing, and she didn’t look at him. She couldn’t look at him, but instead turned her sight inward, envisioning the bright faces of her loved ones against the darkness that was Tucker, who was solid as a rock wall in the dark as she briefly strove against him.
The Flight of the Dragon

Chapter Summary

Together again, Ed and Al go scouting in the air for the location of the new Gate. Meanwhile, Winry is suffering the aftereffects of her terrible deal with Tucker.

Chapter Notes

This is one of my favorite chapters. With nods to 'The Neverending Story,' 'Spirited Away,' and 'Dragonriders of Pern.' :)

I.

In the darkest part of night, a terror descended upon Penitentiary Hill. Some said later that it was a huge monster with bloody jaws and red eyes; others said it was like a slowly fading streak of lightning coming down from the sky. Whatever it was, the prison gate was blown to bits, the guards were scattered and the prisoners were freed.

A wind blew as the escapees ran like rabbits, swarming the broken fence and melting into the woods. Only one prisoner stood his ground—his face lit up with wonder and amazement. Alphonse landed before him, his back arched and his brown mane flying. “Siegfried! It’s me! Hurry up and get on!”

“Little Brother!” Siegfried cried, and he immediately rushed forward. Al bowed his head and raised his forearm as a step, helping his friend to a seat on his neck. “Grab my horns!” he said, and took off, swimming quickly upwards just as the gunshots started. As they left the range of weapons, Siegfried began to laugh and whoop.

“This is incredible!” The scientist hitched himself up closer to Al’s ear. “Where is Big Brother?”

“I’ll tell you about it later. Going down!”

Siegfried whooped again and almost lost his seat as Al put his head down to land. He ended up catching the scientist rather abruptly with his horns as he touched down, and Siegfried staggered as he dismounted clumsily, then sat down in the grass. “Are you OK?” Al asked anxiously.

For answer, Siegfried began to laugh and cry at once. He got up, opening his arms, and rushed Al again to embrace his great scaly head as Alphonse licked and nuzzled him. Al was tickled by his kisses until he finally rolled over, snorting and kicking. “Oh, Siegfried! It’s so good to see you again!”

“Likewise, Little Brother. My God! How you have changed!”
“Yeah. It’s kind of cool, really,” Al said of himself, glancing back at his gleaming coils.

“And the cough?”

“It’s gone.” Alphonse sobered, righting himself. “Thanks to my dad.”

“You father? You told me he was dead!”

“I found out differently. He’s trapped between the worlds, Siegfried. Ed thinks he’s part of Envy now.”

Siegfried blew out both cheeks in a long sigh of perplexity. “So much has happened. Since last we talked! We have much to discuss. But tell me. How is Big Brother?”

Alphonse looked at the ground. “I don’t know. I left him.”

The scientist gaped at him, as if, even in dragon-form, Alphonse was surely not capable of such a thing. Recovering himself, he said softly, “This world. Has a way. Of getting b-b-between people. But you two? Please tell me how such a thing could be.”

Al drew a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. “He lied to me, Siegfried. Well, he didn’t lie, exactly, but...” He began a rather cursory explanation. Siegfried listened intently, exclaiming in shock when Al recounted how Edward had sold himself, and again when he described how he’d savaged Ed’s attacker. Alphonse continued, showing no remorse, until he reached the point where he had left his brother in the woods. Then Siegfried said, “B-but Little Brother! What he has done here. He might never have done. In his own world. This world has m-made him. Sick in the head! Alphonse! Don’t you r-r-remember this?! And even if you choose to judge him b-b-by his mistakes. How could you abandon him, so wounded and hurting?!”

There was a long silence.

Al was mortified. As streetwise as his brother was, Edward had never before—at least to Al’s knowledge—been inclined to sell his body. Siegfried was right. Most likely, Ed’s attempt at prostituting himself was attributable to the incompatibility between him and the planet. In his anger, Al had not even begun to take this into account.

“Oh, Siegfried,” he said at last, in a stricken voice. “I’ve been so unfair. So dumb.”


“My mind is fading. I can feel it.”

“I do not think. You will lose. The bulk of your intelligence.” Siegfried got up. “Too much cranial capacity there. It is your way of thinking that is changing.” He dusted himself off. “W-what are you going to do now?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m going to go back where I left Ed and try to follow his scent. Get on, Siggy!” Al said. His eyes hardened with determination. “We’re leaving now.”

II.
Sciezka watched Winry from the corner of her eye. The first delivery of steel had come that morning, hidden in a blacksmith’s truck, and Winry had immediately gotten to work. She’d chalked out her array—a vastly complex diagram of intersecting lines like none Sciezka had ever seen before—and set to forthwith. But there was no question in Sciezka’s mind that something was very wrong.

Winry performed her art flawlessly and with humorless determination, following her sketch of the blueprints which Al had shown her in her dreams. It was not beyond reason, Sciezka thought, that such a communication had really occurred, especially if it involved the Elric brothers, for whom anything seemed possible. But though the pieces of steel which Winry wrought were beautifully made and finished, she worked as though she were sleepwalking, and her eyes were hollow.

What had gone on between her and Tucker? Sciezka wondered anxiously. She knew he’d had something to do with Winry’s state of mind. It was only after he’d spoken to her two days ago that she’d noticed the sudden change in her friend. She wanted to mention it to Pinako, but felt that the sharp old woman had already recognized there was a problem. Just as she thought this, a tap on her shoulder made her turn. It was Winry’s grandmother, wordlessly bearing a basket of hot food.

“Thank you so much, Grandma!” Sciezka said softly, taking it. “It’s so kind of you to go to all that effort for us!”

Pinako nodded, a finger to her lips as she watched Winry, who was seated cross-legged on the platform with both hands on a new piece of raw steel. As they looked on, a pale blue glow enveloped both the young woman and the metal, and moments later she was listlessly examining another finished piece.

“What’s the problem, dear?” Sciezka asked quietly.

“Have you figured out what’s wrong with her?” Pinako whispered unexpectedly.

Sciezka shook her head slowly. “I don’t have a clue.”

“Well, if she keeps on like this, she might put together a handsome artifact, but the boys will never get back.”

Sciezka was only momentarily startled by Pinako’s pithy statement before remembering that she’d served as surrogate parent to Edward and Alphonse for several years.

“It’s that Tucker,” Pinako continued in a darker tone. “I know it. He’s frightened her somehow.”

“I know that part of the deal was that he be allowed to conduct his own experiments at the site,” Sciezka said. “But I don’t know what that might entail.”

“Where is he, anyway?”

“Gone again. He left when it was still dark this morning. He’s arranging for more materials.”

“Hmf. Well, I don’t like keeping that Orichalcum in my house. Even though it’s in a crate, it feels like it’s watching me.”

“That may very well be, since it is alive.”

As Winry reached to pick up another sheet of steel, Sciezka added, “Do you think we should talk to her again?”

“No,” Pinako sighed. “Nothing will induce her to come clean until she’s really in trouble.”

“Spoken like one who knows her well.”
“I hope I don’t live to regret it.” Pinako turned away. “Please tell me when Tucker comes back, dear. I want a word with him.”

III.

In the blue light of the stars, Alphonse and Siegfried landed silently on the hillside where Al had left Edward the evening before. Alphonse’s eyes were almost blind, as he was on the verge of molt, but his nose was keen and he began tracing his brother’s scent at once, first to the fern-brake where he’d taken shelter against the cold, then along a faint deer-path into the woods. They found where he’d paused to make his bark sandal, then continued on to the foot of the hill and in the direction of an outlying village. Siegfried walked a little behind Alphonse all this distance, silent except for the occasional comment. Finally he spoke up. “Little Brother? Have you heard from Russell?”

Alphonse paused on the trail ahead of him, looking back. In the dim light his eyes gleamed milky white. “No. Ed told me his parents were holding Fletcher over his head to keep him away from the Golden Toad.”

“Hm. I understand. Brothers should always take precedence.”

“I think so too. Except for Heinrich.” The sound of a dog barking in the distance made Al blink, and he turned. “We’re getting close to those houses.”

“We should not approach. You are a dragon. I am an escaped prisoner.”

“I’m not about to let you get captured again, Siggy. But I’ve got to find Ed. I’m going to follow his trail until I’m positive he went to those houses.”

Alphonse led Siegfried on a steady course. The trail widened out, crossing a road before turning into the main street of the tiny village. The lights of Munich shone in the distance as they wended their way closer and closer to the settlement.

Then Al halted, sniffing carefully. “Ed’s all mixed up with other people!” He looked up. “I’ve lost his scent.”

They went up and down the main road near the village. Al found nothing. At last, only an hour or two before sunrise, he took to the air, Siegfried on his back. “Ed—ward!” Al shouted as he skimmed the trees. Siegfried clung to his horns as they listened for a reply, but none came.

“He has to be here,” Siegfried burst out at last in frustration.

Al reflected on this as he swooped and turned, looping slowly back on himself again and again. His body sliced through the still-dark sky almost invisibly except for the same sudden faint flashes that also marked the undulating movements of fish in the shallows. His mind was turning truly dragonish now, he’d noticed. It was a horrible thing, feeling his humanity slipping away so silently.

He blinked, scanning the pale landscape through a milky haze. The moon had set and the stars were fading. “Ed knows how to survive in the wilderness better than anyone,” he said after awhile, with a reassuring tone he did not really feel. “Even without alchemy.” His throat tightened as he realized that, without any clothes, his brother could have died of hypothermia if he were not so resourceful.

_Brother! I could’ve killed you, after all you’ve done for me!_ This horrible realization, too awful to
voice, was knotting his belly tighter and tighter. Hunger, he knew, was also knotting it, but his claws were finally beginning to harden and there was really no reason he couldn’t hunt. Just as the thought crossed his mind, he spotted a small herd of deer grazing below.

“Hold tight, Siggy,” he said. “I need something to eat, and I bet you do, too.”

* * *

It was surprisingly easy for Al to catch and kill a deer, as they didn’t watch for silent predators from the air. They’d been grazing in a glade which had been recently occupied, probably by Roma, and Alphonse caught and consumed his meal there. Suspecting that his brother had fallen in with the travellers, Al wanted to follow their trail, but the sun was coming up and Siegfried was tired and hungry.

Someone had left some dry timber here for the next campers, and Siegfried laid out a neat fire in the stone-encircled pit. “All ready, Little Brother!” he said, gesturing cheerfully.

Clearing his throat, Alphonse approached the fire pit and paused. Exactly how did dragons produce flame? He coughed, first tentatively, then harder and harder. Nothing. He tried snorting instead and ended up sneezing violently, blowing himself backwards several feet. Still no flame.

“Perhaps the mechanism is not in the respiratory system.”

Siegfried could be correct, Al thought. Perhaps dragons spat fire rather than ‘breathed’ it; so, he tried spitting— with predictable consequences. His last attempt involved a long and colorful belch that sent Siegfried reeling, but still with no results.

It seemed to Al that making fire should have been easy, but at last Siggy had to improvise a bow drill and start a flame himself after half an hour’s worth of effort. As he did, he explained that as a kid, he’d experimented a lot with things like this, and had finally succeeded in accidentally starting a grass fire near his original home in Bonn. “Afterwards they forbade my ignition research to continue,” he said, grinning as he vigorously worked the drill. “Still, nothing learned is ever wasted!”

IV.

Two days after his brother had left him in the German wilderness, Edward stumbled, exhausted and dehydrated, into the Roma camp. He was clothed in a stolen outfit several sizes too big for him and he was nearly delirious, mumbling about his brother and a dragon. Simionce was the first to recognize him. "Hey! It's Edward Elric!"

They fed him and put him in a warm bed in one of the tents. The next morning he woke out of a heavy sleep that had been full of horrific dreams, confused as to where he was and how he’d gotten there. Ed noted as he arose that the stump of his left leg was very sore— blistered, he thought, although he couldn’t tell for sure. It would take Winry's expertise and some ether to completely remove the socket and check it out. He suspected that the breathable pad which cushioned the amputation had worn through. To do that, he must have walked a distance, and he wasn't surprised to learn that the caravan was at Walchensee, near the Austrian border about forty miles south of Munich. The great lake, with its new hydroelectric dam, was just beyond the next hill.
Simionce sat with him on a fallen log as they ate breakfast at the campfire. "I remember hitching a ride with some other Roma who knew where you were camped," Ed said doubtfully, scratching his head. "But I don't remember who they were, or even getting out of the wagon. I must have followed the road the rest of the way."

"Wow. Sounds like you were out on your feet."

"Yeah." Ed grinned sheepishly, but his mood darkened immediately. "Simionce, there was a fight and now I can't find Al." The words left his lips sounding shaky and helpless.

"We gathered something had happened." Uncle leaned over his shoulder. "Hello, lad. I wish we'd met again under happier circumstances."

"Hi, Uncle." Ed reached up to shake his hand. "It's good to see you. I see you got your truck back."

"Oh, yes. We pulled the old girl down off the mountain months ago." Uncle looked satisfied.

"Is Noa with you?"

"I'm here." Noa appeared, touching his other shoulder.

He turned to her at once, feeling a little dizzy. She wasn't smiling, and her face was drawn. He was wondering dully if she was about to slap him when he finally connected with the deep concern in her dark eyes. Not looking away, he reached into his breast pocket and pulled out Al's Bible. Wordlessly he gave it to her, and wordlessly she took it. Around them, the bustling camp came to a near standstill, pausing to hear what she would say, but she just took the book and turned away.

"Noa?" Ed started up, forgetting he'd just detached his leg, and fell hard. He would have landed in the campfire if Simionce hadn't leaped to push him away from it; as it was, he fell on his open socket. The pain was excruciating; he lay on his side, his stump of a thigh drawn up as he clutched it in silent misery. Uncle and Simionce crowded over him. "Noa!" he gasped between his teeth as he writhed. "What is it? What did you see?"

She'd come back to him on realizing he'd fallen, and was kneeling over him. Uncle and Simionce each got one of his arms and dragged him upright. He halted back to his seat on their strength and his remaining leg and she followed them. She sat down beside him on the log while he cursed and brushed the dirt and ashes out of his socket. "Edward?" she said finally. "Have you killed someone? It's all over this."

He stared at her in shock. "What? What do you mean?"

"There's death all over this Bible. Someone was murdered."

He looked at his feet. "Someone did die, Noa. I was defending myself."

She gave him an odd look.

"There's talk on the street of a horrible scene in Neuhausen last week," said Uncle quietly. "Rich pervert got chewed up in his own bed. By what, no one knows, but whatever it was got him, wasn't of this world. The maid saw it. She said 'twas like a great snake, and it crawled off with the body of a rentboy in its jaws. You wouldn't happen to know anything about it, would you?"

Ed shook his head mutely and stared at the ground. There was a long silence.

At last Noa spoke again, her words coming all in a rush. "I don't see your brother, Edward, but I do
see something else. Something I've never seen before. It's pale, like a ghost, but it is no ghost. It has a
snout like a beast, and a body like a snake’s but with loose skin. It’s hiding in the woods.”

"His skin is loose?” Ed muttered. It made sense; Al had been close to molt when they’d parted.
“Where in the woods, Noa?”

She shook her head mutely, and looked at him expectantly, awaiting his explanation.

Finally Edward drew a deep breath. "I don't want to involve anyone else in this any more than I have
to," he said. "But the truth is, Al and I have a half-brother. He's a Homunculus, and his name is
Envy, which kind of says it all. He hated, and killed, our father. He hates us, too." Ed felt a collective
gasp go up around him.

"I knew your father Hohenheim had been killed," Noa said. "I saw him devoured by the Great
Serpent!"

"Yeah, well, that was only the half of it. You know the transmutation they were trying to have you
activate? It caused Dad’s spirit to remain in this world and bind itself to Envy’s. They’re a single
entity now. I know this is confusing, it’s a long story.” Edward glanced around apologetically, but
Uncle nodded at him to continue. “Anyway, when Alphonse saw them, he thought it was just Dad.
He always trusted Dad, even though he gave him no reason to. But they gave him poison.”

This time he heard several oaths, including a startled exclamation from Noa. The Gypsies had always
loved Alphonse, with his kind and friendly smile and his keen interest in their ways. Uncle and
Simionce both started up in outrage. Edward wearily gestured them back down. “He got paralyzed
and nearly died. I had to suck it out of his stomach to save his life. But he’d already absorbed some
of it and believe me, it had a real strange effect."

Noa laid a hand on his arm. "Oh!" she said. "I see now! Of course! Their half brother is the Great
Serpent—and Alphonse has become a serpent as well!"

This time there was only stunned silence. Edward looked up and saw the blank faces around him,
then bowed his head again.

"I wondered before whether you were human or fey, lad," Uncle said finally, placing a hand on his
shoulder. "I guess this answers the question for us."

"I've wondered, myself,” Ed admitted. "And it turns out I am fey in all senses of the word. But I also
believe Al is fully human. Or at least, he was fully human... Even though we’re brothers, we’re so
different." He reached wearily for his leg, dragging it up to mate it with its socket, and cringed again
in pain. "I've got to find him."

"You need crutches for that," Simionce said quickly. "Let me make some for you."

“Wait!” said Uncle. “There are other things you need to know. You asked us to keep an ear out for
strange happenings—things that just don’t fit? Well, we have some friends over the border who tell
us there’s something very strange indeed going on in the mountains.”

“Like what?” Ed said, sitting straighter.

Uncle sat back on the log and stretched out his legs. “Firstly, there’s that new electric line to
nowhere. That’s why they built the dam, you know, here on Walchensee. For hydroelectricity. But
the line is leading away into Austria!”

Ed grunted, startled. This must be the way the Thule Society was going to power the Gate, and the
The completion of line construction was probably the reason their testing of the Gate had been delayed. It was no stretch to think that some Society member in the upper echelons of the Austrian government could arrange for such a thing. “How close are they to finishing it?”

“I don’t know. So you have some idea what it’s for?”

“I think I do. What’s the other thing you were going to tell me?”

Uncle leaned forward, and Edward became uncomfortably aware that all of them were regarding him with the keenest interest. “Well, according to our friends, there’s a great fleet of warplanes hidden way up in the Otztals, and the oddest thing is, they’re German!”

Ed’s face blanched white. “Oh, no,” he muttered weakly, swaying on his seat. “Are they going to use the bomb?”

Uncle and Noa caught him as he fainted.

Winry woke from a deeply disturbed dream. Something was going to happen. Something horrible, and soon. Edward’s stricken face had seared itself into her inner vision in her slumber and was still before her eyes as she arose from her makeshift bed. She was staying by her handiwork in old man Mackie’s barn day and night—as if she could protect it, were it discovered, she thought bitterly.

She shrugged the thought away. Time to work. She lifted the burlap curtain to peer out of one of the windows. The sun would rise soon.

Sciezka slept on, near the platform. She had wanted to sleep next to Winry, but women’s intuition had made Winry set up a different arrangement. Otherwise, her friend might smell the odor of Tucker’s attentions and realize what was going on. Of course, sooner or later the truth would out, but Winry wanted it later—hopefully after Edward and Alphonse were there to protect her from the backlash, alchemical and otherwise, when she took her revenge on him. She rummaged in Pinako’s latest basket and found some toast and two small jars of berry jam. Her grandmother was preparing breakfast for her and Sciezka every morning, bringing it before they rose. Winry was grateful.

She sat on the edge of the platform and ate quietly. No sense in waking up Sciezka just yet. There was nothing the librarian could do right now—all the carpentry was completed, the raw steel pieces were stacked neatly, and the finished components of the Gate lay flat, in order, on the array.

As Winry swallowed the last of the toast, her mind wandered to what it wanted most to avoid. She wondered, inadvertently, about the thing she was helping nourish with her meal. Strangely, although Tucker had assured her she was pregnant, she felt nothing, nothing at all. There was no connection between her and whatever was living inside.

She got up quickly, as if trying to avoid her own thoughts, searching for just the right piece of steel. She was modeling her Gate on the living original, which she remembered with a clarity that told her by itself that she would never be the same again. Once the pieces of the steel armature were finished, she would use alchemy to liquefy the Orichalcum which Tucker would supply, allowing it to flow into the grooves and channels she had left for it, using a flux made of dragon’s blood to help fix the metals to each other, creating a three-dimensional array.
Alphonse had dreamed her the blueprints of the Thule Gate before she had witnessed the real one. It was interesting how similar the Thule design was to her own, and she wondered if its engineer, in that other world, had also seen the real Gate. Both manmade Gates would have to be activated at the same time, bending the fabric of both worlds so that they met. How that was to be coordinated, she still wasn’t sure. The first step would surely be a calibration of clocks.

Winry realized that her mind was running too fast and she paused, closing her eyes and breathing deep. As she did, she heard a door close behind her and she turned. It was Tucker. He approached her silently across the intervening space as she stood and looked at him dully.

“I see that the components are coming along nicely,” he whispered.

“Yes,” she said.

He paused uncomfortably. “I am still working on securing an adequate power supply. Would you be averse to my using some red stones as augmentation?”

“I don’t care what you use, Tucker. Just get my friends back.”

He nodded as best he could. Winry shuddered. Every sight of him held horrible memories—memories so awful that if she let them surface, she would be incapacitated. Quickly she controlled the thought.

There was a long and awkward silence. Then Sciezka sat up suddenly. “Oh!” she said. “Is it morning already?”

* * *

After the librarian had eaten, work began again in earnest. Winry was a little better today, Sciezka thought as she watched her friend shaping pieces of steel with ease. Tucker disappeared again; Pinako came on the scene, looking on approvingly as Winry matter-of-factly outlined where some new assembly scaffolding had to go. By the end of the day, Pinako had taught Sciezka how to use the circular saw, and the girl was still expertly cutting boards when Winry finally quit her alchemy in exhaustion, throwing herself on her cot.

“You shouldn’t run yourself into the ground like that, dear,” Pinako said, sitting down beside her on an apple crate. “You know how Edward used to be when he was first learning alchemy, draining his energy for days at a time.”

“That’s just the problem,” Winry said. “There isn’t time.” She rolled her head to look at her grandmother.

Pinako was regarding her keenly. “I haven’t put my finger on it, but it seems to me there’s something very wrong here,” the old woman said after a long moment. “Wouldn’t you like to share it with me?”

Winry drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “There is something wrong, all right. I’ve never figured out the exact power consumption of my Gate, but we’re having trouble finding the right source for it. Now Tucker says we’re going to have to use Red Stones.”

“Hm.” Pinako shook her head slowly from side to side. “I’ve been wondering how you were going to do it, but Red Stones are bad business. I hope you don’t end up having to search for a Philosopher’s Stone.”
“That’s impossible, Grandma,” Winry said. “We just don’t have the time.”

It was obvious Winry wasn’t going to open up yet. “How many gigawatts did you say this will need?”

“It depends upon the duration of the warp. To bend spacetime so severely that it temporarily breaks down, you need a concentrated mass as large as a small black hole. The Gate uses a mechanism which temporarily creates mass out of energy. Even though the potential energy of every molecule is awesome, we don’t have a method of controlling the release, so we couldn’t use something like that atom-splitting bomb Ed and Al told us about unless we had an indestructible container for it—and that’s impossible. Instead, we have to just feed the Gate mechanism a huge load of electricity. All the power running Central is only a drop of what we need, Grandma.”

“What about collecting power using a huge bank of batteries, or adding some giant capacitors to the circuit?”

“I’ve thought about that, but the only battery big enough would fill this whole valley and then some.”

Pinako left thoughtfully after inviting her granddaughter to have dinner later, at the house. Winry lay in the dim light and rested for some time, relieved to have avoided a confrontation. Pinako seemed to be treading more carefully than she usually did, Winry realized, perhaps in deference to the seriousness of the situation.

A pang went through her and she shivered, rolling over and pulling up her blankets, shutting out the sudden thoughts and memories that she could not afford to harbor and reaching instead for the bright memory of her friends, Edward and Alphonse.

VI.

“There. As clever as a snake!” Siegfried exclaimed, holding the inverted skin as Alphonse pulled his tail free. It was evening again; on their continuing search for Edward, the two had just paused on the top of a small mountain to get their bearings when Al’s tightly stretched and drying hide had split neatly down the middle.

“That’s better. Thanks, Siggy,” Al said. Moving a short distance away, he sat down on his haunches and began to pick listlessly at his taloned feet, where the skin never came off cleanly.

Siegfried, still dragging the empty hide, came to stand beside him. The view from the heights was fantastic; the city of Munich lay spread out below like a haphazard spider’s web illuminated with jewels. After awhile he said, “I will never go back there again.”

Alphonse looked up. “I wouldn’t mind if I never saw it again myself,” he said. His voice was subdued.

Siegfried glanced at him knowingly. “Edward is OK,” he said simply.

“Oh, Siegfried. I can’t believe I left him. You think it’s horrible I killed that evil man, and so did he. But I left my brother hurt and naked and alone. That’s what’s horrible to me.”

“I know. If it’s any consolation. We all have wounded ourselves b-by doing things we regret. Thoughtless things.”
Al’s expression was curious, but Siegfried did not volunteer any more, and his attention had drifted back to his toes when the little man suddenly gasped out loud. Siegfried’s expressions of wonder were so frequent and so varied that Alphonse didn’t even acknowledge this until his chubby hand gripped him by the forearm.

Al looked up, and his ears went back in dismay. Where a moment ago the jeweled city had shone, now only a flat blackness stretched. The entire countryside lay dark under the rising moon.

Suddenly the Flamel cross began to burn on Alphonse’s chest. Both of his clawed hands went up to clutch it as he balanced on his hind legs. “Siegfried! Something’s happening with the Gate! They’ve activated it!”

“They made another key!” Siegfried’s voice was grim as he watched his friend’s writhing coils. Al had torn the hair thong free of his neck and was back on all fours, curled about the Orichalcum pendant like a fortuneteller with a crystal ball. “I see the mountain! Oh, Siegfried, it’s shining so bright! There’s a plane! They’re going to send it through the Gate. Wait! Wait, oh wait!” Al was shouting uselessly, and Siegfried knew it was not at him, but at the power-mad fools on the other end of the Orichalcum’s silver cord.

Al gave a great groan, and at the same moment, Munich once again shone brightly below them.

“What happened?” Siegfried demanded, taking the Flamel cross out of his friend’s talons.

“Someone just died.” Al sighed heavily. “They really didn’t know that for this kind of Gate to work, there has to be one activated in both worlds.”

There was a long silence.

“Siegfried?” Al said finally. “When we were at Winnifred’s, Ed and I made a plan. If the Gate were activated, we were going to head for August’s place. We were hoping he could help us identify where they’d relocated it. Ed has the key; he knows something’s up. If I were him, I’d be going to August’s right now.”

VII.

When Edward woke again, he was back in the tent, and Uncle and Noa were with him. “Son?” Uncle said as he opened his eyes. “Are you still with us?”

“…Yeah.” Ed groaned. “Sorry about that,” he added, immediately trying to scramble up only to be restrained by the old man. “Take it easy!” Uncle admonished.

“I’d like to,” Ed said. “But I’ve got to find my brother.”

“Your brother is safe,” Noa said. “Or as safe as can be under the circumstances. But what about us?”

Ed leaned back on his elbows and sighed. “Right. What about you? You’re in a situation similar to another tribe I know.”

“They’re called Ishvarlans. And they live in Amestris, your homeworld,” Noa added for him. His eyes went wide. “Noa?” he said faintly. “Have you been reading my mind again?”
“It’s clearest when you’re unconscious,” she reminded him. “I learned a little when you were asleep yesterday. But I learned much more just now.”

Uncle leaned in. “That Gate you’re trying to use, lad. It goes to Faerie, just like the other one they kidnapped Noa to help create. We want to go there with you.”

Ed’s eyes went wide as he sat up slowly. He’d briefly discussed this possibility with Alphonse, but so much had happened since then that the idea had been driven from his mind.

When Alphonse had first met his Roma friends, he’d been stricken with shock. It had taken Edward hours to get him to explain why, and when he had, Ed had been just as moved. It seemed that Al had known the counterparts of Uncle and Devi, and her children, too. They’d been among a hundred Ishvarlan refugees, all dead or dying in a train wreck that Al had encountered on his journey to Lior. There had been many spirits for his brother to help on their way that day.

Ed was silent for some moments, quickly weighing the pros and cons of Uncle’s request, but his first thought was of Rose. Finally he drew a deep breath. “Noa?” he said gently, his heart sinking as he heard himself utter the words. “I know all you want is a safe place to live. But you can never come to my homeland.”

They looked shocked.

“Why not?!” demanded Uncle.

“Because there can’t be two identical persons in a world at once. Noa, I know your counterpart in Amestris personally. Her name is Rose. As far as I know she is still alive. She’s the only one of her familia who still is. If you go there with me, she’ll almost certainly die.”

The stricken look that she gave him caused a flush to burn in Edward’s face. It was a horrible feeling. He forced himself to continue. “I know this is hard to believe, but in my world, your husband, Simionce, was a criminal called Scar. He killed some of my best friends, and he almost killed me. He’s dead now, so it would be safe for Simionce to go. But not you.”

To her credit, Noa did not weep. But she left, quickly and silently. Uncle looked after her for a long moment.

Edward bit his lip, staring at the floor. It was a pitiful way to repay his friends. At last he said reluctantly, “What you’re proposing is illegal in my country. Even if the rest of your familia made it, we could all get into very serious trouble.”

Uncle regarded him for a long minute. Then, softly, he said, “But the others can come?”

“I don’t know. It’s possible.”

* * *

They stood outside in the cool night air and talked it over. Ed found himself helplessly agreeing to bring as many of the family as wished to come.

Al had said the military train wreck in Amestris had killed at least a hundred Ishvarlans. His brother had also told him more than once that he never forgot a spirit, and Edward wondered if his memories would be useful in confirming who could go and who had to stay behind. Uncle said there were about a hundred Roma who needed to be expatriated, so the numbers were roughly the same in both
worlds. Even as Edward promised to help, he wondered if it could really be done, and what would happen to Noa and Simionce here without their clan? Then, just as he was saying that they would need some sort of staging area, the Orichalcum key upon his breast began to burn.

Ed grabbed it. “Something’s going on. The Gate’s in use.”

Everyone gathered around him, staring at the artifact. The Roma put great stock in talismans, and seeing his reaction to it immediately convinced them of its power. Edward clutched the key, closing his eyes to better ‘see.’ Then it was over, the key lay dead in his hands, and Edward was shaking his head. “Stupid bastards. That experiment just cost them a life.” He looked up, into the eyes of his friends and allies. “I’ve got to leave now. I have to visit a friend of mine. His name is August. He lives just a few miles away, up on that hill.” He pointed.

“I know him,” Uncle said immediately. “We’ll take you there.”

* * *

August’s hill was farther away than Edward had realized, and the night journey took several hours even on wheels. He sat in the back of the truck, helping Simionce fashion him a crude pair of crutches as the vehicle rumbled up the winding road along the shore of Walchensee. Noa sat with them, but she wouldn’t speak to him, and he did not know what to say.

As Ed worked, his heart went out to his brother and he wondered where he was. Noa had said Alphonse was safe, and if that were so, he would have also felt the activity at the Gate. Would he remember their plan of action? Would he return to August’s, or was he still too angry?

Edward cringed at the thought. It was hard for him to believe that the same brother who had dared that suicidal leap between the worlds to be with him forever would just leave him in disgust, especially after all they’d been through since that time. Ed wondered if Alphonse hadn’t really abandoned him out of fear of his own dragonish reactions. Maybe Al had been more shocked by his slaughter of Huskisson than he’d let on. Maybe he’d been afraid that Ed was next. Or perhaps he’d had something else entirely in mind. Al’s intelligence had been in a state of flux at the time, and even under the best circumstances, there was no predicting the vagaries of thought.

“Al?” Ed murmured under his breath as he fitted a makeshift grip to his crutch. “Please forgive me. Please, please come back.”

* * *

Edward would have preferred to not wake up August in the middle of the night, but since there had been a disturbance at the Thule Gate, there wasn’t time for such considerations. The metallurgist’s house, a modest log structure, stood only a few feet from the converted barn. Leaving his Roma friends at a short distance, Ed used his new crutches to wend his way to August’s door. The moon was out, illuminating the steep path up the high hillside, and an owl perched on the shop roof was hooting softly.

Ed paused as he reached the door, turning to see the high peaks of the Austrian Alps shining in the moonlight. Then, drawing a deep breath, he knocked. He was startled when the door opened at once.
“Edward Elric! In Gypsy clothes?” The big bearded man was in his work outfit, and he looked neither sleepy nor grouchy. Edward gaped for a moment in surprise. “August! You’re awake? At this time of night?”

“Couldn’t sleep. I knew something was in the wind, but fancy it being you! Come in, come in, my little friend! Have you got any news of Siegfried?”

“Nothing new. As far as I know, he’s still in prison.” Ed hitched himself over the threshold. As he did, the uncushioned end of one of his makeshift crutches slipped on the tile floor and he would have fallen badly but for August’s hand under his arm. “You haven’t heard about the Penitentiary then?” the metallurgist said, supporting Ed to a comfortable chair near the hearth. On this warm night, there was no fire burning.

Ed sat at attention. “No! Has something happened?!”

“Mm.” The big man nodded. He was in the modest kitchen pouring two cups of fresh hot coffee. “I had this on the stove, just in case someone showed up. Do you like milchkaffe?”

“No, just a little sugar please,” Ed said absently. “Please, August! What happened at the Penitentiary?”

August remained silent, obviously relishing Ed’s suspense, as he wended his portly way back into the living room, handed Ed his coffee and pulled up a chair nearby. “Well,” he began, “It seems there was a little disturbance.”

“What kind of disturbance?”

“Seems the place was broken open in the middle of the night—about this time Wednesday, to be precise. All the prisoners escaped!”

“What?” Edward almost dropped his cup. Setting it hastily down on an end table, he leaned forward intently.

“Some of the witnesses are swearing they saw a great long beast fall right out of the sky, like a snake in a whirlwind. But whether it did or didn’t, the Penitentiary gates were blown wide open by whatever hit it, and the fence was ripped out over the half the grounds. I believe it was a meteor,” he concluded with certainty, folding his arms as if to challenge his guest for a better scientific explanation.

“Could be!” Ed said, but his heart was swelling in his breast with pride and joy. So Alphonse had had another agenda—a grand agenda—but he hadn’t wanted to put his brother’s life at risk. That was the real reason he’d left him! Even with the fear of a new invasion of Amestris present in the back of his mind, Edward felt like getting up and dancing. “Well, August, whatever the truth of the matter, you’d better keep the coffee hot. I have the feeling Siggy’ll be with us very soon— and Al too!”

VIII.

When Tucker returned from his latest journey, he wore a face that was long even for him.

He had ranged over half the country, yet had succeeded in finding no red stones. Winry more than
suspected he’d even made contact with homunculi, perhaps trying to use alchemic traps to extract the stones inside them, because he looked rather scuffed and abused, and his coat was in tatters. She felt no sympathy for him, only frustration for herself.

Upon hearing of Tucker’s failure, Pinako immediately left the barn, saying only that she was going to make some phone calls. Winry didn’t know or care what she was going to do; her mind was on other problems. A power source would come—it would have to come—but the raw Orichalcum Tucker had earlier supplied had begun to ‘speak,’ broadcasting signs of distress, and Winry knew that if she didn’t apply it soon to her Gate, charging it with energy, it would lose its life force and be rendered useless.

Much of the mechanical Gate was now complete. When active, it would become far more than it looked, condensing mass out of pure potentiality. Orichalcum was necessary to this transformation, and could be applied as soon as the last piece of the frame was put in place.

Winry worked alone far into the night, long after Sciezka had gone to bed and Tucker had once again disappeared. As she slowly maneuvered the last section of the armature into place, using a pulley and counterweight system to lift it, she pondered the next difficult question. How could she coordinate her own actions with those of the Elric brothers a universe away?

It seemed a nearly impossible task. Dreams were notorious for existing outside of time and place; but the answer came to her as she worked: utilize an important date, one that held special significance. For the Elrics, as well as for herself, only one day of the year was possible—and it was coming soon.

Winry bolted the section into place and climbed down off the platform. Even an important date would have to be approximated, she realized, as the two universes didn’t match up exactly. That meant she’d have to activate her Gate early, and deactivate it late—but how early, and how late? A day? A week?

She sighed, rubbing her face with her hands. Her mind had been racing much too fast lately, as if trying to do the work of a lifetime in a few short days.

Sciezka was there suddenly, her mutated face surfacing from out of the dark. Her approach had been silent, but Winry felt too tired to startle—too tired even to talk.

“Winry. You’ve worked much too hard today. Please, call it quits.” Sciezka’s clawlike hands were surprisingly soft as they rested on her friend’s slumped shoulders. Perhaps more surprising, her touch was profoundly soothing.

She sighed again. “I guess you’re right. There’s nothing else we can do until we apply the Orichalcum anyway. I am tired, Sciezka.”

Sciezka guided her slowly to her bed, making her seat herself and then resting beside her. The little cot creaked under their combined weight. Without a word the girl leaned to draw her makeshift curtain closed, then helped her out of her work clothes and into her pajamas. When she was finished, she made Winry lay face down on the cot and began to gently massage her shoulders. “Oh, Winry. You’re so tense. You’ll make yourself sick if you keep working so hard. Granny and I have been so worried about you, but no matter what we say, you just won’t stop.”

“What else am I supposed to do? There’s not much time.”

“Time? I didn’t know we had a deadline to meet.”

“We do now. October the third.”
“That’s less than a month away. Why the third?”

Winry turned onto her side, reaching to grasp her friend’s hand. “It’s a long story—but basically, that’s the date the Elric brothers burned down their own house and set out on the road. It’s engraved on Ed’s pocketwatch. We need a common date to activate the Gates in both worlds, and that’s the logical choice.”

“Oh. Of course.”

The way Sciezka blinked made Winry smile, but in the next moment, exhaustion swept over her and she was forced to lay back on her pillow. “I guess I’m more tired than I thought,” she murmured. Unexpectedly, she began to weep quietly.


It’s not that, Winry thought, but she said nothing, only letting her friend put her arms around her. Despite her fog of pain and weariness she was still aware of how wonderful it was to have her by her side—long-suffering, patient, heroically battling her own tragedy. But as she drifted, half-conscious, through the dismal forest of her dark emotions, she suddenly became aware of the silent presence of something else. As close to her as Sciezka’s arms, it seemed brooding and sullen. Briefly she wondered at it, then closed her eyes and dismissed the sensation as a product of her own exhaustion.

* * *

Hours later, when all the world was still and the barn was sunk in deepest gloom, she dreamed that she stood before her creation and fancied that it was staring right into her heart, like that great eye she had once seen. Or perhaps it was most like looking down a well, she thought, laying a hand on the inert metal as she peered through it into the darkness. Unbidden came a dream within her dream—the Elric brothers, their bright faces gazing back at her—and her heart leaped with a short-lived joy. Then the vision faded, and she fell back with a gasp. It wasn’t Edward’s face, but Tucker’s that regarded her solemnly from the other side of the Gate.

IX.

By the small hours of the morning, after the moon had set, Edward and August had reached an understanding. Being a friend and onetime companion of Siegfried, August was, to some extent at least, sympathetic to the Roma. The Gypsies would be allowed to congregate on his land for one week in order to stage their escape from the country. While he didn’t yet know of things like Amestris and the Gate, August realized that something very unusual was afoot. Though gatherings of Gypsies, and even travelling caravans, were illegal under German law, very few people made it out as far as August’s house, and he felt the odds of their discovery were low. “But there is to be no fighting and no stealing!” he admonished, wagging a finger in Ed’s direction. “Otherwise I will turn the whole lot in. Make sure they know it!”

Thanking him profusely, and a little dizzy at the speed at which Uncle’s plan was progressing, Edward left to tell him the news. Immediately Simionce set out with the truck to notify other members of the kumpania, while Uncle and the rest pitched two tents in a corner of August’s barn. Edward then crashed in the metallurgist’s guest room. Even his worry about the fleet of German
planes and a possible invasion of Amestris, and his acute concern for Noa, were not enough to counter his exhaustion.

* * *

He dreamed deep, and soon Winry was staring solemnly at him from the depths of a mysterious well. Her blue eyes were shadowed and there was a cloud around her—Alphonse would call it a ‘spiritual occlusion.’ Edward was greatly disturbed as he realized it was composed of amorphous otherworld entities, haunting her as though they were predators and she, prey. It was an inexplicable situation—why would Winry attract malevolent spirits? Fear for her touched his heart and he reached out to her at once, leaning toward her. She responded immediately, her hands rising out of the water.

He leaned into the well until he grasped her fingers—and was suddenly pulled in. Then he woke up with a jolt. To his surprise, it was early afternoon.

There was still no sign of Alphonse and Siegfried. Fighting back his multiple anxieties, Ed ate a couple of freshly baked biscuits which August offered him and then went out into the yard, where he was astonished at the number of people who had already arrived—seven new adults and a whole pack of children, to whom he was introduced by Uncle as a fellow Roma. Moved by this display of affection, Ed spent several hours with the newcomers, getting acquainted and hearing their stories. Most had experienced ill treatment at the hands of *gadje*, and all were eager to try their luck in a new land. Edward realized that Uncle must have been regaling them with tales of Amestris for some time.

As the evening shadows were approaching, Edward finally excused himself, going back indoors. Noa and Devi had appropriated August’s kitchen with his blessings and had a large stew going in two of his cast iron pots. Ed wanted more than anything to have a few moments alone with Noa, but she still didn’t want to speak to him. He had just pulled August aside instead to discuss the logistical problem of housing so many people, when a high-flying shadow flickered across the window and there was a great ruckus outside. “That’s my brother!” Ed said with satisfaction, rising hastily and grabbing for his crutches. “Come with me and you’ll see what really happened to the Munich Penitentiary!”

As August helped him out of doors, Edward looked around in confusion. Alphonse was nowhere in sight, nor were any of the Roma. Then his gaze fell on a little chubby figure, trudging quickly out from behind the barn, and he brightened at once. “Siggy! Hey, Siggy!” he yelled, pulling away from August’s steadying arm to hitch himself rapidly toward his friend.

"Edward!" Siegfried sprang forward with open arms. The two embraced, laughing, and Siegfried lifted him off his feet so his crutches fell to the ground, whirling him around and putting him down again. Then the little scientist’s eyes went wide as Edward kissed him full on the mouth—a beautiful, passionate kiss that needed no explanation. "I missed you," Ed said simply, pulling back a little to look into his face.

"Edward!" Siegfried breathed, and they hugged again, a long, tight embrace as August looked on. “You have changed too! Not so much as your b-brother. But you have changed!” He ran his fingertips over Ed’s lightly bearded chin and his tanned skin.

“I need to talk to Alphonse now, Siggy,” Edward said almost apologetically. “We have some stuff to discuss.”

“Come out, come out, O Dragonboy!” Siegfried yelled merrily over his shoulder. August’s eyes grew as huge as plates as Al came shyly out from where he’d landed in back of the shop, carefully
carrying five laughing Roma kids on his long back, with three more hanging onto his tail. Edward picked up his crutches and hobbled to him, stopping just before they collided. “Al?” he said breathlessly.

“Ed,” Al began in misery, but he was quickly shushed. Edward embraced him awkwardly. “Shh. Don’t say it. I’m not angry, little brother. You trusted me to take care of myself, and that was a very brave thing you did to save Siegfried. I’m so proud of you!”

“Ed…” Alphonse rested his chin on Edward’s shoulder, absently watching Siegfried explaining the existence of dragons to the reeling August with expansive gestures and hearty laughter. As the children spilled off his back, he pushed his nose into Edward’s chest and shut his eyes. Shame overwhelmed him. It was clear that Ed had misinterpreted his actions. In fact, his rescue of Siegfried had been an afterthought, a way to salvage something from the wreckage and ease the pain of his broken heart. Still, he thought, as long as Ed was happy and there was peace between them, maybe there were truths that were best left unsaid.

Alphonse caressed Ed’s cheek with his nose before sniffing him all over. “You’ve got all kinds of scents on you, brother,” he murmured at length. “Where have you been?”

Ed grinned, pushing him away. “Only with our Roma family. They’re here—all of them, and the rest of the clan is coming. We’re going to help them take refuge in Amestris.”

Al’s jaw dropped in dismay. “Oh, Ed. There’s all kinds of things wrong with that idea! We don’t even know if they’d survive there—and what about Noa? Rose is still alive!”

“I know,” Edward said seriously, leading him toward the house. He noted that all of the Roma, including Noa and Devi, were gathering around them as they walked. August was still staring at Alphonse with the expression of a man in a waking dream.

* * *

August’s modest log house was barely big enough to comfortably house the Roma, their host, and a dragon. Alphonse made himself as small as possible by wrapping his coils compactly around the couch. He rested his chin on the high back of Edward’s chair as his brother, Uncle and Siegfried outlined the improbable situation to August. Having a live dragon as evidence definitely helped their case; August didn’t reject any of their stories, but listened with great intensity, the bright spark of discovery lighting up his dark eyes.

Alphonse was predictably horrified to hear from Uncle about the fleet of warplanes hidden in the Otztals. “That means we’ve got no time to lose,” he said. “But we can’t do anything until we figure out where they’ve put their Gate.”

Edward glanced back and up at him. “I lost your sketch of the peak, Al. Think you can do another one?”

Alphonse nodded. “I can… but I don’t think I can write with a pen now,” he added doubtfully, holding up his claws.

“I can arrange something quickly, I’m sure,” August said. “Could you draw with a stick in some sand?”

Al nodded. “Yes, I think so.”
“Then I’ll return shortly.” As the metallurgist excused himself, Siegfried turned to Uncle. “It is a lot of ground. We will cover in a hurry. And more people than Little B-brother can carry.”

“Of course we don’t know how far it is to the mountain,” Al said. “But I could probably make several flights and carry you all.”

“You don’t know that,” Edward said. “What if you get tired?”

“Don’t worry about that, brother!” Al’s jaw opened in a silent laugh, and Ed noted that he did look well-fed and sleek. His new skin shone as though polished, and Edward fancied it had a subtle glow. Even his red-gold hair was in excellent condition, braided and tied up by Siegfried into a warrior’s topknot. All in all, Alphonse made a magnificent dragon, and there was no reason to think that his strength did not match his looks.

“Well,” Ed said thoughtfully, “You’ll have to fly us over the Austrian border, anyway. The Roma can’t legally cross it.”

“Right. As soon as we find out where we’re going, we need to make plans to establish a base camp.”

“That means tents. Blankets and supplies. And mountain clothing.” Siegfried nodded to himself. “I know a clothier. In the city. Who supplies the climbing expeditions. Will you drive me there tomorrow?” He asked this of Uncle, who regarded him with surprise.

“Are you daft, man? You just escaped from prison!”

Siegfried blinked like one of his toads trying to swallow an oversized bug. It was clear this hadn’t crossed his mind.

“Still the same old Siggy,” Edward said, shaking his head with a grin. “I bet August would run that errand for you, if you asked.”

“Siegfried,” said Al. “Do you think this clothier could make a harness for me, and get some carabiners and belts? If I’m going to be carrying people, I don’t want anyone to fall off. There are bound to be some strong winds up there.”

“Good idea!” Uncle said. “But don’t bother with the clothier, lad, we Roma know how to make harness.”

“Returning to the planes,” said Edward. “We have to get there before the fleet is mobilized and find a way to get everyone through. Once the Gate is destroyed, they won’t have anywhere to go and their plans will be ruined—at least until they build another Gate. I don’t think there’s much doubt that they’ll eventually do so.” He looked around the table.

“With the exception of the Orichalcum. The structure is made of common materials.” Siegfried leaned forward on his elbows. “It should be a fairly simple matter. To lay explosives, b-but it would require. A detonator.”

“Someone would have to stay behind,” said Uncle.

They looked at one another. The thought of Noa lay heavy on Edward’s mind, but he didn’t dare say anything. Alphonse was just opening his mouth to ask a question when August rapped hard on his own door. Siegfried leaped up to open it and let the big man in. He was carrying a flat tray filled with the fine sand he used in his lost-wax casting work.

“Oh good!” cried Alphonse, sliding down off the back of the chair as the sand tray was set on the
floor at his feet. Someone put an ornate fireplace poker in his claws and he immediately began to work. Edward smiled a little as his brother stuck his tongue out in concentration. In a few minutes Al was done. He stepped back, laying the poker on the floor. “There. What do you make of this?”

Ed, Siegfried and August gathered around the tray to see what he’d drawn. “I recognize that!” Edward said. “It’s the mountain in your dream.”

August walked around the tray to take a quick look at the distinctive forked peak from another angle and immediately said, “It’s Hintere Schwaerze. There’s no mistaking it.”

Siegfried whistled. “That’s a long way. To run power. Across those mountains!”

Ed and Al looked at each other in confusion. Siegfried turned to them. “Hintere Schwaerze. Is in the Otztal range. Miles from here.”

“And it’s in the same area where the German planes are hidden. They’ve had years to plan this,” Edward said.

“August. We will need you to run an errand to the city sometime soon,” Siegfried said decisively. “We will need supplies. Clothing. Food. Gear. Everything to survive on the mountains for at least a week.”

“We’ll have to take a detailed inventory first and see exactly what we need,” August said dubiously. “And who’s going to pay?” He turned to Uncle. “Do you have any idea how many of your people are going on this goose chase?”

Uncle nodded. “A hundred at least. Maybe more.”

There was a short silence. At last Edward pushed back his chair, sighing and stretching. “Let’s give this a rest and let it shake itself out. It’s not going to come together in a day.”

* * *

As the impromptu meeting broke up, Ed headed for the kitchen and spied Noa just slipping away from the door. She had been eavesdropping on them, he realized. Putting on a sudden burst of speed, he crutched himself out of the little house and around back just in time to catch her at the kitchen entrance. “Noa! Noa,” he said desperately. She turned as if to flee back into the house. He dropped his crutches and lunged to grab her by the arm, stumbling and pulling them both down on the stone steps.

“Noa,” he said again, clutching her upper arms. Her look pierced him to the core—a wild look, like that of a wounded bird staring into the eyes of a predator that was slowly killing it. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Long silence. Her breast was heaving with unspent emotion, and Edward braced himself to be slapped, but she restrained herself. After awhile she began speaking in a low, haunted voice. “All I’ve ever wanted was a home to call my own. My own sisters called me a gadje because of this and sold me to Eckhart’s men.”

“The Roma have no home,” Edward said. “They are a nation without a country, like my own kind. They call us ‘antisocials’ here, and punish us for just existing, same as they punish you.”

“I knew you were one of them,” she whispered. “I knew it. You and Heiderich.”
“Yes. But back in my homeworld, Noa, your double Rose is the first person I ever made love with.”

She caught her breath in shock.

“You see, I have to protect her,” he said urgently. “Even if it’s by keeping you from going to Amestris. But there are still options, Noa. I have a friend in America. His name is Fritz Lang, and if I send him a letter he might make a place for you and Simionce there. Noa,” he finished desperately. “Please, don’t give up. I don’t know why, but there’s got to be a reason you have to stay in this world.”

* * *

Later that evening, after Ed had partaken of the stew, he lay curled comfortably against his brother’s side, sheltered in August’s library. The room was small and cramped—especially when occupied by a dragon—but neither of them minded that. Happy to be together again, they were discussing Ed’s recent dream of Winry while examining the geography of the Hintere Schwaerze. Edward had already told him about his encounter with Noa.

“You’re right,” Al was saying thoughtfully as he held down a large map with his claws. “There’s no reason dark spirits should be congregating around Winry.” He looked up. “I wonder if that’s why I’ve been having such trouble trying to communicate with her. I was thinking that maybe it was because I’m a dragon now.”

“What else would cause something like that?”

“Well, spirits usually congregate when they see an opportunity to enter the physical world, or when they feel a very strong affinity for someone in it—like what happened to us on that old battlefield.”

“When they see an opportunity to enter the physical world?’ Al, could she be pregnant?”

Alphonse blinked. “By who? Besides, the kind of spirits you described aren’t the kind who usually oversee a pregnancy. What you described would be more likely to leak through a badly constructed Gate.”

“Then do you think she’s had problems with her project?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t we try dreaming together tonight? Maybe we can get through to her.”

“Good idea. We need to anyway, and what you say makes me think she might be in some kind of trouble.”

A flicker of lights and a sudden horn honking made them both glance out of the small window.

“Look!” Al said. “It’s Simionce—and he’s brought a whole caravan with him!”

Ed grabbed his crutches, scrambling to his feet and hobbling outside, while Alphonse stayed in the house behind him. He didn’t want to frighten any of the newcomers.

Uncle was laughing and merry as he began to introduce Edward to the crowd. There were Sinti as well as Roma, with several languages being spoken, and even a familia that had recently arrived from Russia. August, Noa and Devi fed them all biscuits and stew and cautioned them to not leave the premises. Privately August warned Siegfried and the Elrics that he couldn’t sustain the situation for more than a week. Siegfried had lost his assets, and though August lived comfortably, he was not
Still, the overall mood was a positive one, with a sense of magic and anticipation, and when Alphonse was finally introduced to the newcomers they cheered and clapped, and no one was fearful. The unspoken thought was that with a real live dragon on their side they could not fail, and before long some of the travellers had broken out their musical instruments and there was a midnight celebration in August’s barn. The fun was contagious, and even Noa joined in, looking happier than she had in days. Edward danced on his crutches—a trick he’d learned years ago—and Siegfried capered by his side, clapping his hands and kicking his feet in a vigorous rendition of the Amestris folk-dance which the Elric brothers had demonstrated in his study months before. Alphonse frolicked with them, nodding and laughing along with Edward and shaking his great horned head. It was an amazing sight to see a dragon dance, stamping in time to the wild Gypsy music with his reddish mane flying as the Roma women, with their bright layered skirts and bangles, twirled and spun around him, and the little children bounced and laughed high on his arching back.

At last, face flushed and out of breath, Ed fumbled one of his crutches, staggering backwards to land handily in the arms of Siegfried. The little scientist lifted him effortlessly and romantically, whisking him quietly away as the music played on.

* * *

August had left several stalls intact during his renovation of the barn. He used them as storage areas, but Alphonse made himself a comfortable bed in one of them among some old, dusty bales of straw. Later, long after the party was over and everyone else had gone to bed, Edward swung himself down from the loft through the hay door, dragging a blanket behind him. Al snorted softly, noting Siegfried’s scent all over him, and shifted to reveal a warm nest he’d fashioned for him out of an old horse blanket. Ed smiled at him and Al sensed his happiness. Without a word Edward settled himself close to his brother. Al lay his head protectively over him. The soft sweet sound of his dragonish purr quickly soothed both of them into a profound slumber.

When Winry finally appeared to them, the spirits were congregating around her just as Ed had said. Alphonse was puzzled and concerned. He tried to speak to her, but she wouldn’t reply. It seemed as though she couldn’t hear him. She was sitting in a dark place they didn’t recognize, holding a mantel clock in both hands. It was an eerie artifact, fashioned like a mausoleum. All her attention was focused on that clock.

When they woke from the dream it was morning, and the Elrics held a time and a date fixed in their minds: Midnight, October 3, 1924.

X.

Whether it was from the excitement of the past few days and his new relationship with Siegfried, or the worry and difficulty of trying to communicate with Winry, or just because it was long overdue, Edward spent the next forty-eight hours nursing one of the worst headaches he’d ever had in his life. His skull felt like it had been hit with an axe, and he was dizzy and nauseous. Whenever he shut his eyes the spectacle of a fleet of warplanes in the air loomed before him. Following Al’s concerned advice, he did his best to absorb everything he was seeing without letting himself become overly agitated by it.
Siegfried had been doctoring those of the Roma who sought his help, using supplies August had brought back for him from the village. Now he cared for Edward as well, insisting that he sleep in August’s spare feather bed in the guest room. It was a wonderful place, finished in honeyed pine, with geraniums on the windowsill and a view looking southward on the Walchensee and the sweeping sunlit flanks of the Austrian Alps beyond. Just being there made Edward feel better. Having Siegfried by his side made it downright wonderful, rendering the pain worth his time and speeding up the long hours.

Every now and then Alphonse would come to the window, sticking his head through it to inquire how Ed was doing, or to give him news. Over the course of his illness, more Roma wagons, cars and trucks had pulled into August’s lower field, where Al artistically camouflaged them with branches and uprooted trees. The barn became crowded with people and August had divided it up into sections, letting Uncle oversee the gathering with his stern but fair hand.

Uncle had, in fact, become the unofficial leader of the expatriation, and Alphonse recounted how he had cleared off one of August’s workbenches and spread out a large blanket to take donations for the expedition. This had met with a surprisingly mixed reaction. A few of the travellers shook their heads in disgust and left, while a few others immediately threw down their gold jewelry and coins. Still others had simply stood there, not recognizing Uncle’s authority. At last Alphonse had fetched Devi from the kitchen, briefing her on the situation as he escorted her to the barn, where she promptly offered up her golden earrings and the bangles on her wrists. She was well known among her people and this seemed to turn the tide; it hadn’t been long before the offering table was laden with precious metals. Al had been impressed: it was a dragon’s hoard of precious metals, and he had set himself to guarding it until August could melt it down. No one argued with him.

Siegfried, meanwhile, passed much of his time with Edward by writing and re-writing his inventories of what one hundred Gypsies and their friends would need to navigate the Otztals in autumn. Even with the luxury of having a dragon to convey them by air to their destination, they would still need to be well prepared, or the entire company could die.

* * *

With the Roma causing no trouble and their own gold now supporting them, August rescinded his limit on their stay, saying that they could use his barn as a staging area until that fateful first week of October. Still, he was growing ever more anxious, spending more time than usual at his favorite pub in Walchensee, where he learned that the local authorities had already notified the Office of Gypsy Affairs in Munich of Gypsy traffic passing through the area. According to the barkeep, no one knew how many there might be, or their destination. August kept his eyes and ears open. If he were found harboring a gathering of Roma, it would mean jail time for him and even harsher punishment for his guests.

Al was able to screen the Roma as Edward had thought, using his memories of the spirits of their Amestris doubles who had died in the train wreck more than a year before. Everyone but Noa, he said—everyone but Noa could go. Neither he nor Ed spoke to one another of their growing fear for Rose in Amestris, but late at night they did discuss Noa.

As the days passed, Alphonse was still struggling to connect with Winry, and growing more and more fearful that something was terribly wrong. The few messages they did exchange were fairly clear and unambiguous, but there were no more dreams of the pond and the apple tree, no visions of happiness and laughter. A dull and heavy dread lay on their nighttime exchanges, and during the day his thoughts were growing more and more consumed by this. Seeing his dark mood, Uncle tried to
lighten it with cheerful talk as the Roma harness makers began to outfit him for the journey; but Al would have none of it, his great head drooping as he stood still for them in a corner of the barn.

Still, Alphonse was by nature an optimistic soul, and even burdened by his worry he did not lose his sense of wonder. August’s barn was situated on a breathtaking height over the Walchensee, and once Al’s harness was finished, he took the Roma children by turns on low, short flights over the water at night, when the moon was sinking on the horizon and spying eyes could see nothing. The children anticipated these outings with undisguised glee, squabbling among themselves as to who got the ‘King’s Seat—’ the small saddle strapped on Al’s neck above his forelimbs, intended for Edward’s use. These night flights were necessary, enabling the harness makers to fine-tune Al’s gear and allowing them to estimate the load which he could carry. Five adults at a time plus the thankfully lightweight Edward, they said, no more; and Alphonse was agreeable to this figure. Plans were laid and maps were drawn.

Edward, meanwhile, recovered from his brief illness with no lasting effects. His leg was healing slowly as Siegfried treated it with unguents and saltwater soaks. If there had been more time, Ed would have let his friend attempt a readjustment of the socket, but it was already September and that would require an operation and weeks of recuperation.

Night had fallen once again. Al was finished with the last of his test flights and was glad of it; his head still rang with the children’s squeals and his mane was hurting from little fingers pulling it. After getting a long drink at the spring-fed trough in the yard, he was returning to his stall in the barn when he heard a soft rustling above it. Alphonse reared up with dragonish curiosity and put his head through the hay window into the loft. Siegfried had earlier climbed up here with Edward, as was their wont—they seemed to prefer using this rather than August’s guest room for their trysts. Al had never spied on the two before, but his curiosity had the better of him now. As he viewed the scene from behind some storage crates, he found himself surprised.

Al didn’t know what he had expected to see, but he knew it was nothing so marvellous as what he did see, and nothing at all like the tragedy he had witnessed in Neuhausen. Even after Edward taking the Priestess’ role to teach him the Seven Secrets, he would certainly never have dreamed that his brother could act so genuinely receptive, with his long golden hair flowing loose around his shoulders and his little, low cries of pleasure as he enjoyed his lover. Knowing the aggressive tendencies of Edward better than anyone, Al thought this role reversal was a wonderful thing to see, and he rested his head on a crate and watched it all in unrepentant and romantic fascination. At last, when the two friends had fallen asleep in each other’s arms, he slid slowly back down to his stall, where he lay and considered what he’d witnessed.

Al had learned more about his brother’s psyche in an hour than he had in years. He realized that Edward had a magical ability that he would never be able to completely fathom—a kind of physical shamanism, the counterpoint to his own spiritual abilities. Hohenheim might be trapped between the worlds, but his firstborn son walked freely between worlds in a completely different way.

As he thought and wondered, he remembered the sweetness he and his brother had stolen from out of the very teeth of despair when Edward had taught him the Seven Secrets. The difference was qualitative. His brief exchange with Ed had been a well-established rite of passage, the Secrets in this case being conveyed to him by his dearest friend and older brother instead of a Priestess. Ed certainly had not evidenced the passion then that Al witnessed now between him and Siegfried, yet Alphonse
did not feel overly jealous, or that they had loved each other any less thoroughly.

He remembered Edward’s kind looks, heard again his murmured words, felt how they’d first touched—carefully, as if they might break one another’s hearts, even though they both already knew that this was only temporary shelter. Neither had he craved after his brother later, but rather quietly treasured the memory of what had passed between them, understanding that the moment could never be duplicated. He realized that Edward had been right: theirs was a ‘higher love’ and always would be, and he was glad of that, because it could not be sold or broken.

Still, Al was also glad that comfort was never beyond their reach. The realization that he and Ed were in fact free to partake with one another of whatever they might need was actually pretty profound, he reflected, especially here in this miserable world where the enlightened were still confused with the insane—where murderous racists could walk free, while lovers could be jailed for a kiss.

XI.

Over the last several days the Orichalcum had been installed on Winry’s Gate through her increasingly skilled alchemy. She had shaped the raw metal to a microscopic tolerance as thin as foil, then applied it with a special solder, using flux made of dragon’s blood. It was a clever solution to a difficult problem, and even Tucker had applauded her unreservedly; but she seemed oblivious to her own accomplishment, her eyes dark and tired and her body drooping. Had Edward been there, he would have recognized her posture at once; it was the same defeated stance Rose of Lior had adopted after she’d been raped by soldiers.

Pinako had given her a stern lecture and was feeding her vitamins every morning and night. Sciezka begged her to take time off, but she refused adamantly, and Tucker cast her guilty looks as he went past on his little daily errands.

“What is this?!” she demanded of him one day when she cornered him alone. “I’m a medic, Tucker, so don’t think you can fool me. I know about childbearing, and this isn’t normal. Look at me. I’m a wreck. It’s sapping all my strength.”

Tucker cringed a bit at her harsh tone. While she had little idea what went on in his mental dreamworld, she had gotten the impression that he’d assumed, as many males might, that she must have liked her experience with him at least a little. To give him his due, he had been as gentle as possible with her, but with a body like his, that hadn’t counted for much.

“I admit, I am surprised at your body’s reaction to this pregnancy,” he whispered. “At this point your responses should be normal.”

“What do you mean, ‘at this point?’” Winry demanded angrily. But the conversation was abruptly cut short as the main barn door creaked noisily open. Winry turned to see who had entered and was astonished to see a stranger clad in the robes of an alchemist. It was a tall old man, with a long, narrow white beard and a pointed hat. His skin was wrinkled and yellow and his eyes were slits. He bowed to her, but she couldn’t tell if he was smiling or indifferent.

Pinako stepped out from behind him, grinning. “Winry, dear, this is Yung, an old friend of mine. He’s an Electrical Alchemist, and he’s here to solve our problem.”
Winry stuttered, her blue eyes wide with shock. “But—but Grandma! This is supposed to be top secret!”

“Now, now. Don’t get yourself all in a dither. I’ve sworn him to secrecy. Don’t worry, Winry!”

It was easy for her to say, Winry almost retorted, then thought better of it. Pinako had a vested interest in the project’s success, just as they all did. Edward and Alphonse had been raised by her after their mother died.

Tucker stepped forward and bowed hideously. “A pleasure to meet you. I’ve heard of your work.”

“Likewise,” Yung said, without meaning it. He approached the nearly-completed Gate, gazing up at it with intense curiosity. “So this is the machine? It doesn’t look so big.”

“Don’t let your eyes deceive you,” Pinako said. “It’s going to need a load in the thousands of gigawatts—as big as you can manage, in fact.” The way she was holding Yung’s arm made Winry think that here was an old story.

“Hm. I will consider my options. This place is secure?” He was looking around with the expression of a rich man who rarely encountered such humble surroundings.

“It is secure,” Tucker said. “And shielded from prying eyes.”

“We’ll need power by the first of October,” Winry heard herself saying; but in the same breath the world darkened around her, and she felt her grip on reality slipping. Something twisted painfully in her belly and she slid to the ground, gasping for breath as Tucker rushed to catch her.

XII.

As October approached, the preparations at August’s were gaining momentum and direction. Siegfried and Edward had charted their flight path from Walchensee to the Hintere Schwaerze, a straight line of fifty-three miles, and August had run several errands to Munich to pick up the necessary gear. It would take twenty-one trips to bring everyone to the site of the Gate, and Edward was intending to ride Alphonse on every flight. Because of this, he needed a high-quality, insulated suit—but none could be found that would quite fit his diminutive self. Finally, at a loss, August took him to the boy’s department of the largest outfitter in the city. Ed’s reaction was predictable, but he did get the proper gear.

Alphonse did not laugh when he heard the story. “Ed can’t help it if he’s undersize,” he said darkly, and when everyone had gone away for the night he turned to his brooding brother, nudging him gently with his nose. “I’m sorry, Ed,” he said. “They’re brutes, all of them.”

Edward looked up, mildly surprised. Even though he’d taken Siegfried as his lover, he rarely slept anywhere but at Al’s side. “Dear Al,” he said. “Something’s been bothering you since this morning. Won’t you tell me what it is?”

Alphonse sighed. “It’s Winry. I don’t know exactly what’s going on with her, but things aren’t good.”

“What?!” Ed sat straight up, all sleepiness leaving him.
“Oh, Ed. I think you might have been right,” Al burst out miserably. “Maybe she is pregnant somehow, because something strange has happened to her. It was last night. I felt it, even though I wasn’t asleep. It’s like she blacked out somehow. I haven’t been able to talk to her since.”

“This is terrible.” Edward was too ashamed to admit that his first concern was not what had happened to Winry, but how this would affect their plans. “Al, we’ve got to re-establish contact. If she just fainted for some reason, or got sick, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Right, but something more is going on. I know it. Those dark spirits you saw around her in your dream? They probably have something to do with this, and if they do, there’s no telling what could have happened.”

“OK. OK. Just try to relax a little, all right? If you can’t relax, you won’t be able to get to sleep, and if you can’t sleep, we’ll never get to the bottom of this.”

“Well, I can’t sleep. Ed, I know you might think I’m making a big deal out of nothing, but I really love her! I love her, and she’s in trouble, and I can’t do anything about it.”

“I know. I know,” Edward soothed his distraught brother. Al breathed a huge sigh, his scaly sides expanding widely and then collapsing again with a **chuff**.

“Do you want to call off our reconnaissance flight?” Ed asked, referring to the scouting trip over the Otztals which he, Al, and Siegfried had scheduled for the early morning hours.

“I’m not sure. I mean, without Winry this whole thing is going to fall apart anyway.”

“Don’t talk like that.” Ed’s expression softened as he stroked Al’s face. “Have you been fed lately?”

“I’m not hungry, Ed.”

“Let me get you something anyway. Remember, a dragon flies on his stomach!”

* * *

Though Alphonse had said he lacked an appetite, he had no difficulty in putting away a whole ham, which Edward had procured for him that very day in Munich. Afterward he got very sleepy, and at last was snoring heavily with his brother at his side. With all his attention on Winry, it wasn’t surprising that they encountered her in their dreams almost immediately.

She was sitting at the edge of an abyss, gazing steadily down into the blackness. Alphonse saw the spirits roiling in the air around her, appearing and disappearing, all grasping hands and empty eyes and all intent on her. Then she glanced up. Her face was vacant and white. She looked down again, mute as she had been in his dreams for some time now, and he saw that she held something on her lap. Alphonse was frozen with horror as his world shattered around him.

“Winry!” Edward shoved himself sharply into the scene. “Don’t fall for it! Don’t let them use you!”

“Winry.” Alphonse’s thoughts were a shocked whisper. “**Who did this?**”

* * *

A dragon awake when he should have been sleeping off a meal, was an unhappy beast at the best of
times; but Alphonse was more than unhappy that night, moaning loud enough to wake half the Roma and shedding buckets of tears. “Oh, Ed. It was Tucker. *Tucker!* I should have seen it coming.” Al had buried his head in a pile of loose straw, his long body writhing in his pain and frustration, coiling and uncoiling like a snake’s crushed by a cartwheel.

“I should have seen it, too.” As the realization of what had happened began to sink in, Edward was a little surprised at the quickly increasing depth of his rage. “This just gives us our best reason yet for getting back home as quick as we can.”

“How do you suppose it happened?” Alphonse’s voice had dropped to a near-whisper. His stricken eyes were huge and watery. “I mean—we’ve all heard the story. The Princess and the Beast?”

“Al! Don’t be ridiculous!” Edward snapped.

“But—maybe Tucker found a way to turn himself back into a human, or something.” Al’s suggestion sounded feeble even to his own ears, but anything was better than believing the object of his affection had been molested in his absence.

Ed understood what Al was up to, but he frowned anyway. “I’m sorry, brother, but the only way this could’ve happened was by force. That look she had? I know it. Remember-- I’ve been there.”

Alphonse threw himself back down in the straw with a howl of anguish. “But I wasn’t there to save her. We weren’t there for her, Ed.”

“No, we weren’t. But we’re going to be, if she can just hang on a little while longer.” Ed sighed. “I keep thinking about that child.”

“It wasn’t a child. It was a dark spirit. It’s got its hooks in her. It’ll settle inside her like a parasite.”

“Winry won’t see it the same way, Al.”

Alphonse shuddered, realizing Edward was correct. “That’s right. She’ll just think it’s her baby. She’ll defend it against everything and everyone, just like Teacher did Wrath—and all the while it’ll be sucking the life force right out of her body! Oh, Ed! I can’t believe this is happening!”

After Edward was convinced that Al wouldn’t do anything rash—like take off for the Gate without him—he crutched his way out of the barn between ranks of curious Roma, heading to August’s house to temporarily call off the scouting expedition. When Siegfried insisted on knowing why, he took him aside and explained the situation in terse words, including a brief description of Tucker that left Siggy gasping in horror.

The rest of the day was spent in anxious waiting as Alphonse’s dragonish emotions slowly worked their way out. Al had descended to a place where he couldn’t even speak. As the hours progressed, he began to pace restlessly, emitting lionlike barks and roars; his scales were standing stiffly, like ruffled feathers, and his skin was glowing like pink pearl, as though sunlight were shining through it from the inside out. He was magnificent when he was angry, Ed thought as he sat in the loft and watched him from above. Meanwhile the Roma were uncharacteristically quiet, giving him a wide berth.

An early autumn storm had been predicted for later in the week, and they had wanted to get the reconnaissance mission out the way before it hit. By evening, Edward and Siegfried had decided to try to literally harness Alphonse’s raw energy. It might be dangerous—perhaps more dangerous than flying in a storm—but as motivated as Alphonse now was, it might also be for the best.

Al was standing defiantly in the barn door, head thrown back proudly, the ruff around his neck
expanded in a fighting display. His eyes were as keen as an eagle’s and every bit as cold, but when Edward limped up to him without fear, they immediately softened and he relaxed a little, his big head lowering to greet him.

Edward caressed him. “Al?” he murmured softly. “Are you ready to fly?”

Alphonse snorted eager assent, his sulphurous hot breath blowing back Edward’s hair. As Siegfried and the Roma watched from a distance, Edward put the saddle and harness on him and tightened the straps. Siegfried rushed back to the house to retrieve Ed’s flight suit and goggles, his safety belt, binoculars, a map and compass, and a sack of cheese and biscuits.

By the time Ed had changed into the insulated suit, the evening shadows had fallen. The moon was just coming up as he kissed Siegfried on the cheek, waved to August and the gathered Roma, and then climbed up onto his brother’s back. Al’s muscles quivered beneath him as he snapped himself tightly on. His stomach churned; he’d never ridden a dragon before, but he had the good sense to knot his fingers in Al’s mane as he sprang away, loping out of the barn and down the steep hillside before taking a dizzying plunge over the edge of a cliff.

Edward yelled, his breath ripping from his lungs as they swooped low out over Walchensee. He would have made a joyful ruckus if Al’s mood had allowed for it. It wasn’t like riding a horse at all—the undulations of a dragon’s body were snakelike, side to side, as the great head in front of him quested for the warmest currents of air. Al caught a thermal on the far shore of the lake by a mountain wall and lofted violently upwards, nearly giving Ed whiplash as they soared that quickly across the border and over the Austrian heights.

As they wended onwards, the moon rose higher, revealing the pale mountains in all their splendor. The light reflected brightly from the vast expanses of snow, muting the twinkling of the sea of stars above them. The cold air was numbing Edward’s face and he reached up to snap shut his fur-lined mask and pull down his goggles, then got out his compass on its chain. “Al,” he called. “Bear right about ten degrees.”

Without a word, Alphonse leaned slightly rightward, heading toward a distant point on the horizon, swimming toward it through the air like an eel through water. As Edward squinted, he made out the distinctive shape of the Hintere Schwaerze, a high forked point on a long ridge of high points that ran roughly east to west above a river valley.

“Go lower, Al!” Ed shouted into the wind, but his brother had thought of this and was already lessening his altitude. Ed didn’t know exactly what they might look like from the ground—perhaps they would be mistaken for an aircraft, or one of the unidentified objects that showed up from time to time—but it made no sense to take risks. Al was soon at the level of the mountaintops and circling like a low shadow around the Hintere Schwaerze.

At first, despite the brightness of the moon, Ed didn’t see anything out of the ordinary about the mountain except for the distinctive shape he recognized from Al’s drawings—a forked peak, one side slightly higher than the other. Then, on the second pass around, something between the two caught his eye. Instinctively he stood in his stirrups.

“I see it,” Al’s voice came back to him on the wind. Edward breathed a gusty sigh of relief. It was good to hear his brother speak again. He’d been a little afraid Alphonse’s muteness might be permanent. He leaned forward, laying both hands on Al’s neck. “Let’s get closer.”

Alphonse dove lower. It was a calculated risk; even here, the Gate would have guards, and he did not want to alert them or get in range of their guns. Edward was impressed at how well his brother could control the speed of his flight as Al slowed down considerably, enabling them to get a good
look as they passed close to the flank of the mountain.

Just as Al had dreamed in his agony at Winnifred’s, the Thule Gate had been airlifted to stand in an exposed space on the spine of the mountain. The stars twinkled through it as Alphonse swept by. Edward could just make out the power lines running along the mountain’s face to a substation at its foot, and he shook his head in wonder that an idea so fundamentally impractical and so difficult to achieve could have actually been realized. Someone in the Thule Society had ready access to government money, he thought. Not even a private fortune could build something as outrageous as a power feed through these great peaks all the way from Walchensee.

But there was another problem, far more immediate. The exodus of the Roma depended on them having a landing spot—a place large enough to hold a hundred people, and near enough to the Gate for them to reach it on foot. Alphonse and Edward could not fly between the worlds twenty-one times; the best they could do was to get the Roma to the Gate, but there was no level place near enough to it.

Al lashed his tail in frustration and pulled over the top of the steep triangular height as Edward leaned to get his binoculars. “One more pass,” he said, and Al turned on his tail, dropping even lower. “There!” Ed said, pointing. “That ledge, to the left of the Gate!”

“It’s too small,” Al replied doubtfully. “And it’s too steep.”

“At least I don’t see any signs of people here. They must figure the wilderness itself will guard that thing. After all, they had to bring it up here with dirigibles. Take us down, Al.”

They slowed down to land on the narrow strip of rock. Edward did not dismount, but let his brother test the ledge. Al swung his head to look back up at the Gate standing above them like some quirky sculpture, calculating whether or not their friends would be able to make the climb. “I don’t know, Ed. They’re going to need someone with some climbing skills go up first and lay down ropes.”

“But it’s better than nothing.” Edward patted his neck. “At least nothing looks like it will interfere with Siggy’s part of the plan.” He was referring to Siegfried’s idea of planting the Gate with explosives and detonating it with a timer after everyone had gone through.

“I hope he’s an experienced mountaineer.” Alphonse pushed lightly off the cliff face and floated for a moment before descending rapidly into the valley below. It was like riding a runaway train heading for a wreck and Edward clung to the saddle despite being safely strapped on. As they reached the dark valley, with its long alpine lakes and meadows of grass shining blue under the moon, he got his breath again and raised his binoculars. “It’s unbelievable those Roma got this far out here.”

“Not really. They’d be pretty safe here, that's for sure.”

“And so would those planes they spotted. They’ve got to be nearby. Pull up a little, brother.”

Al obligingly quested for a thermal. It was interesting to watch him, Edward thought; evidently a dragon’s long whiskers were acutely sensitive to minute changes in the temperature of the air. His head cast left and right, the carplike tendrils extended and waving, until after a moment he found what he was seeking and pushed upwards with a strange nod of his head. His lightweight body, with its hollow, gas-filled chambers, followed, pushed along by the vigorous lashing of his broad tail fin, which he also used to steer. It was amazingly efficient. In a minute they had risen two thousand feet.

Edward and Alphonse flew the entire length of the valley and saw nothing. At last, with the moon directly overhead, Al swam over the long high ridge that held the Hintere Schwaerze as its crown jewel and descended into another valley on the opposite side. This lay near a mountain road, already
snowed in for the winter, that wended its leisurely way all the way up from Lichtenstein, and it was on a spur of that road that they discovered what they’d been looking for.

The planes were in a box canyon that made a natural hangar and refuge. Al landed well short of the area on a low peak. Edward dismounted and promptly fell; numb from the long ride, his legs had gone out from under him. Al lowered his head to delicately lift him out of the snow with his teeth. “Silly! What would you do without me?”

“I’m glad you’re feeling better, Al,” Ed said earnestly, leaning back against him as he fumbled for the binoculars once more. He pushed his goggles back and raised them to his eyes. After a long moment he lowered them again. “I count fifty planes,” he said grimly. “Mostly German, all right, but I see some others, too. They’re fighters, not bombers, but it looks like they’re parked by a pile of ordnance.” He swung back to look at the broader landscape. “They’ve got a straight shot at the Gate. They could get all fifty planes through in a matter of minutes, with no one the wiser. Looks like Eckhart left her mark,” he finished sourly.

Al blinked, squinting into the night. “They’re guarded,” he said suddenly. “I see a tent with a light. There, on the other side of the canyon.” He chuffed, pawing the snow with his feet. “I should just take them out right now.”

“No!” Edward said hastily. “Don’t be rash. Remember, they’ve got guns.”

“I did it at the Penitentiary.”

“I don’t want you to, Al. They’ll have a radio. We don’t want to scatter the rats before they’re all in the warren. And if you got shot up here, there’s no one but me to help you.” Ed blinked away the vivid image of an injured dragon lying in the snow. “We have to wait. You’ll have your turn, but I want some backup first.”

Al sighed. “I suppose you’re right.” He surveyed the landscape again, thoughtfully. “The Roma must have been following this road, and just stumbled onto the planes.”

Edward marked the location of the fleet on his map with a pencil before pocketing it. He and Alphonse then shared some of August’s cheese and biscuits before Ed clambered back into the saddle and fastened his belt firmly. “Can you find your way back without the compass?”

Al snorted. “Of course I can.”

* * *

August and Siegfried were sitting up, waiting anxiously for them, when they returned in the small hours of the morning. Breathless and grinning, Edward high-fived his brother before going into the house with Siegfried to warm up by the hearth. Unaffected by his icy flight, Alphonse returned to the barn a calmer dragon, curling up at once in his warm bed of straw. “Please don’t worry, Winry,” he whispered as his eyes began to close. “We’re almost home.”
Going Home

Chapter Summary

The project is completed, and the Gates are activated. But nothing ever comes easy for the Elric brothers and their friends...

Chapter Notes

WARNING: More violence and gore... dragon fights, some sex, and a mild hint of incest... ghost kittens... and a dragon stuffed inside of a car o_O;

I.

The first thing that Winry became aware of when she started to regain consciousness was a feeling of dread so heavy, it was as though a stone had been placed in the center of her chest. This feeling persisted only as long as her mind was still; the moment she began to think, it was dispelled somewhat, fading into the background as a dull kind of ache.

Words now took front and center in her awareness; she recognized the voice of her grandmother, and she started awake, gasping. She was in the recovery room of her own surgery.

"Winry. You’re awake." Pinako sounded as though she wasn’t necessarily welcoming her back, and Winry groaned. She had no idea what her grandmother would do if she discovered her deal with Tucker, but she knew it wouldn’t be pretty.

She looked around guiltily, as if Tucker could read her thoughts, but thankfully she didn’t see him anywhere. Sciezka was there, her huge eyes even larger than usual, and Yung hovered in the background as well, his face still unreadable. Pinako was sitting by her side, looking at her hard, as though she knew she had something to admit.

Winry knew that trick, and she almost breathed a sigh of relief. “Hi, Grandma,” she said apologetically.

“You irresponsible girl!” Pinako said. “You scared us all to death!”

“I’m sorry,” she replied, as meekly as possible. “I guess Sciezka was right. I have been working too hard.”

“I’m glad you agree, because you’re about to take a week off.”
Winry sat up instantly. “A week?!” The world reeled around her.

Pinako grasped her arm to steady her. “Don’t you agree that you need it?”

There was a long pause. At last Winry shrugged.

Pinako nodded firmly. “I’ll take that as a ‘yes.’ Ed and Al have survived this long, Winry. They can wait a little while longer. Remember, you have to take care of yourself first, or you won’t be able to take care of anyone else.”

“That’s right,” Sciezka said, stepping forward. “So I’m taking a week off, too. I’m going to spend it with you, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course I don’t mind. You’ve been so brave, Sciezka!” Winry reached past Pinako to take her friend’s hands as she offered them to her.

“Meanwhile, Yung and I think we have a solution to your power problem,” Pinako said. “We’ll implement it while you’re resting up. It’ll be ready to go when you get back to work.”

Winry drew a great breath and reclined against her pillows. “I’m so lucky to have you,” she said softly, meaning them all.

“We’re lucky to have you, too, dear,” her grandmother said, patting her arm with maternal affection. “Now you just rest up. I’ll go make you some of your favorite soup.”

“I’d like that very much.” Winry managed a smile as Pinako and Yung left the room.

Sciezka went over to close the door after first glancing both ways down the hall. When she returned to Winry’s side, she pulled up a chair and spoke in an intense, low voice. “All right, Winry. I’ve covered for you. Now you owe me the truth.”

“What do you mean, you’ve ‘covered’ for me?” Winry shifted herself up to rest on her elbows, the fear returning to settle in her chest all over again.

Sciezka leaned a bit closer. “I know something’s up between you and Tucker.”

“Oh, Sciezka. What a disgusting thought!”

The librarian drew in a sudden breath as though stricken. After a long moment she recovered herself. “Winry. Don’t make this harder than it already has to be. Don’t you trust anyone any more?”

Winry bit her lip, rolling over on her side to face her friend. “Please don’t take it personally, Sciezka,” she said earnestly. “I simply can’t afford to risk anything right now. When Ed and Al get safely back, then all of you can know the truth.”

“I know the truth already. Tucker’s using you, isn’t he?”

“Sciezka…”

“Your grandmother conducted a thorough physical examination while you were unconscious. She found some bruising—bilateral, like someone grabbed you. I said you’d stumbled on some scaffolding and Tucker had caught you as you fell. She believed me, because he happened to catch you when you fainted this morning. But she found other things, too. Evidence of sexual activity.”

Winry blushed deep scarlet, reeling a little as she sat there. She was caught, and she knew it. “And you said…?”
“I just said some creativity could be expected on your part, because you couldn’t get your mind off Edward.” Sciezka blushed a little herself. “I led her to think that you and I—”

“—Sciezka!” Winry was mortified.

“Well, what else would you have me do? Everyone but you realizes I’ve had a crush on you for years!”

Winry stared at her friend, her blue eyes huge with shock and her sensibilities offended to the core. For a brief moment it seemed to her that Sciezka really had changed into a sand eel.

“Please, don’t look at me like that,” Sciezka said miserably. “I didn’t mean any harm by it. Surely you wouldn’t rather that I told her the truth—that you’d made some kind of evil deal with Tucker?”

“Sciezka…” Winry stared at her, uncomprehending. “Is… Is that the reason you’ve stayed with me for so long? Is that the reason you’ve helped me all this time?”

Sciezka drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly, trying to control her frustration and fear. It was an old feeling, the fear of her words falling on deaf ears. “Winry… I’m your friend. You have to understand—I’m no monster like Tucker. I would never do anything to you. I would never dream of such a thing. I love you. I only want to help you, even if I get nothing in return. That’s all.”

Winry bit her lip. “I… I should have realized,” she said, after a long moment’s thought. “You never had any boyfriends, or anything like that, but for some reason I never wondered about it. It was like you never missed having them, so I never really noticed.”

The librarian nodded slowly. “That’s exactly right.” Getting through to the conservative ego was like trying to communicate with a very small and spoiled child that constantly insisted on getting its own way at the expense of everyone else. Sciezka had had long practice at such communication, starting with her own parents, but it never seemed to make it any easier.

“Oh, Sciezka!” Winry said at last. It was obvious that she was struggling. “This is all so terrible. All of it. I don’t know if I can bear it.”

“Two people can bear a load better than one,” Sciezka retorted. “You should know by now that you certainly needn’t worry about my behavior. All I’m asking for is the truth of the matter. I gave you my truth. Now you give me yours. It’s only fair.”

* * *

Pinako returned with the soup to find both Winry and Sciezka deeply subdued. It looked like they’d been crying. As soon as she entered the room, Sciezka got up and left abruptly, leaving them both staring after her.

Pinako sat down in the vacated chair and arranged the tray and napkin. “I’ll feed you if you like, Winry.”

“No. That’s OK.” Winry reached for the tray, settling it on her lap, but she didn’t pick up her spoon.

“If you’re embarrassed about Sciezka, don’t be,” her grandmother said forthrightly. “I’ve done things like that a time or two, you know.”

“You have?!” Winry’s eyes grew huge.

“Don’t be silly. Of course I have. When the boys are away, what’s a girl to do? Besides—” and her
glance softened—“There’s nothing wrong with a little ‘equivalent exchange.’”

Winry was gasping like a fish at this news, but Pinako leaned to take the cover off the soup bowl. “You’d better start eating this,” she said. “You’re so anemic, your blood’s as thin as water. I’m going to give you an iron shot later. Honestly, Winry, how could you let yourself get so run down?!”

After a moment Winry took the spoon and started on the soup. It was good. “Grandma? Do you really think Yung can make the power we need?”

“I have complete confidence in him,” the old woman replied. “He’s working with Tucker now, laying a better shield over the barn so his alchemy won’t be detected. Old man Mackey’s given us permission to put an installation underground. But I don’t want you even thinking about that right now, Winry. You’re in bad shape—worse than I thought. I’m sorry I didn’t catch you before you got this way.”

“Well, I didn’t help matters any. I’m sorry, Grandma.” Winry sighed, then resumed eating. “It’s just that I can’t stop thinking about Ed and Al, and the third of October is coming up so fast.”

“You’re acting like this might be your only chance at rescuing them. What’s to keep you from trying again on the fourth or the fifth?”

Winry didn’t reply. Finishing the soup, she wiped her face with a napkin and gently pushed away the tray.

“Good girl.” Pinako took it and got up. “I’ll go fix up your iron shot. Meanwhile, you should have a nap.”

* * *

Tucker was still working on the first of a series of protective arrays, having sent Yung for some alchemical materials when Sciezka strode into the barn. Her eyes were blazing, and the mask of her face was rigid. She marched right across the center of the array to stop in front of him, and he straightened in astonishment.

“You’ve already ruined my life,” Sciezka said in a bitter voice. “I’m not going to let you ruin hers. Tell me what you’ve done!”

“Miss Sciezka!” Tucker said, affecting deep offense; but she saw the sudden panic in his eyes and stepped forward, pressing him back step by step.

“You made some kind of secret deal with her. I see that now. You’d use her, in exchange for getting the boys back. Well, I might be a sand eel, but you’re a worm, Tucker. A worm!” Sciezka’s voice had risen to a shout, and Tucker cringed like a scolded dog, raising his hands as though he wanted to cover his ears.

“She’s cowering in her own house afraid to make a move or say a word! But I’m not going to be like that, Tucker.” Sciezka raised her right hand and Tucker saw to his dismay that she bore a weapon—the small but deadly handgun used by Amestris military officers. “Tell me the truth right now, or so help me, I’ll kill you where you stand.”

II.
The next day was the twenty-fifth of September, and Alphonse had woken late in the morning, well-rested and feeling good after his journey of the previous night. He’d had a strange but vivid dream of Winry in which she’d been counting daisy petals in a field. Each petal had a different number, but somehow they all wound up as three. He’d interpreted this, of course, as October 3, and hoped the dream was just a product of their mutual anxiety.

When he told his brother about it, Edward hardly seemed to care. His long ride had left him staggering about, groaning and bow-legged. Al would have laughed, but he remembered too well the painful aftermath of the pony rides of his own childhood, and he soon sent him off to receive Siegfried’s gentle ministrations.

Over the next several nights, Edward and Alphonse received an unusual flurry of contacts from Winry in their sleep. Her messages were murky but her tension was palpable, and it quickly spread to them as they realized that this, the chance of a lifetime, was going to finally materialize.

“Get ready, Siggy!” Edward told his friend. The little scientist had been spending his time building a series of bombs and a detonator with which to destroy the Gate, as well as tweaking three portable crystal sets which had been assembled by August. Now, as they finished packing, Ed added, “We’re going home. It’s gonna happen right on schedule.”

Siegfried paused to give him a happy thumbs-up.

* * *

Less happy was the Patemani familia. Just as Alphonse had observed about families while he and Ed had been at Winnifred’s, their individual ambitions were now pulling them apart. Uncle’s decision, made finally, was to go with Devi and her children, leaving Noa and Simionce. Had he not pledged his deceased brother that he would protect his family?

Simionce, in turn, had stated gruffly that he could take care of himself. Still, he was Devi’s twin brother, and devoted to her, and now he faced losing her forever. Word reached Edward’s ears that Simionce had been heard cursing Noa and the ill luck she carried. Noa herself was seeming to shrink inward, becoming more and more a shade, more and more reluctant to meet anyone’s eyes, and the worse things got, the worse Edward felt about the matter and the more silent he, in turn, became.

“Ed?” Al said that evening, as he was turning round and round to prepare himself a fresh straw bed. “You’re worrying about Noa, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Edward said irritably. “Who wouldn’t be? Simionce is pissed she’s hanging him up and she’s feeling like a boat anchor that no one wants.”

“She was the one who came up with the whole Crossing idea in the first place. Ironic.”

“Yeah, and now it’s come back to bite her big time. I’m afraid she’ll try to kill herself or something.”

Alphonse didn’t even pause to ponder the situation; his new brain operated a little more ruthlessly than his old one, at least where girls other than Winry were concerned. “Even if she does, Ed, it still won’t have been your fault. There’s a lesson here somewhere for her, and maybe for all of us.”

“Yeah. If we can ever figure out what it is.”
That evening, a strange thing happened. Several frightened Roma kids reported seeing a ghost in the barn. After asking some questions and hearing a description, the Elrics determined that it was their old friend John Sampson. They were glad he was still with them, even if he scared the children.

Upon hearing about this, Siegfried insisted on staking out the barn, and at Alphonse’s request the deceased American fighter pilot made a spectacular appearance on the last night of September, leaving the staggered Siegfried a dedicated believer and craving to study the phenomenon in depth. “That’s where I can help you, once we’re back in Amestris,” Al told him. “I’m a Spirit Alchemist. Ghosts are what I do.” He was feeling cheerful and optimistic, despite his continued worry for Winry. His long wait was soon to be over.

III.

Winry’s week off would have been interminable, except for one thing. Confined as she was to her bed, and spending much of her time asleep, she was able to communicate a great deal with Edward and Alphonse.

The nature of her dreams had changed, and she was only vaguely aware as to why. They had become briefer and darker, as though she were viewing them under water, and a fearful thread ran through them all—even the dreams where Alphonse sat with her on the front porch steps. She dreamed that more than once, and every time, as she stared at his handsome, honest face, it had changed into the face of a dragon. She had fled, ignoring his pleading voice, only to awake with that familiar churning in her belly and her heart pounding against her ribs.

It was Edward who, strangely enough, now gave her less cause for upset. It was he who managed to convey the most detailed information to her across the incalculable distance between them. Of late, he had been giving her the constant impression of a crowd being around him, and she struggled to understand what this might mean. But Ed and Al’s predicament wasn’t the only thing she was struggling to understand. Pinako’s revelation regarding ‘equivalent exchange’ had rocked her world, whether her grandmother had meant to or not.

Winry wasn’t really certain where she’d ever picked up the idea that ‘nice’ girls never enjoyed sex with other girls. Perhaps it was from her own father, before he’d gone away with her mother to the war. In retrospect, such an attitude really didn’t make much sense; she admitted to herself that there could be no unintended pregnancies in such an arrangement, and it might be safer in other ways, too—a good way to learn and gain confidence, perhaps even a good way for women to bond. But despite her own maturity, and her experience as a surgeon and a nurse, the idea that Pinako herself had indulged in these mysterious activities, the specifics of which were still only vaguely defined in her mind, was still very hard for her to believe.

But it was easier than thinking about Sciezka. When it came to her librarian friend, Winry was at a total loss, and filled with guilt. The tears she wept into her pillow were as much for Sciezka now as for Edward and Alphonse; she’d looked back over all the time she’d spent with her and seen clearly that it had all been for her own selfish benefit. On the surface, Sciezka had seemed such a young and happy soul, but Winry now saw beneath it all a great loneliness, a great sadness—and a capacity for loyalty that took her breath away. Sciezka had suffered a great deal from being her friend, she now
realized. Besides the pain of unrequited love, (if such a thing could actually be felt between two girls, Winry’s pragmatic mind added automatically), she had been taken from her familiar haunts, traumatized and poisoned, her body twisted by alchemy almost beyond recognition—and what had Winry done about it? Put her to work with hammer and saw to help build the device that would save her other friends—her ‘best friends.’ It was terrible, and it was urgent that something be done about it. But what?

Sciezka’s unusual love for her was something Winry felt certain she would never be able to return, so the obvious answer was simply to cure the transmutation that had rendered her into a human sand eel. But that would require Tucker’s help. She hadn’t seen him in almost a week, and she wished fervently she would never have to see him again.

Over the last few days she had found herself becoming more and more afraid that the embryo she carried wasn’t normal. The wrenching pains that took her at odd intervals could be construed as muscle spasms or any number of other things, but the dread that now lay on all her limbs and body was something she had never seen or heard tell of before, and it increased tenfold when Tucker’s hulking presence was near. It also increased when she was anywhere near her Gate, and as the long week came to an end and she began to anticipate getting back on her feet again to witness the activation of her masterpiece, she also began to get more and more afraid.

* * *

Tucker put the finishing touches on his array as it was running, shielding the Mackey barn under a powerful electromagnetic veil. “This should prevent all but the most determined spies from detecting the Gate, even when it’s operational,” he said, but the tone of triumph that would normally color his voice at seeing himself making such an achievement was lacking this day. He was addressing Winry, who stood with her arms crossed at the base of the platform. Sciezka stood tall and straight behind her, and as Tucker met her steely eyes he cringed a little despite himself.

He had told her everything—had been forced to at gunpoint—and she had released him with the admonition to keep silent about the incident, on pain of death. He thought he anticipated what her next move would be. Sciezka was still a military officer; of that he had been reminded quite rudely; and the military could not afford another fiasco like they’d had when Alphonse Elric had unwittingly helped to activate the Thule Society’s Gate. An ordinary officer would try to warn Roy Mustang of the impending debacle, but Tucker had to admit that Sciezka wasn’t ordinary anymore. The way to climb the ranks was to distinguish oneself, and Sciezka was going to try to capture the completed Gate technology singlehandedly, delivering it into the hands of the military.

At least, that’s what he would have done, had he still been part of the ranks. But Sciezka couldn’t fathom the fullness of his powers. He had defenses that she could only dream about, and he would use them, if necessary, to protect both the project and himself.

Tucker cleared his throat like a lecturer at a blackboard as Pinako and Yung joined the group. Yung was looking uncharacteristically happy, his eyes almost bright, and Pinako hung on his arm with a grin like that of a schoolgirl. One would never realize upon entering the barn that an amplified geopower system had been silently installed, by the use of Yung’s alchemy, in the very earth beneath their feet. Only the glowing green caps of the four deep rock energy wells, one on each side of the platform, showed that anything was different at all.

“Is everything prepared?” Tucker asked.

“It’s all ready,” said Pinako. She moved to stand by Winry, taking her arm. “This is it, girl. Don’t
you have anything to say?”

“Yes,” Winry stuttered, feeling Scieza silently take her other arm. It was good to have someone to lean on, she thought, and her mind, dulled by excitement and fear, flew at once to Edward and Alphonse, waiting anxiously somewhere on the other side of time and space. “As you know, I’ve done my best to synchronize the time with Ed and Al, but the two universes don’t match exactly. That’s why we’re going to activate the Gate early, and leave it active for as long as we can—because we don’t really know what the time is in the other world. But Ed and Al know what we’re about to do, and once we activate the Gate we can expect them to arrive at any moment.” And when they finally get here, it won’t take them long to find out what you’ve done, Tucker—and even less time for you to die. The last thought made her straighten her spine and she said, “All right, Grandma. You do the honors!”

Still grinning, Pinako leaned to flip the switch.

IV.

On the morning of October 1, several attempts were made to synchronize the time more closely between Amestris and Germany, with the Elrics and Winry repeatedly showing each other clocks in their dreams. Neither party was sure if it was working. Edward and Alphonse decided that they should leave a little early, just in case. They appeared that morning together to make a final appeal to the Roma, cautioning them that nothing might go as planned, and that once they reached their destination they might die from it, or perish along the way. No one protested this, and no one backed out. Then came word from Simionce that Noa had disappeared.

August’s barn was in an uproar. Everyone was running here and there, in and out the doors, looking for her. The well and the nearby lake shore were searched by Simionce and the children. Edward organized a scouting party and took to the woods, ignoring Al’s increasingly dragonish snarls and posturing as the search began to impinge on their impending reunion with Winry. At last Al impatiently took to the air, circling the mountain, but if Noa was there somewhere, she made no sign.

That night Alphonse was in a temper, snorting and pacing round and round in his stall, his scales on edge and blood red rubies glowing in the depths of his eyes. “Damn that girl!” he huffed.

“I can’t, Al,” Edward said shortly. “I have to know what’s happened to her.”

Al halted in front of him, lowering his head. “Do you suppose Simionce knows?”

“I’m way ahead of you, brother. But Uncle says no way.”

“If we can’t find her by tomorrow, we have to go anyway, Ed.”

Edward grimaced, knowing that Alphonse spoke the truth. They couldn’t imperil the journey of a hundred souls just to accommodate one capricious woman.

Misinterpreting his brother’s expression, Al rumbled dangerously. “Don’t you even think of bugging out of this, Edward!”

“Not that I’ve given you any reason to trust me,” Ed said sarcastically.

“I don’t trust you. Not now.” Al shook his ruff out; it stood stiffly around his neck, looking like a
fighting cock’s.

“Hey. Hey!” Ed put his hand on the dragon’s hot snout. “Just relax. I’m not going anywhere.”

* * *

The next morning, Noa was still missing. Uncle grimly directed the final preparations for the journey. The old man was looking more and more worn, Edward noted; as though he might regret what he was about to do, but was sticking to his plan on account of pride. Meanwhile, Simionce had taken another group out to search again for his wife.

The weather had turned, delivering a steady gray drizzle which didn’t look like it was going to let up; but with the shelter, warm clothing and supplies they had arranged, the expedition was ready for almost anything the mountains could throw at them short of an avalanche. One advantage of the cloud cover was that they could fly during the day; Al was just the color of the sky, and no one would see him from the ground.

The first load Alphonse and Edward took consisted of several heavy canvas tents. Ed insisted that he could unload them by himself at their destination, but Uncle went along anyway, after some private final words with Simionce. They had a tense moment just after takeoff, when Al was trying to gain altitude out over the Walchensee; the load weighed him down a little too much and he had to struggle, but once he was up and over the mountains things went more easily.

Up here, of course, it was snowing lightly, and the clouds obscured their vision, but they flew by Ed’s compass, reaching the Hintere Schwaerze without incident. In the limited visibility, they couldn’t see if anything had changed; the Gate itself was difficult to see, and they only found it after Al searched for it. He landed silently on the mountain ledge and Ed helped Uncle unload the gear. Then, leaving him behind, with one of the portable crystals, to set up the tents, Al took off again, Edward clinging tightly to the saddle as he fell into the long valley below them before gaining altitude once more.

The round trip took less time than they’d expected. The wind had shifted slightly and Alphonse had it at his back on the return journey, but once they’d landed at August’s again Edward noted his anxiousness. “What is it?” he said, dismounting to briefly stretch his sore legs.

“The weather’s getting worse. If the wind blows too hard I might not be able to fly.”

Ed bit his lip. While they had taken such things into account, this particular problem had seemed a lot less immediate on paper. “Well, we just have to continue as best we can.”

They got the first load of refugees on Al’s back, including Siegfried, who insisted on reaching the Gate immediately to begin laying his explosives. Edward got everyone strapped to their places on the harness and cautioned them to keep silent—no screaming when Al took off! After checking briefly back with August, who said there had still been no luck finding Noa, Ed mounted last, directly in front of Siggy, who put his arms tightly around his waist as Alphonse ran along his well-worn trail down the hill and flung himself over the cliff.

* * *

Ed and Al were on their seventh return trip, having transported more than thirty refugees. It was dark, and the moon had not yet risen. Wonderfully, the clouds had cleared and the snow had
stopped. The wind was still blowing with a steady roar across the cold expanse of stars, but Al had learned with some practice that it could be negotiated. It was mainly a matter of finding and holding the right altitude.

Edward was getting cold even in his quilted ski suit, which was insulated with goose down and rabbit fur. His legs and buttocks had long ago stopped hurting and turned numb from riding on the hard saddle. They had dropped off five more people on the windswept ledge where Uncle had set up the tents, and Al had then used the wind to rise up, over the mountain and down its opposite face, letting it blow him a little eastward in order to catch a reverse current he’d discovered at about twelve thousand feet. It was at the height where Edward’s breath just began to fail him, and he risked altitude sickness, but his exposure would be brief, lasting for only a few miles until Al fell on the slightly warmer conditions above the Isar valley. Alphonse was just climbing to reach this thermal current when his body jerked violently in shock and he dropped straight down from the sky, slowing only at the last second just before he lit heavily on a patch of snow in a high, boulder-strewn field.

“Al?!” Ed’s voice was filled with panic as he hastily unstrapped himself and leaped off his back. “What’s going on? Are you hurt?!”

“Shh!” Alphonse put his scaly arms around his brother. “Something’s coming!” He ducked low in the deep shadows of a nearby rock outcropping, hugging Edward against him protectively.

Edward squinted into the darkness. Something was moving in the distance, above the mountainside. He fumbled hastily for his binoculars, raised them to his eyes and his heart froze in his chest. He and Alphonse uttered the same name at the same instant: “Envy!”

The sight of the great green dragon, twice as big as Alphonse, winding his leisurely way above the valley floor like an eel cruising the sea, his huge head sniffing about for a scent trail, was worse than the Elrics’ most horrible expectations. “Al. Where did he come from? If he finds our friends—”

Alphonse reeled at this thought, exhaling abruptly in a cloud of steam. “He can’t have yet. We just left from there!” He looked his brother in the eye. “Ed. We’ve got to lead him away, whatever the cost.”

Edward nodded mutely, not trusting himself to speak. Against Siegfried’s wishes, he had equipped himself with two loaded pistols prior to the journey, but they were useless against such a monstrous beast. Hanging his binoculars around his neck by their strap but forgetting his mask, he swung himself back up on Al’s back, quickly snapping his belt into place. Al pushed off the valley floor with considerable difficulty, laboring until he found an upwelling, then shooting skyward. Edward looked back. “He’s spotted us! Get going, Al!” He kicked Alphonse forward as he would a horse.

Al grunted. But he sped up, sidewinding across the wind as he made the open air above the mountains and headed south into unknown territory, putting the gale at his back.

V.

They lost Envy over the heart of Austria, and returned to the Hintere Schwaerze in a great rush, anxious to verify the safety of their friends. Edward was fainting from exposure and exhaustion as Al landed on the ledge with a huge sigh of relief; the Roma gathered in their tents were all OK, but filled with worry at their long absence. Siegfried had already climbed up to the Gate in the dark, burying his explosive charges in the snow and preparing the way for the others with Uncle’s tireless
help. He had returned to his tent to warm himself up when Edward’s slight body was deposited suddenly and unceremoniously in his arms.

Ed’s ski suit was soaked and cold, and there were tiny icicles in his beard. He was shivering. “Oh, my d-dear Edward!” Siegfried stuttered in horror.

Ed smiled wryly at him with the sluggishness of hypothermia. “Sorry I’m late,” he said, as though waking up from a long sleep. Then his expression changed as he remembered where he was. “Siggy. Envy’s out there!”

Alphonse meanwhile had managed to back most of himself into the same tent, which was well heated with a portable oil stove. There he lay, his head out in the snow, watching and sniffing for danger on the wind as Siegfried got Edward out of his clothes and wrapped up in a warm blanket by the heat, giving him a steaming cup of tea. Uncle raised August on the crystal radio set, informing him of the situation with terse words. Alphonse cringed, imagining the crushing disappointment of the Roma who were being left behind.

An immediate problem was Radhika. She had come along with Devi on one of the first flights, leaving her brother Andreas behind, and she wanted to go home and get him. Devi gently explained that it wasn’t possible at the present time, but she began to cry at this, and her shrill screaming echoed through the camp. Fearful it would give them away, Uncle scolded her harshly, at last slapping her to render her silent. Siegfried and Edward watched this with solemn faces; it didn’t seem likely that she’d see her big brother ever again.

After an hour or two by the little stove, Edward was much warmer; nevertheless, his body was still heavy with exhaustion as he leaned back in Siegfried’s comforting arms. “Winry’s already activated her side of the Gate,” he reminded them. “We can go through at any time, but once we key it up we’re certain to attract some serious attention.”

Alphonse turned his head back into the door to speak softly. “I think it would be best if we got going,” he said. “I’ve got a really bad feeling coming on.”


For answer, Ed hauled himself to his feet with a groan. His legs were starting to stiffen in the most incredible way. Then his glance fell on his quilted suit, hanging as it was near the stove. “My clothes aren’t dry yet, guys.”

“I’ve still got your spares,” said Al. Siegfried quickly unpacked them from one of the harness bags and helped Edward into them, buttoning him up securely. “OK,” said Edward, back to business despite his weariness. “Devi, get everyone together and count heads. We’re moving out. Siegfried and I are going up on Al to activate the Gate. You’ll know when we’ve done it. Your job is to get everyone through it as quick as you can. Winry will be waiting for you on the other side.”

“I have to initiate the detonator,” Siegfried said. “It is set for fifteen minutes. Come, Uncle.”

Suddenly Al chuffed, a sound like a soft bark, and slid out of the tent. “Ed. Hey Ed! I don’t believe this!”

“What is it?” Edward strode forward to peer out past the flap. In the white light he could barely see Al’s long form pouncing like a cat’s. A woman screamed. Ed rushed out into the cold. “Noa!!”

They were all shocked—not only Ed and Al, but the Roma as well. In her desperation to reach Amestris and the new home she’d always dreamed of, she’d put on a disguise, playing the part of a
distant relative who’d joined the Gypsy exodus, and left Simionce behind. The clothes she’d worn bore another’s scent, which had tricked Alphonse into carrying her without his knowledge—at least until he’d put his attention fully on the odors around him. Now, as Al released her from his claws, Ed helped her to her feet. She was swearing and weeping with frustration and fright. He knew he should be angry, but for a long moment he could only hold her. “Noa,” he whispered. “I’m so glad you’re safe.”

Al snorted furiously and turned away, shaking his head, as the girl pulled her cape tightly about herself once more. “Your brother’s changed even more than I realized,” she whispered.

“He’s a dragon now. You shouldn’t expect him to have much patience. Especially since you tricked both of us, and your own kith and kin besides.” Ed pulled back, grasping her firmly by the shoulders.

“My whole life, I’ve only wanted a place I could call home.”

Ed regarded her solemnly. “Home is in here, Noa.” He tapped his chest lightly. “Home is where love is. Your home should be with Simionce.”

“Simionce doesn’t love me, Edward.” He had never seen her look so utterly miserable.

Ed steeled himself to deliver the blow. “Noa, listen to me. You have to go back. We have to take you back on our very next trip. You can’t come with us.”

“No! No! I would rather leap from this cliff than go back!” She collapsed to her knees in the snow.

Edward was thinking furiously, Noa clinging to his legs, when Alphonse, pacing back and forth in front of the tents, suddenly swung around. “Ed. Wait!” he said excitedly. “Our counterparts in these other universes are not exactly the same. Al Heiderich was older than me. What if Rose is really her daughter, grown up?”

Edward stared at him. “It’s possible, I guess. But we can’t take the chance, Al!”

“I think we can. What was the name of Rose’s mother?”

Edward thought fast. “Her name was Noweh!”

“That’s right.” They stared at each other in astonishment as Noa climbed to her feet.

Ed turned to her. “Well, Noa, it looks like you’re in after all. I’m glad. But I’m so sorry about the rest of your people. I would have liked nothing better than to give all of them a new home.”

“I know, Ed.,” she whispered. “But even if it doesn’t turn out exactly the way you wanted, you are still a hero. The Romani people will tell stories about you for a thousand years—the golden boy from Faerie, whose brother was a dragon.”

Just as she uttered the word dragon there was a guttural roar, and people began crying in panicked voices.

“Edward!” Al said at the same moment. “He’s here! Get inside the tent!” he added savagely before whirling, his tail whipping furiously, to launch himself headlong at the monstrous green serpent which had landed on the ledge. Edward grabbed Noa as they witnessed the incredible and terrifying spectacle. Briefly illuminated by the moonlight, Alphonse seemed to hang suspended in midair before colliding solidly with Envy, and the two beasts tumbled down from the heights in a writhing tangle, roaring and snarling as they fell into the darkness of the valley below.
Ignoring his brother’s order to take shelter, Edward rushed out to gaze over the edge of the ledge, but he could see nothing but a vast expanse of empty space. Then came the real shock. Up out of the black shadows swarmed a score of armed men, their faces appearing so suddenly that Noa screamed shrilly and fell on the ice.

Edward’s twin pistols might have been useless against a creature like Envy, but they showed their value now. He drew both of them at once, firing point-blank at the intruders and immediately sending three of them backwards off the cliff face to their deaths. “It’s the Thule guard! Noa!!” he screamed. “Get the others!” As he said this, a flash of flame in the sky above their heads revealed the hovering form of Alphonse Elric. His roar shook Edward’s world.

Envy was taunting him. Alphonse remembered that voice, remembered how it irked him. He fought to keep his head, giving ground a little as he saw the swarm of men now scaling the peak on lines that had heretofore been hidden in the snow.

“Had your hopes up?” Envy called, circling him at a safe distance. His sides had gotten raked by Al’s talons, and his acid blood steamed in the frozen air. “They never had a chance.” He swept closer, his mad eye glittering. “You see, brother, I can hear your dreams!”

“So how do my dreams harm you?!” Al retorted, rising higher to keep a little above his adversary. Without reply, Envy lunged suddenly. They tumbled end over end through the air, but Al had been ready for him, and scored him again with his claws.

They broke apart and hovered, facing one another. “Envy!” Al said plaintively. “You were once my father’s son. We shouldn’t be fighting like this! Call off those men!”

Gunshots rang out below and Al caught a glimpse of Edward standing on the edge of the cliff, heard his voice yelling orders. A sudden blinding rage swept over him as he saw his brother fighting for his life. Something in his chest gave way all at once, and he almost choked on a gout of fire that raged out of his very heart. With a deafening roar he swept down on his adversary, grappling him with all four sets of talons, raking his sides again as they fell. Envy fought like a viper, twisting and curling, spitting his cold chemical flame, but Al pressed his advantage. Friend and foe alike scattered for their lives as the two snarling dragons crashed onto the ledge.

Alphonse righted himself at once, rolling off of the still-writhing Envy. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Edward and Uncle regrouping to tackle their black-clad enemies together. “Get behind me, get behind me!” he roared, feeling again the heated upwelling of his heart as they obeyed, leaping over his back. Al paid attention this time to the stages of his flame: first the overwhelming emotions, then the sudden collapse of some protective barrier around his beating heart. The sensation was not at all unpleasant as the explosive chemical rumbled up and out of his massive lungs, and it ignited on contact with the air as he spat it full in Envy’s face. Envy screamed in agony, thrashing about before rolling off the ledge, and Al leaped after him, swooping low as he tumbled down the sheer face of the Hintere Schwaerze.

Edward and Uncle were fighting side by side, their backs against the mountain wall. Many of the Thule guard had been killed, but there had been a toll on the Roma as well; several of the refugees lay dead, and rivers of blood stained the snow. The women and older children were fighting too, throwing objects and even chunks of ice at their attackers.

Uncle calmly leveled his rifle once more and squeezed the trigger, and another guard fell from the cliff. He paused to reload. Even in the midst of the mayhem his actions were a study in deliberation. “Looks like they had this planned in advance, son,” he said, again raising his gun. “There’s a rat in our midst. Your turn,” he added, referring to Ed’s empty pistols.
Edward had dropped to one knee to reload his own weapons while Uncle covered him. Few of the other refugees had guns. While the Thule guard was heavily armed, having to climb up from their position lower down on the mountain’s flank made it perhaps more difficult than they anticipated to actually shoot, and not one of their men had made it alive to the Gypsy tents. An unanticipated advantage of the refugees’ situation was that the moon was behind the peak, and its shadows were beginning to slowly creep over the ledge. As these thoughts were going rapidly through Edward’s mind, a well-placed bullet suddenly grazed his steel shoulder, winging away into the blackness.

“Get down! Get down!” Ed dropped flat into the trodden, bloody snow, pulling Uncle down with him. Though the old man was wheezing a little, his excellent condition was apparent—he looked less exhaust ed than Ed. “They’ve set up a sharpshooter.”

Uncle glanced upslope. “How many of them can there be?! We’ve killed at least two dozen.”

“Uncle?” Edward said suddenly. “Where’s Siggy?”

“Haven’t seen him since we set the detonators. Look there!” He pointed. Squinting, Edward could just make out a tiny figure swinging precariously from a rock outcropping not a hundred feet from where their ledge tapered off into the mountain. Uncle leveled his gun—but then a second wave of men began to climb over the cliff. At the same instant Alphonse rose menacingly behind them in the full light of the moon, bellowing to draw their attention.

Edward leaped to his feet, almost dropping his weapons. “AL!” he bawled as shots were fired. It was easy for the guards, as they climbed the rocks, to turn and shoot at the dragon. As Alphonse continued to taunt and distract them, falling back just out of reach of an easy kill, Edward rushed the cliff edge.

“WAIT!” Something flew past Edward’s head from behind and he ducked, instinctively falling and rolling as an explosion rocked the mountainside and half a dozen of the enemy fell screaming into the abyss. “What was that?!?” he spat, scrambling up. In the next second Siegfried’s hand clapped down on his shoulder. “Sorry I’m late!” he stuttered, his round face red with excitement. “I had to r-r-reset my detonator!”

“Have you got hand grenades?!” the astonished Edward demanded, just before his friend lobbed another one over the edge of the cliff. Another explosion, and the rest of the Thule guards quickly joined their defeated allies at the bottom of the mountain. At the same moment, Uncle finally fired, and the sharpshooter suspended from his rope vanished screaming into the darkness.

Siegfried clapped his hands together as the refugees quickly gathered around them. Three were dead—Rafe, Hans and Arjun—and the camp was in a shambles, with the children screaming and the adults stunned, but there was no time. Alphonse landed on the ledge.

“Get on my back, you two!” Al barked. Edward and Siegfried swung themselves up and strapped in, and without further words Alphonse took off again.

The wind was coming in unpredictable gusts, and flying was difficult. Catching the first updraft he could find, Alphonse maneuvered his way to the nearby Gate. The starlight revealed the tracks of Siegfried and Uncle, showing the ropes they’d left anchored and the stairs they’d cut up to the Gate in the hard-packed snow. The refugees had a clear and navigable path to their goal, and Edward breathed a sigh of relief at this. After casting a long glance around to make certain they were safe, Al brought them down as close as he could to the Gate. Edward pulled the key out from around his neck and leaned, trying to reach the activation lock.

There was, he supposed, some sense to situating the lock at the top of the Gate. It certainly prevented
any accidental activation, but if there had been more time, it would have also been an easy climb up the pre-existing handholds. Edward briefly considered this, but some instinct told him that time was running out.

The wind howled, buffeting Al’s body so that he writhed and lashed while attempting to stay steady. Edward tried again to reach the lock, Siegfried supporting him as he leaned impossibly far, but he fell short by a foot and Siggy barely was able to pull him back in time before a freak gust whirled Al away from the Gate and slammed him against some rocks. “Are you all right?!” Alphonse yelled, glancing back.

“We’re OK!” Ed said. “Al, let me off! I’m going to climb it!”

“No!” Alphonse struggled back to the Gate, once again casting anxiously around before pulling over it. “I won’t let you! We’ve got to stay together!”

“Al, we can’t! If they get attacked again while we’re up here, those people down there are all going to die!”

“NO!” Al barked the word savagely, a little blue flame escaping from his mouth. “I won’t let them die! But I won’t be separated from you either! Not for anything!—and that’s that, Edward!”

Edward did not try to speak further—it was a losing proposition to argue with a furious dragon. If he unhooked himself and tried to swing onto the Gate from here, Alphonse would probably prevent him, and with the wind gusting as it was, he could easily lose the key if he fought back, and ruin all their chances. He turned quickly to Siegfried. “Siggy, you’re taller than me. You can reach it.” He passed the Orichalcum key back to his friend with shaking fingers that were almost blue. Even his automail was freezing up in the icy blast.

Siegfried took the key, carefully unwrapping the string from Edward’s wrist before looping it over his own. There was an awkward moment as Edward turned himself completely around on Al’s back to face his friend. Alphonse had swung his head around and was watching his brother through narrowed eyes, allowing no escape. Ed snapped himself on again tightly as Siegfried undid all of his own harness except for the safety rope. “Be careful, Siggy,” Ed said.

“OK, dragon-boy!” Siegfried yelled to Alphonse.

Al waited, judging the gusts. The Gate below them sat silent and dead, and the Orichalcum beast etched upon its face seemed to writhe in the wailing whiteness. Suddenly there was a lull in the wind. Alphonse half-rolled, listing sharply sideways as he reached out with a claw and hooked the Gate, anchoring himself within three feet of it. “Now, Siegfried!”

Siegfried leaned impossibly far, stretching until he groaned. The key came within a few inches of its goal. Edward leaned with him, clinging to his brother with his knees as he gripped Siegfried’s harness as tightly as he could. “Closer, Al!”

Alphonse reached out with his other forearm, trying to get a firmer purchase on the Gate. As he did, his body was pushed by another gust of wind and for a brief moment he was close enough. Siegfried leaned farther, beginning to slide. Edward scrambled for a better grip on him, but his frozen fingers would not obey him. Then the key went in.

There was a *snap*! of electricity and a huge arc flash lit up the Gate. The mountaintop shone in the night like a beacon. Blinded, Alphonse bawled and lost his grip just as Siegfried slid from Edward’s grasp with a cry and tumbled down into the activated Gate. “SIGGY!” Ed screamed. He felt the safety rope jerk taut as his own harness slipped under the impact. Then the rope recoiled, and, to his
horror, the cleanly severed end flipped back up in his face.

“SIEGFRIED!” Fighting the gale, Al struggled back toward the Gate just as Edward saw something out of the corner of his eye. He twisted around and found himself staring straight into the hideous jaws of Envy. “AL! LOOK OUT!” Edward lost his seat, his harness slipping the rest of the way beneath his brother’s belly as Alphonse violently altered his course.

Edward swung uselessly from his safety straps as the wind tore around them and they rose above the shadow of the mountain and into the moon’s icy glare. Al’s flight was snakelike and erratic, his maned and whiskered head darting and weaving as he sought the rising air currents, and his body rolled and writhed as it followed. Ed clutched and scrabbled uselessly at Alphonse’s scales, trying to climb up on his back again. ”AL!” But Envy was snapping at Al’s tail, and he darted upwards with an explosive roar. Envy came after them like a rocket.

As they rose high into the midnight sky, Edward managed to grab a trailing strand of Al’s mane with his good hand and started to pull himself up. Then Al changed direction again and he was flipped completely over his brother’s neck, now hanging on his other side. Edward screamed with pain as his live shoulder dislocated, and Envy overshot them as Al paused in confusion, glancing sideways at his brother. Edward, his arm useless, was still struggling to extricate himself from his impossible position when the moment of vertigo passed and Envy rammed into Al's side, spinning them around. They fell briefly, Al twisting to stay just out of reach of Envy's teeth before darting upward once again, still in front of the other dragon.

When they collided for the second time, Al was ready for it. His jaws snapped shut on the other's throat. Something happened then that was entirely unexpected, even in the middle of a battle between dragons where almost anything could be expected. As the two beasts tumbled from a great height toward the sharp rocks below and Al’s jaws began to clamp down unmercifully on his adversary’s neck, Envy’s mouth opened and the voice of their father came forth. “Alphonse! Son! Stop!”

“Kill him, Al!” Ed screamed.

Envy uttered a terrible ululating shriek as Al shook him brutally. “You betrayed your own sons!” Alphonse snarled savagely. “You tried to kill our friends and destroy Amestris! No one loves you—and you aren’t my father, Hohenheim!”

Something cracked, and Envy's body fell away. Al pulled up, and in the same moment Edward, blind with tears, began pounding with his automail on his brother's side. ”Al! Al! I hear a plane!”

Al paused, chuffing, as he got his bearings. “I don’t see anything. Are you all right?!?”

“No! I’m not all right!” Edward was sobbing in his agony as he still struggled without success to climb to Al’s back. As Alphonse slowly circled around the mountain he saw the Gate flaming with light, saw the rank and file of the Roma passing in.

"Brother!" Al said breathlessly. "I see the Gate below us! They’re going in! They’re going to make it!" Edward strained to look, but as Al fell toward the portal the world faded suddenly out, and he hung unconscious at his brother’s side.

VI.
With a triumphant grin, Pinako threw the switch. The Gate roared to life with a sudden snapping of electricity that made their hair stand on end and filled the Mackey barn with blazing light, and something *contracted* around them. There was a brief sense of being crushed. The others seemed to recover almost immediately, but Winry began to scream. It was as if an invisible hand had shot right into her womb and was squeezing the life out of her, and she staggered backwards and fell as something unseen and horrible reached out of the void and into her helpless body. Pinako reached again for the switch, but Winry cried, “NO! No, let it be!”

Tucker shuffled quickly forward, picking up his wooden stylus. “Wait! Don’t turn it off. I can make a protective array.” Drawing much quicker than normal, he sketched out his formula in the earth around Winry’s writhing body and activated it. Instantly she collapsed.

Pinako knelt anxiously by her sobbing granddaughter. “I don’t understand what’s happening to her,” Tucker began as Sciezka stepped forward to peer into the active Gate. It was like gazing down a bottomless well. Just the act of looking caused her vertigo and she reached out with her malformed hands to grab the platform, steadying herself. “Something’s there!” she exclaimed, her voice rising with excitement. “Someone’s coming through!”

Even as she uttered the words, a body came flying out of the Gate. Sciezka ducked. Instinctively Pinako threw herself across Winry, and in the next second, both of them were pinned under the form of a little, sputtering man.

Sciezka and Tucker hauled him to his feet immediately. It was neither Ed nor Al nor anyone else they knew. His eyes were very bright, his face was very red, he was heavily dressed in winter clothing and he was looking quickly up, down, and around. His gaze finally settled on Winry, who had sat up with Pinako’s help, and in a strange, melodious accent he cried triumphantly, “Ah! It is you! It is the Princess! I have made it! I have made it!” and he began capering in a circle around them, waving his arms wildly.

“Hey you!” barked Pinako. Her sharp voice brought the little man to an immediate halt.

“Who are you?! Did Ed and Al send you?” Winry still sat there, bent painfully over her own arm, but all her attention was on the stranger.

“Yes. Allow m-me to introduce myself.” He came closer and bowed deeply. “I am Siegfried Schauer. Naturalist. Doctor. Friend of the Elric brothers. And you are Princess Winry. As b-beautiful as they said. And as intelligent.” He gestured to the Gate. “This would be your work, no?”

Winry’s cheeks flushed bright red and she sat straighter as all kinds of conflicting emotions, but predominantly good ones, rushed through her. Her heart leaped out of its torpor and her spine tingled with the excitement of her success and the anticipation of more. “Yes. It is. I’m Winry Rockbell.”

“I am *delighted* to meet you!” Siegfried’s voice came out as a deep chuckle and he bent to shake her hand firmly. She liked him at once; friendly and smart, with his bright blue eyes blazing like stars beneath a kindly brow. Just the kind of person Edward and Alphonse would befriend, she thought.

“Delighted to meet you, too, Siegfried Schauer!” She gasped a little as he gently helped her to her feet. Pinako and Sciezka crowded round. “Now don’t worry about your friends,” he said, seeing the anxious way she glanced back toward the Gate. “They will b-be along shortly. I hope you understand. I am not the only person. They intend to rescue.”

“Rescue?” Pinako said. “Sounds like they’re at it again,” and she broke into another grin, shaking her head slowly as Sciezka laughed in relief.
“Here they come!” Tucker called, drawing their attention immediately back to the Gate. As the little group watched, a young girl landed gracefully on the platform without missing a step. She turned, looking left and right with wide eyes before spotting Siegfried and rushing to fling herself into his arms.

“Radhika!” he said. “I am so glad you made it, child!”

They came through quickly, on each other’s heels, and in less than five minutes they had all arrived, forming a small crowd around the Gate. Winry’s jaw had dropped and she gazed around in stupefaction. They weren’t quite like the Ishvarlans, but she saw the similarities at once.

“They are Roma!” Siegfried explained. His beaming smile would have done credit to the sun. “Refugees from my world. They gave your friends shelter. And food. And introduced them to me. Now the Elrics are returning the favor.”

“But where are the Elrics?” Winry at last gave vent to her impatience, pulling away from the startled Pinako to clamber up onto the platform. As she approached the Gate, her hair began to stand on end from the powerful magnetic field. Dimly she sensed Sciezka following her. She grasped the machine firmly on both sides and leaned forward into the field, unconsciously holding her breath as if she were leaning into water. Her heart skipped and writhed. There was a terrible twisting sensation; then she was looking over a range of high mountains in the night. In the far distance she could see several tiny illuminated specks quickly resolving themselves into aerial vehicles. Then a shadow fell across her and in the next second a huge head, scaled, maned and whiskered, thrust itself into her world. Winry screamed louder than she ever had in her life and leaped away from the Gate to stumble and fall on the platform’s rough surface.

"Winry!" said the dragon. "Winry?!!"

She looked up and everything clicked. The face was clearly the face of a very dear friend. "Al! Al, is that you?!"

"Winry! Your Gate’s too small! I can't get through!"

"Oh, no! Al!" Winry was back on her feet. "I didn't think! I made it only for humans!"

"Brother's in trouble. Can you reach him?" Al's head disappeared, pulling back; she saw, as if through a window, his snakelike body turning sideways. Then she saw Edward's unconscious body swinging at his side and she screamed a second time. "EDWARD!!" She almost fell through the Gate, aware of Sciezka grabbing her shirt from behind as she leaned through and gasped in terror. She was looking straight down a snowy cliff face; Edward was hanging from Al's side just in front of her. She leaned farther, reaching for him with both hands as Sciezka clung to her from behind. "Al!" she yelled, the wind whipping away her words. "I can't get him! You have to get closer!"

Al shifted sideways with a quick serpentine undulation, but in the same second there was a noise like a buzzing bee and a lock of Winry's hair was severed by a projectile. She gasped and ducked back through to her world. "Al! Get out of there! I'll fix the Gate! Now go!" But Al was already falling away.

***

The only good thing about the situation, Alphonse thought as he struggled to outrun the planes, was that he knew now there was no way that the Thule Society could execute their plan of an air invasion.
of Amestris. Winry’s Gate was too small even for him, let alone a German aircraft. As he caught the wind and rode its twisting currents higher, he fought back tears. By now, the Thule Gate had been blown to bits with Siegfried’s explosives. They were still stranded here in this hellish world—and all their friends were gone.

Bullets screamed nearby and he ducked and spiraled like a leaf, presenting an impossible target. Edward was still unconscious, and he felt his brother’s small form banging against his side like baggage, but there was no safe place to land. He went with the southward gale, letting it push him ahead of his pursuers into the heart of Austria.

Then something strange and wonderful happened. Ahead of him, another plane materialized silently out of the mist. It wasn’t German, he realized, and a split second later he recognized the ghost craft as American. It was John Sampson. Blinking, he changed his course to follow.

There was hail of bullets and the ghost plane disappeared. Alphonse looked back over his shoulder. The high gale he’d been riding had died down here over the more habitable lands as the mountains were no longer channeling the currents, and their pursuers were still after them. Edward still hung at his side; Alphonse could see his spirit there and knew he wasn’t dead. More bullets shrieked past, too close now, and Al knew he had to do something immediately or die.

He pulled up, stalling in midair, and deliberately fell out of the sky.

The best thing to do, he reasoned as he spiraled downward toward a large tract of woods, was to act as if he had been shot. Maybe then they would hold their fire and take their pursuit to the ground, giving them time to get away. As the world spun and the ground got closer, he took care to protect his brother. At the last moment he curled up, cushioning Ed securely in his coils as his great body crashed into the forest by the Rhine.

VII.

Edward snapped awake. They were on the ground. He could hear Al moaning softly. The dragon lay on his right side and Ed was swinging freely from his straps against Al’s belly, staring up through leaves and broken branches at the dark sky. There was a heavy cloudbank beginning to obscure the stars, he noted peripherally. His body was tangled in his improvised harness, his live arm twisted at an unnatural angle that made him utter an agonized cry the moment he tried to move. “Al! SIGGY!” As memory returned he began to scream with anguish. “SIGGY! SIGGY—!” His cries rang through the snowy woods.

“Ed.” Al’s scaly head lifted itself into his field of vision. “Brother! It’s all right! He’s still alive!”

Edward fell suddenly silent. His throat was raw and his eyes were much too bright. “But Al—” he began.

“—He found his way to Amestris,” Al interrupted firmly, knowing he had to help stabilize his brother before shock overcame him. “Now can you unbuckle your harness?”

“I don’t know.” Edward stayed still for several minutes as he struggled to regain his breath. He hadn’t felt such physical pain since that dreadful night, so many years ago, when they had tried to resurrect their mother.

Al arched his neck at an awkward angle, trying to bring his head over him. “That’s right, brother,”
he said calmly. “Just close your eyes and breathe.” He didn’t say that he couldn’t help him, and
didn’t dare to move. Edward’s harness had slipped down Al’s shoulders, and he’d landed with his
brother behind his forelegs. There was no way he could reach the leather straps with teeth or claws.
Ed would have to free himself or die.

* * *

“Ed. Ed!”

Edward started awake again. He’d drifted off as shock began to take hold. His brother’s head was
still looming over him. “Does anything hurt besides your arm?” Al said.

“No. I—I don’t know.” Realizing the danger he was in for the first time, Ed attempted to straighten
his legs, inadvertently shifting the harness as he did so and gasping in agony. “My—my legs are OK.
It’s just my arm.” He turned his head slowly.

“Do you think it’s broken?”

“I don’t know.” Finding his torso so tightly bound as to be immobile, Ed flicked out his switchblade.
He couldn’t see where to cut, but fumbled until he located a strap and began to saw it with difficulty.

The wind was picking up again, and it was starting to snow. As he worked, Ed realized he was fast
becoming chilled, even in the bulky suit. The freezing flakes fell on his face with greater and greater
frequency. Alphonse stretched, leaning farther over him, trying to protect his brother from the
weather.

Suddenly the strap broke and Edward fell. As he immediately hung up again with a violent jerk, the
shock of pain made him faint. His injured arm hung pitifully loose as his small body swung in the
harness.

Taking advantage of Ed’s unconsciousness to shift his weight, Alphonse slowly righted himself and
tried to catch the harness in his teeth. He fell short by inches, grunting in frustration as he tried again
and again to free his brother. His attempts devolved into a struggle, and finally he lay his head in the
snow in defeat, his breath shooting from his nostrils in great steaming plumes.

“I’m going to die here,” Edward said presently. He was hanging nearly upside down and beginning
to shiver.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Get out your switchblade and cut some more.”

“I can’t reach the straps. I can’t move.”

Alphonse was considering what to do next when he became aware of something on the wind. He
lifted his head, suddenly alert. Had their pursuers finally found them? “Ed! Something’s in the air.”

Edward struggled to move and only succeeded in hurting himself. “What--?” he said between
clenched teeth as tears of pain spilled from his eyes.

“I don’t know, but I don’t think it’s good.” Al was looking back at him. His white scales were almost
obscured by the falling snow. “Ed,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK, Al. This is all my fault.”

“I need to confess something,” Al continued. “When you made love with Siegfried in the barn? I
watched.”
Shocked, Edward swore. Disregarding his arm, he kicked his brother in the ribs. As Alphonse had hoped, this made Ed’s harness swing within his reach, and the dragon’s head darted to grasp the straps as Ed bawled in pain. With one neat bite Al severed the leather, dumping his brother in the snow.

Ed rested on his knees and his automail hand, weeping with agony. “Damn you, Al!” he wailed. “That was an effing dirty trick!”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Alphonse said with satisfaction. Gentling his voice, he touched Ed carefully with his nose as he drew his coils protectively around him. “You’re much too cold. Let’s warm you up,” and he began to quickly lick his brother’s pale face with his rough tongue, breathing his warm breath over him.

“Al. It’s useless, baby brother. I’m freezing to death.” Ed’s teeth were chattering as he rested in Al’s arms.

Al knew he had to find better shelter for his brother immediately. Ideally, they’d go back to August’s, but Edward was much too weak to ride dragon-back, and Al had been disoriented during the chase. In this weather, without being able to use Ed’s compass, or to see sun, moon, or stars, he knew he couldn’t find his way back, and he didn’t have any idea where to turn. Pulling his coils more snugly around his injured brother, he looked up at the sky. “John Sampson!” he said earnestly, projecting the thought. “We need you! Please, help us!”

He had barely said it when, out of the storm, he saw a light. There was a gravel road nearby, and a vehicle was forging slowly along it, catching the flakes in its headlamps. It was a luxury sedan, not a military vehicle, ill-suited to use on a country road in winter. Forgetting his own safety and everything but the welfare of his brother, Alphonse lifted the barely protesting Edward and with a single great bound he landed on his hind legs in front of the car. Whoever was in the car didn’t matter; it was a potential shelter for Edward. As the sedan slowly slid to a stop, Al crouched in what he hoped was a harmless-looking posture, turning a little to shield Ed with his own body in case of gunfire.

The car doors opened and three figures, two tall, one short, stepped out into the snow. They were bundled so heavily that Alphonse couldn’t see their faces clearly. He ducked lower over Edward. “Please,” he said over the rushing of the wind. “I’m not what I seem. I’m really a human being. I just look this way. Please, help my brother! He’s freezing to death.”

The short person turned quickly to the others. “Mom! Dad! It’s them! It’s them!”

Alphonse blinked, his eyes going huge. “Winnifred?!” he stuttered.

The snowstorm had devolved into a blizzard, and the roads were under whiteout conditions as the drifts piled up, leaving their pursuers far behind them. Alphonse sighed impatiently. He was, all of him, crammed impossibly into the car, his coils looping around and around like some mutant python’s, and his bristling head jammed between the front seats. His horns were poking holes in the roof. It was supremely uncomfortable, but it was shelter, and it wasn’t until, parked at the outskirts of a small village, the Rockwells had encouraged him to crawl in, that he’d realized how cold he, too, had become.

It was early morning. They’d warned Al that the Austrian military was not far away, searching the
forest for him and his brother. Heading deep into the mountains, they’d made it to the village before being snowed in, with Alphonse following the car. They’d gotten stuck several times, but each time Al had been able to push the vehicle back onto the road, and once he’d stopped it from sliding into a ravine. The Rockwells had seemed to have no doubts about his good intentions from the get-go.

Al knew their rescue of him and his brother was not random luck. It was the work of John Sampson and his spirit interpreter, Winnifred, and he was supremely grateful for it. Winnifred’s parents, Keith and Olga, would have been a credit to any world, he thought—intelligent, inquisitive, and both of them suffused with compassion. They had shown no fear of him, only a prudent caution as they had approached immediately to take the unconscious Ed from his arms. They had even offered him a blanket, which he had gracefully refused. “So there are dragons!” Winnifred’s father had said in wonder as the girl had flung herself on Al.

“That’s right,” Winnifred had said. Needing no introduction, she’d turned to her parents. “This is my friend Alphonse!”

Al sighed again as the snow continued to fall. They’d promised him an update soon on Ed’s condition. As Keith had driven the car, Olga and her daughter had managed to get Ed warmer and stabilized. Olga had observed that Ed’s arm might not, in fact, be broken. By the time they’d found the village and arranged for a bed, Edward had been beginning to regain consciousness, and his sobs of pain as they’d carefully maneuvered him out of the car and carried him indoors had been pitiful, leaving Al staring after them, his coils writhing in fear.

Footsteps crunched suddenly nearby and Alphonse went on the alert, then relaxed as Keith Rockwell’s face appeared in the driver’s side window. Fearlessly he opened the car door. “Your brother’s going to be all right, Al. We’ve rented a lodge, so we’ve got room for you indoors now. Follow me.”

Al sighed with relief, relaxing enough to uncoil and slither slowly out of the vehicle. It took several minutes for him to completely extricate himself, and he apologized for the holes in the roof. Glancing left and right, he realized that his pearly color, combined with the snowy conditions, almost guaranteed that anyone who wasn’t within ten feet of him would never see him, and he followed the doctor quickly a short way down the street to an isolated building. Swarming up the steps behind him, he went through the doors and in the direction Keith pointed, up a short flight of stairs. The second storey of the lodge was all bedrooms and Edward’s was the first one on the right. The door was open and Al could see the reflection of a warm hearthfire on the opposite wall. “Can I come in?” he called.

Winnifred appeared at the door and ushered him in quietly. Edward lay comfortably in bed, his injured arm now in a normal position. They had removed his artificial leg and it lay on the floor next to the foot of the bed. Olga was bending over him and she straightened as Alphonse crawled to his brother’s side. “His arm was dislocated,” she said. “We put it back in its socket, but it’s going to be sore for quite awhile. He’s still suffering from some hypothermia.”

“Thank you so much for helping us!” Al said fervently, ducking his head.

“Hey, brother,” Ed said weakly, and smiled as Alphonse licked his face. “You’re worse than Den!”

Al drew his coils around the head of the bed in a protective gesture. “How do you feel?”

“Better. But I’m really glad you weren’t here when they popped my arm back in!”

“Have you had anything to eat?”
“Plenty of hot soup. Don’t worry about me, brother,” Ed said. “You’re not looking so good yourself, you know.”

“I am hungry,” Al admitted.

“Hey Olga,” Ed said. “Please, is there any way we could get my brother here some meat?”

“I’ll see what we can do,” the kindly woman said. She was tall, with hair turning prematurely grey, and she was no more fazed by the dragon than she would be by the family dog. “Meanwhile, you should rest. You’ve been through quite a shock.”

“More than you know,” Edward said, and settled himself a little deeper in the bed.

Alphonse gave him a last gentle nudge before curling up by the fire. It seemed he’d only slept for half an hour or so when he was woken by the footsteps of Olga and Keith hauling a large whole ham in to place it in front of his nose.

“Doesn’t he need a water dish?” he heard Winnifred ask in an anxious whisper.

Alphonse chuckled softly. “I can just drink from a bucket.” He raised his head to nose Winnifred carefully. “It’s really good to see you again,” he said earnestly. “How are Scooter and Princess?”

“Right now they’re in Munich with Granny. They’re getting to be big cats already!” She sat down on the hearth next to the ham. Al was aware of Olga and Keith pulling up two chairs nearby and cast them a friendly look. “I know you want to ask how I got this way,” he said, a little shyly. “Ed and I didn’t explain that part in our letter.”

“You didn’t explain a lot of things,” said Winnifred’s father. “We understand, of course, why you took shelter in our house, and Winnifred’s ghost friend says it was necessary, so we don’t mind that. But who were you really running from? And why the gouges in the foundation? Was that you?”

Al shook his head slowly, side to side. “We didn’t dare say anything about dragons in our letter,” he said. “You would have thought we were crazy. But I’m not the only dragon in Munich. We have a half-brother, and he’s—well—not very friendly.” At their looks, he hastily amended, “I don’t want to scare you. He won’t bother your house again.”

Olga pursed her lips in a soft whistle. Glancing across the room to see if Edward was still asleep, she said, “But how can this be? Why are there suddenly dragons in Munich? And yes—we would very much like to know how a human boy came to be in your condition?”

VIII.

Late that afternoon, Edward woke feeling much recovered. His live arm was sore and bruised, but workable, and he was no longer cold. Thanking Winnifred’s parents profusely for their help, he requested that they reinstall his artificial leg. This was quickly accomplished, with both of them admiring Winry’s workmanship and the functionality of her artful prostheses. Keith took notes and had Edward briefly explain how the nerve grafts worked.

“So is there a phone here?” Ed said once he was on his feet. He moved to the hearth and put a hand on Alphonse’s raised head.
“Yes. There is a telephone downstairs,” Winnfred’s mother replied.

Winnifred herself had fallen asleep on Al’s pearly flank, and he sniffed at her with a bemused expression on his long dragon-face before turning to them. “Ed. What if there’s some kind of wiretap? I mean, the Austrian military must have figured out where we went. Even if they can’t reach us right now, they can still tap the phone.”

“Maybe they have, maybe they haven’t. But I’m going to call August anyway and tell him what happened.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?”

“No. But he really needs to know. I’ll be back in awhile, and we can pull out right away.”

“All right.” Shaking his head a little, Alphonse looked after Edward as he strode out of the room.

Olga had sat down on the edge of the bed and now she regarded him thoughtfully. Al had told her everything, holding nothing back—where he and Ed had come from, why they were here, what they were trying to do, and where they were trying to go, and she had believed him in the way a less experienced person might not have. Clearly she had already seen strange things in her world, not the least of which would have been her daughter’s friendship with a ghost.

“Until another way is found for you to return to your homeland, you will need a safe place to stay,” she said. “But that’s looking in short supply, isn’t it, with the armies of two countries after you?”

“I know. This is terrible, Mrs. Rockwell,” Al said. “We worked so hard to get back, and it’s all been ruined.”

“At least you managed to send some of your friends across. I hope those Gypsies fare well in your world.” She sighed, crossing her arms. “The Office of Gypsy Affairs seems to be doing its best to make life difficult for them here.”

“It always has,” Al said. He tilted his head a little, looking at her keenly. “You would have very much liked our friend Siegfried Schauer,” he said after a moment.

“We had heard of him. He is quite well known in the biological sciences. But we had also heard unpleasant rumors about him—working for the Thule Society, indulging in sexual perversions.”

Alphonse gave a derisive snort. “You know how that kind of thing gets started. Oh, he’s definitely unorthodox, at least in this world—even in my own, actually—but he’s unorthodox in a good way. He worked for the Thules for a short time to please his brother, but he sabotaged the research before he left. He likes other men, but so does my brother and it’s not perverted. The great thing about Siegfried, Olga, is that he never let academia ruin his curiosity, even when they threw him out, and he never let this ugly boring society get the better of him either—or let politics make a slave of him the way I’ve seen it do to so many others here.”

She smiled. “Is that what you think of this place? Ugly and boring?”

He stuttered. “Uh—well, actually—”

She laughed out loud.

There was the sound of a door slamming below them, and both their heads turned at the sound of Edward running up the stairs. “Al! Al!”
Alphonse heaved himself up, making certain to deposit the still-sleeping Winnifred carefully by the hearth, but he hadn’t gone five steps before Ed rushed into the room, his face beaming. “Al! I called August and you wouldn’t believe what’s happened! He got a transmission from Uncle last night—the Gate’s still there! Uncle stayed behind and deactivated Siegfried’s explosives once he realized we weren’t going to make it back in time! He’s got the key and he’s hiding on the mountain! He says three planes blew up trying to make it through the Gate, and now they’ve stood down!”

“Oh, Ed! That’s the best news ever!” The Elric brothers, human and dragon, began to dance a little jig together, making the floor creak and the ceiling fixtures sway and waking Winnifred, who joined them in the romp. Al halted, ducking his head to grin at her. “We’re going back to Walchensee right away,” he said. “You and your parents get ready for the ride of your lives!”

IX.

Winry sat on the edge of the platform, swaying a little as she finished another section of Gate, and Siegfried sat beside her, watching silently, but with an intensity that drained her with its mere existence. The Roma, including a contrite Noa, had set up camp at the other end of the barn. Mackey had been furious when it became apparent he’d been caught up in one of the Fullmetal Alchemist’s liberal humanitarian schemes. He was not known for his sympathy for Ishvarlans, and to him the Roma—indeed all “foreigners”—were the same. It had taken some fast talking by Pinako and Siegfried to persuade him just to let them stay for the moment.

Designing the Gate extension had been easy, but calculating the extra amount of power it would need was still eluding Yung, who had retired to a dark corner with Tucker to discuss the problem. The power required of Winry to quickly manufacture the new sections was easier to figure out—everything she had, and then some. As Pinako and Sciezka took the heavy piece from her and lay it on the assembly pad, she exhaled slowly, shaking her hair out of her eyes, and reached resolutely for another piece of steel. She’d been working at it steadily now for several hours, and she had one more section to go.

Pinako returned quickly to her side. “Please, dear—give it a break!”

“I can’t. You know I can’t. Now don’t distract me, Grandma. Ed and Al are depending on me.”

“That’s exactly why you need to rest!”

“No, it’s why I need to get this done. One more piece, Grandma.”

“And then you’ll be saying, let me apply the Orichalcum, let me assemble it—”

“Be quiet!” Winry barked, and immediately cringed at herself, but her uncharacteristic outburst at her grandmother had the desired effect. Pinako stepped back with a headshake and a huff, folding her arms and watching as the metal began to fold and stretch in Winry’s capable hands. The girl straightened, lifting her arm and sweeping it sideways, and the metal followed as if bound to her hand. She spoke a word and gravity ceased in that one spot, enabling her to lift her work long enough for the blue fire enveloping it to take hold as a smooth and shining finish. Then the completed piece clattered down on the platform, and Winry collapsed on the floor.

***
Pale and shaking, she directed the application of the Orichalcum and the rest of the assembly from her cot. Pinako had ceased to hover over her, instead working furiously with the special drill and the titanium bolts her granddaughter had fashioned to fasten the pieces together while the freshly applied Orichalcum was still hot. Sciezka and Tucker supported the Gate sections in lieu of a new scaffold, while Yung was finishing his calculations and sinking a fifth well. Geopower was the blood of the earth itself, he said, and the casings had to be constructed of titanium to withstand the invisible flow.

By that night, preparations were almost complete. It was the evening of October 3, by Amestris time. Pinako was in a stupor of exhaustion, and the rest of the group wasn’t much better off. Winry had fallen asleep and they let her rest, remarking on the whiteness of her skin and the fragility of her breathing. Siegfried hovered over her, as anxious as Pinako.

Tucker and Sciezka faced each other uneasily. Her glance was clear despite her ugly mask, while his was furtive.

“If you’re thinking about jumping through, don’t,” she said softly to him. “Alchemy doesn’t work in that world. You’d fall apart.”

“So would you,” he replied, just as softly.

She snorted. Pinako, at a distance, was watching their exchange; even Yung was, with his keen, unreadable eyes.

Sciezka excused herself abruptly, going out of the barn.

X.

Alphonse arrowed through the swirling night, following the unerring lead of Ed’s compass as his brother crouched in the saddle. Strapped to Al’s harness, bundled in their warmest clothes and gasping with glee were Winnifred and her parents. To avoid the Austrian military, they had left their car in the small hamlet and simply disappeared. And after all, Keith Rockwell had said, if worst came to worst they could buy another car, but the chance to ride a dragon was a priceless opportunity.

After thinking things over, Alphonse had had some misgivings. After all, he knew he should spend as little time in the presence of Winnifred as possible, for her own safety. Still, as if reading his mind, the girl had begged to be allowed to go as far as Walchensee, and he’d relented, since it was he who had first suggested it.

“There it is! There’s the dam!” Ed cried as Alphonse came in over it, maintaining just enough altitude so the rushing water didn’t suck them down into the whirlpool below the massive structure. He skimmed along the spillway as Winnifred squealed, laughed and screamed, then, with a flip of his tail, shot up the rising air currents that always flowed over the contours of August’s mountain.

“Look!” he exclaimed suddenly, ducking lower. “There are police cars going up the road!”

“They’ve found him out!” said Ed. “Quick! We’ve got to get to him before they do!”

Al shot in over the barn roof and landed with a thump in front of the metallurgist’s dwelling. As Edward piled off him and rushed toward the barn, he put his claws out to scrape the door. August
yanked it open to see what the noise was and stopped in his tracks. “Alphonse! You’re OK! Thank God!”

“Yes, we’re OK. I brought some friends,” Al said breathlessly. “August. Listen to me. There’s a whole squadron of police coming up your road, but Ed and I have a plan.”

* * *

Winnifred and her parents watched from the safety of August’s windows as Edward and Alphonse disappeared into the night. Minutes later there came a series of bellowing roars, countered by the screams of men. No policemen came to August’s house, and a few minutes later the Elrics returned laughing and puffing. “That was excellent, brother!” Alphonse said, raising his claw for Edward to high-five.

“Are they gone?” August asked anxiously, stepping outside.

“Oh, yeah. Scared shitless. No one’s going to bother you for a day or two, but when they do, you’d better have a story ready. No one’s going to argue about anything you claim that monster made you do. By the way, it’s good to see you,” Ed added, briefly hugging him. “Have you heard anything more from Uncle?”

“No,” the big man said. “It’s been hours since we last had contact.”

“He’s laying low. Hoping the Thules aren’t listening. Where’s Simionce? We found Noa.”

“Stowaway, eh? He’s here, with the rest of them.”

* * *

“Now that we’re here, we can take more of the Roma with us back to the Hintere Schwaerze,” Al said. “Maybe even all of them. It won’t be safe, but as long as Uncle still has the key… Brother? How long do you think it will take Winry to fix her side of the Gate?”

“If she’s competent in alchemy, she should have already made the alteration,” Edward said. “You know that.”

“But she’s sick! Did you forget it?!”

“No. But she’s had almost twenty-four hours, and you know Winry.” Ed smiled, looking more reassuring than he felt. “When she has her heart set on something, she always gets it in the end. Including you, brother. She’s not about to pass up her chance—and you can bet she wouldn’t believe for a minute that you can’t be changed back to your proper shape. Now I need to give our friends the all-clear and talk to Simionce.”

“What are you going to say?”

“I’m going to ask him whether he loves Noa or not. Because if he does, he needs to go to the Gate on our very first trip.”

* * *
As Edward went on his errand, Alphonse crawled back through August’s door to find Winnifred and her parents warming up by the stove. Winnifred leaped forward to hug his whiskered snout.

Al nuzzled her tenderly. “Ed and I don’t have much time.” He looked up at Mr. and Mrs. Rockwell as August came into the room. “Let me introduce you and your parents properly to August here. He’s a member of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee and he’s been a good friend to Siegfried Schauer. I have the feeling that in the future you and he are going to be working a lot together.”

“John Sampson thinks so, too,” Winnifred said, glancing up at her parents. “John Samson says something big is going to happen in the future, and good people are going to have to stick together.”

“That’s right. I want you to remember that. OK?” Al fixed her with a wide-eyed look and she nodded solemnly. Then he glanced to August. “Ed and I need one last favor from you, August.”

The big man, arms folded, leaned against the kitchen doorframe with a comfortable grin. “Just name it, dragon-boy! It’s a privilege.”

Al ducked his head in thanks. “There are two more people Edward and I will need you to protect if things get bad—Russell and Fletcher Hansford of Berlin. I know this might be difficult.”

“What’s difficult about it? They’re no problem.” August smiled at Al’s trepidation. “Siegfried and I parted company long before Russell came into the picture, Alphonse. There is no bad blood between us.”

Al sighed with relief. “That’s good. We didn’t know who else to ask.”

At that moment, Edward came limping in, with Simionce at his side. Al noted the man’s expression had lightened considerably from the last time he’d seen him. “Got everything straightened out, brother?” Ed said.


“OK then—let’s go!”

As Alphonse backed out of the house and his passengers began tightening his harness and climbing on his back, Edward turned to August and the Rockwells. “Thanks again for everything,” he said. “We might be back here to pick up more people, but if something unexpected happens, we might not see you again.”

“Either way, we’ll do as you ask,” August said. “It really has been a privilege, Edward Elric. We won’t soon forget you.”

“Be good from now on, and you won’t get into any more trouble!” Winnifred admonished him. Ed laughed out loud, wondering what it was John Sampson had told her, and hugged her tightly. “I’ll be as good as I can, little girl. You take care of August, OK?” And saluting them all cheerfully, he ducked out the door into the snowy evening. Minutes later, the long shimmering shape of a dragon was briefly seen through the window, skimming low over the Walchensee before rising suddenly to disappear into the dusk.

* * *

Winry gasped, shaking off the dream. For a moment it was as if she were seeing herself—a little younger, a little different—embracing the head of a dragon. Of Alphonse, she realized. It had felt like
her heart had almost stopped, and now, as she struggled to sit up, she was conscious of a terrible heaviness over all her limbs, and a coldness like death in her belly.

“Ah! You’re awake. We’re ready to activate the Gate, Winry.” Sensing that the time for all caution had passed, Pinako stood by the switch, ready to throw it.

“All right,” Winry managed. “Go ahead—and thank you, Grandma.”

XI.

Ed and Al reached the Hintere Schwaerze by compass in the dead of night, navigating a blizzard so thick that Al had to fly with his eyes closed to prevent them from freezing and only reaching their destination safely because he was familiar with the air currents. He circled the peak twice before he was able to locate the ledge, and when he landed, he cast about in dismay. Two of the tents had collapsed under the weight of almost two feet of new snow, and the third was sagging perilously, looking dark and abandoned. Above it all, the Gate still towered silently, a darker spot in the mountain’s shadow.

Holding up a hand to forestall Simionce and the rest of their friends, Edward put up his goggles and dismounted, landing with a crunch in the soft drifts. He had gone only a few steps before he encountered an object in the snow. Bending, he quickly uncovered it. It was the frozen body of one of the Thule guards.

“Obviously, they haven’t been back since,” he said.

“The weather’s been too bad up here,” Al replied. When he spoke, his breath issued in great steaming puffs. “And it looks like it’s going to continue.”

“We should get off now,” Simionce said.

“No!” Edward was adamant. “Not until we find Uncle and make sure he’s still got the key.” He ducked into the one remaining tent, but it was cold and empty except for the little stove.

“Where could he be?” Ed trudged the length of the ledge and returned again in frustration.

“He didn’t say where on the mountain he was,” Simionce said.

“We need to check some other places, like down in that valley,” Al said. “But I can’t rise back up on this cold air with such a load, so some of you will have to get off regardless of what my brother says.” The Elrics locked gazes, and after a moment Edward nodded.

“I will,” Simionce said immediately. “I’ll clean the snow off the tents.”

“Me, too,” volunteered Andreas.

In the end, to Al’s silent relief, all of their friends disembarked. “Get on, Edward.” Alphonse knelt a little so his brother could mount, then fell sideways off the ledge. His pearly color was the perfect sky camouflage in a snowstorm and he floated downward gently at the same rate as the flakes, making himself all but invisible to any viewers below.

“You think he climbed down those lines? Could he?”
“I think so. He needed to get off the ledge, and he gambled on us being back soon to save him.”

“Makes sense. But he’ll be worse off at the bottom. Their base camp is down there somewhere.”

“He won’t be worse off if he hides in a place they would never suspect. And I know where that might be.” Al turned a little in the darkness, swimming slowly toward a tall rock outcropping. Knowing Uncle as he did and not wanting to dash Al’s hopes, Edward kept his doubts to himself. When they reached the rocks, Al circled until he spotted a long shape wedged between two jutting bastions of stone. It was covered with snow, but Edward gasped in recognition as they landed nearby in a flurry of flakes. Al had found the broken body of Envy.

As Alphonse landed and approached on foot, Edward found himself awed again at the sheer size of their adversary. Even in death he was fearsome, his great jaws wide open and his glazed and frozen eyes gazing toward the sky. Icicles ornamented his fangs and fins. Perhaps strangely, Ed felt no connection whatsoever to the monster. “I can’t believe that’s our older brother,” he said softly.

“It’s only his homunculus. William Elric is long gone. Are you OK, Ed?”

Edward leaned forward to reply, but just as he did, a movement caught his attention and he looked back up, startled. “It’s Uncle!” Al cried, springing forward so quickly he nearly gave Ed whiplash.

They met him near the cavern of Envy’s open mouth, where he’d taken shelter the day before. He was in good spirits, waving them down as Alphonse galloped up and slid to a stop, showering him with snow. Ed leaped down from his brother’s back. “Uncle! Damn, but I’m glad to see you!”

The two embraced wholeheartedly, pounding each other’s shoulders as Al puffed and snorted over them. Grinning from ear to ear, Uncle held up the activation key. “And since to the best of my knowledge, the Gate’s not been touched since I shut it down yesterday, am I right in thinking we can simply resume?”

“You are right indeed!”

* * *

Navigating the storm with Edward’s compass, Alphonse and his brother made several more trips back to Walchensee that night, and after the last of them, every refugee who still wanted to make the crossing was gathered on the ledge on the side of the Hintere Schwaerze. Simionce and Andreas had set up the tents once again and had the oil stoves going in all three of them. The sun was coming up, and the snow was slackening. Patches of blue sky were starting to appear above their heads, and the tops of the Oztals glowed golden.

Siegfried’s bombs were still planted around the Gate, and Edward helped Uncle set the detonator at twenty minutes. Then he remounted Alphonse and they waited behind the assembled Roma while Simionce climbed the handholds and inserted the Orichalcum key.

Alphonse ducked, squinting as he remembered the flare of energy upon the Gate’s previous activation. After a moment he looked up. “What’s going on?”

Edward’s face was grim. “There’s no power.”

Whether the lines had been knocked down by an avalanche somewhere in the mountains, or whether the power grid had been switched off to prevent further unauthorized activations, the Gate was dead. Stricken, the Elrics and the Roma stared at each other for a long and horrible moment.
Then Simionce, still atop the structure, yelled and pointed as a dozen fighter planes appeared over the top of the peak, banking one by one to sweep past the Gate as the Roma screamed and scattered, throwing themselves in the snow. The wind had been blowing from the wrong direction to carry any warning sounds and Alphonse’s jaw dropped in astonishment as he realized what he was seeing. Then he gathered himself, launching into the air with a roar as Edward clung tightly to him.

Leaving the key in place, Simionce fell from the top of the Gate and scrambled for shelter, but there was nowhere to hide from the planes.

“They’re coming in for another pass!” Ed yelled. “They’re going to kill them!”

“No they won’t!” Al roared the last word, spitting flame as he clawed his way into the air above the Gate and flung himself and his brother directly into the path of the oncoming planes.

There was a sudden burst of strafing fire. Al’s body jerked violently and he screamed—a terrible squealing that echoed across the sky. As Alphonse fell under the onslaught of bullets, his heart’s blood rained down onto the Gate.

“AL!” Edward flung his arms around his brother’s scaly neck as they spiraled downward through the darkness. Alphonse hit hard on the steep rocky side of the peak. Down he rolled, and kept rolling, sending a spray of snow everywhere, his tail flipping around and around as he slid and struggled to keep his head and shoulders up in order to not crush his brother. Fighting the useless instinct to throw himself clear, Edward instead clung to him with every ounce of his strength, and they crashed together to the valley floor, bringing down a small avalanche of snow on top of themselves.

For long moments they lay motionless. Crushed under the heavy whiteness, Edward couldn’t move. There was a tiny air pocket between his face and Al’s neck, and, thankfully, he could feel the steady throbbing of his brother’s heart. “Al?” he managed to whisper.

* * *

The world changed and the portal flared, opening up as Alphonse and Edward tumbled in a crumpled heap to the valley below. Simionce, in horror, had seen it all, but now he realized the window of escape. “Go, go!” he yelled, lunging to his feet and pushing his companions toward the activated Gate.

* * *

Al raised his head and bravely struggled up, hauling them out of the snow. His body was a mass of wounds and streaked with blood, and his breath came in painful whistles, but his attention was entirely on Edward. “Ed. I’m sorry. Are you all right?”

Ed still lay along Alphonse’s neck, wrapping his arms tightly around him as his tears spilled forth. “Yes.” He couldn’t say anything further.

Alphonse’s head lowered. He shuddered and coughed blood into the snow before looking up at the sky. Then his great eyes widened. “Edward!”

Ed raised his tear-streaked face to the cruel mountain and saw the Gate. It was active and glowing with power as the Roma filed into it. He sat up. “It’s working! Al! It’s the power of your blood!”

Al nodded painfully. “I did some research at August’s. When combined directly with Orichalcum, it releases potential energy.”

“Good God! Why didn’t you tell me that before? Al--!”
Alphonse smiled a little. “What good would it have done, but filled your brain with more to think about?” With difficulty he swung his head back to touch his brother’s knee. His long face gentled as Edward gave him a completely unguarded look of anguish and love.

“Al,” Ed said, everything in that single syllable.

“Don’t worry, Ed,” Al said softly. “I’ll get us home.” And with a terrible effort, he sprang into the air with a grunt and a snort. Blood spattered back in his brother’s face as he laboriously climbed the cold and unwilling air one more time.

XI.

Pinako had thrown the switch and the Gate was alive with energy. Winry had requested that her bed be moved some distance away from the machine and Siegfried and Yung had done so, with Sciezka looking on. They had just gotten her settled again when there was an insistent rapping on the barn doors.

“Now who could that possibly be?!” Pinako said in annoyance, but before anyone could answer or even unbar the door, it was burst open by force and a company of foot soldiers rushed into the barn.

* * *

Al was breathing like a racehorse on the final stretch, his flanks heaving and his nostrils snorting a fine spray of blood as he struggled toward the Gate. Edward saw the Roma leaping through, one at a time as the planes circled the peak, dipping down to make brief strafing passes. He groaned out loud as he saw that three of their friends lay dead or injured in the snow. He saw Simionce lift one of them and throw him bodily through the portal, then go for another.

“Al,” he yelled as they drew nearer. “There are too many planes! We can’t do it!”

“Like hell we can’t!” Alphonse gritted his teeth, surging onward and upward as several of the fighters broke off from the main pack to bear down on them. “John Sampson!” he roared into the rising sun. “Alfons Heiderich! If ever I was a Spirit Alchemist, hear me and help us now!”

And all around them, the sky blossomed with light. Edward’s gaze swept across it, momentarily uncomprehending before he realized he was looking at a thousand ghosts— the shadows of the fallen army they had first met in the Gypsy camp so long ago. He saw them engage the German planes, saw the pilots veer off suddenly in terror, crashing into the mountain or rocketing off to nowhere. With a roar of triumph Al shot up low over the ledge, the tip of his tail fin slashing the snow as he arrowed home. He rushed through the Gate.

* * *

For a long moment Edward thought that they were dead, and wondered that he was thinking at all. Then he became aware of his brother’s movement beneath him, and his voice. It was shouting something. He strained to hear, and it blasted into his consciousness as though he’d broken a barrier.
“ED! ED! THERE’S TWO OF ME-E!!”

“There’s more than two!” Edward countered as he realized what Alphonse felt—the echo of his own consciousness, multiplied countless times. “There’s nothing else!”

Then, as he said this, the two brothers found themselves alone in, of all places, Siegfried’s study—except it wasn’t themselves, exactly, and the study was a million times bigger and more wonderful than they remembered, with galaxies in display cases and boxes of universes stored on shelves. The library was a billion miles long and filled with all sorts of unrecognizable blueprints. There was barely time to register all this before Alfons Heiderich appeared suddenly in the doorway. He was very much alive and smiling kindly, his hair in its usual charming tousle and his clean shirt freshly starched and scented faintly of spices. “Hey!” he said gently. “You silly! What are you doing back here so early? Our game isn’t finished yet.”

Edward heard Alphonse’s voice as his own. “I like this place and I don’t want to go back. I’m all in pieces there.”

Heiderich took two steps into the room. “Being in pieces can be good sometimes. If we’re not separated, we can’t make love,” he said tenderly. “Neither can we mourn.” His smile turned wry. “I learned that the hard way. I’m sorry that I wanted you to die. Now come. If we are to say goodbye properly, you have to be Edward and Alphonse.”

“But being separate makes us weaker too.”

“True,” replied Alfons. “And it makes us more susceptible to entropic forces, like I was for a time.” He walked to Siegfried’s blackboard and picked up a pointer, explaining as though to a child. “But to have the experience of moving toward or away from itself in Lesser Space-Time, the One must fragment.” He pointed at an equation that looked somehow very familiar, and everything clicked and suddenly they were apart, making passionate love in a silver field under an alien sky. The stars shone bright, fired with each passing breath, and no darkness encroached upon them in that timeless place.

“Goodbye, Alfons Heiderich,” Edward said at last. His face was streaked with tears, but every tear was sweet.

“For a little while. Don’t forget me.” And Heiderich was gone, leaving the human Alphonse in his arms, his words echoing softly in Edward’s memory as though they’d already been there forever.

* * *

Alphonse drifted quietly in Edward’s arms for a long time. There were no words to describe the divine peace that lay over them in this sweet place of rest.

Finally Edward kissed his forehead. “Al? We have to go now.”

Alphonse sighed reluctantly, knowing that going on meant great pain. Then he looked up. Seeing Edward’s face so earnest, he smiled, and suddenly, with a roaring intake of breath, he found himself back in the body of the dragon.

“I’m here. I’m with you!” Edward crouched in the saddle, hunched over his compass, but the pointer went round and round. “Al. You’ve got to follow your hunches.” He glanced up, but there was literally nothing to see. He heard his brother’s rasping breaths growing more difficult.

“I’m lost,” Al said distantly. “We’re not going to make it.”
Edward pointed. “Look!”

A small point of light had blossomed before them. It was Beauty, all white and glowing, running across the space between the worlds, her tail held like a flag. Edward did not need to tell his brother to follow; he did, his body a long undulating wave of light.

Then they saw it in the distance: a window on their childhood, a green land just beyond their reach. “Al! Al!” His brother saw it and turned toward it as Beauty bounded through and was gone.

Al struggled to reach the light. Just short of it he began to sink. Ed saw the red gore trailing from his jaws. “Al!” he screamed. “Winry needs us!”

Alphonse made a last desperate lunge. He was on top of the Gate. Then he was plunging through. Ed had a brief glimpse of Winry’s face, pale and terrified, before Al crashed into the wooden platform, collapsing the structure, and everything went black. Edward was alone in the night.
Ed and Al have returned to Amestris, bringing their Roma friends with them. But what happens when they meet Roy Mustang’s men on the other side?

My original character, Johnny Windwalker, was inspired by an actual, larger-than-life livestock veterinarian whom I knew throughout my childhood. His battered old truck sported a giant Band-Aid plastered over a dent in the door :)

“I!” Ed said as he came to consciousness still in his harness. Slowly disentangling himself and sitting up, he took in the scene with a sweeping glance: the assembled military forces with their guns leveled on his fallen brother; Pinako and Sciezka, the latter strangely altered; Shou Tucker looming over Winry, who was sitting white-faced on a cot; and Siegfried, pushing his way toward them past Noa, Radhika, and the other Roma.

1.

Hurriedly unfastening his harness, Edward slid free of the wreckage. Siegfried joined him as the soldiers lowered their guns, but there was no time for greetings. “Oh, no!” Edward said weakly as he tried to lift Al’s heavy head in his arms. Al’s jaw hung slack and his head was a dead weight. The rivers of blood had ceased. Ed looked up briefly to Siegfried, who leaned over them. “He’s dead,” he said faintly, as if he didn’t believe what he was seeing. “Siggy? He’s dead.”

Siegfried could say nothing. They stared at each other numbly before Siegfried, ever scientific, reached out to gently touch the surface of Al’s open eye. There was no reflex.

Ed groveled on his knees beside the body of his brother and began to utter a pathetic, breathless keening. It wasn’t quite like crying; it was more of a high, thin wail, like an animal in excruciating pain, and it made Winry furious.

“Edward! Don’t just sit there, you idiot!” Grasping Tucker’s arm, she hauled herself up from her cot, then shrugged him violently off. Her fists were clenched and her eyes were blazing. As her friends fell back in astonishment, she shoved her way between a couple of startled soldiers and grabbed a pitchfork that was stuck in a pile of hay. She marched up, hefted the pitchfork and stabbed Alphonse savagely in the back. “How dare you, Alphonse Elric!”

Edward sat straight upright. There was a collective gasp.
Winry’s seemingly crazy action was not without precedent. She knew from her biological studies that dragons had remarkable nervous systems; such stimulation might well be expected to cause Al to gasp for breath even if his heart had stopped, perhaps giving him another chance. But there was no breathing, no reaction.

“Damn you, Winry. Just leave him alone!”

Winry crumpled at that, going down in a stricken heap. Edward turned his back on her as an astonished murmur spread through the crowd. He shut them all out. Protective even in his grief, he crouched low over Al’s body, doubling over himself, his heart stricken with a mortal wound.

Alphonse was dead.

Part of Edward had been steeled for this ever since it had become clear to him Al’s human body was consumptive; but another part of him could not accept it. As unseen people milled around him, he sat there in a daze, the dead weight of the dragon’s head on his lap.

Whatever it was that had, once upon a time, given him the power to resurrect his brother—and to drag his human body back from the depths of the Gate-- wasn’t with him any more. The Earth world had robbed him of it; time had robbed him of it. He knew he couldn’t help him that way again.

Dimly he thought he heard the voice of Winry, tentative and quavering, but he could not respond. Siegfried hovered at the corner of his vision; he didn’t care. They had made it back to Amestris, but Al was dead. Al had died getting him home.

* * *

Edward mourned for three days, stopping only when he fell fitfully asleep. He did not eat or drink or move from his miserable huddle by the body of his brother. He wept until he was sick, until he finally ran out of tears; his eyes became swollen and crusted shut, and still he grieved and grieved.

Winry, strangely, felt numb. During their childhood the two boys had sometimes taunted her for being a crybaby, but now it seemed something had changed inside her and grown steely and hard. She caught Sciezka giving her a disbelieving look as she attempted to scold Ed into coming to the house.

“Edward,” she said. “This isn’t doing either of you any good. I can’t believe you’re just crying for Alphonse. I think you’re really crying because you failed to protect him. Well, sometimes we all fail, and even though you’ve got an ego a mile high even you have to admit that you’re still human.”

“Shut up, Winry. You never had a little brother. He was my responsibility.”

She flinched. Sciezka shook her head and continued on her military errand, whatever it was. General Armstrong’s unit, which had captured Mackey’s farm, had retired from the scene on the eve of the first day on orders from higher up, which neither Ed nor Winry had bothered to learn. If they had inquired of Sciezka, they would have learned that the refugees they had brought over from the Earth world were now being held in the new detention camp just outside of town-- with the exception of Siegfried, who, through quick thinking and an imitative accent, had managed to somehow pass as an Amestrian.

They would also have found out that Armstrong’s unit hadn’t gone very far; a detachment had set up an encampment at the edge of the property and were keeping the farm under constant surveillance.
But Edward and Winry didn’t care about anything but Al.

* * *

On the evening of the third day, Edward came out of his stupor and found himself still at his brother’s side. The dragon’s body had not moved or changed, except his eyes were closed. Ed had done that; he remembered how tenderly he had shut those great gray-brown eyes for the last time, and the memory made his throat close up. He gasped with pain and tried to reach up, to touch the dear dead face.

Then he stopped. Winry lay pale and sleeping in his arms and he stared. *That*, he didn’t recall. She had spent years nursing a crush on him, and he’d made a ruthless practice of not encouraging her. Al had thought him cruel, at least until he was old enough to understand that Ed really didn’t like girls kissing him.

Edward blinked again and shook his head, disengaging his live arm to reach up and wipe the crust from his sore, red-rimmed eyes. This was different, he reminded himself. They had been grieving for Al. Now he remembered them weeping together, and he felt deeply ashamed.

He looked again at her face and was moved by what he saw there. Her eyes had the same hollowness his brother’s had had at the height of his agony; her skin was almost as white. Edward held his breath, found himself reaching over her almost involuntarily, his flesh hand just above her belly as he tried to probe what lay within. But he was not an empath, or a magician-- or a spirit alchemist.

He withdrew his hand as she stirred, opening her eyes. The dim light reflecting from Al’s pearly scales cast shadows like the moon. She said nothing, did nothing, only looked at him.

He cleared his throat. It felt rusty. “Winry,” he said. “I’m so sorry. I’ve been horrible.”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m sorry, too.”

“Where’s Tucker?”

She sat up, startled. “How did you--?”

“Al figured it out. He was coming to save you.”

Winry gave a choked little cry. “Ed. He wanted to marry me.”

“I gave him my blessing, Winry.” Edward hesitated; then he added, “He would have been so much better for you than I could ever be. He said that all he wanted was to live his life right here in Resembool with you and me.”

There was a moment’s silence as both of them reflected on the happiness that could have been. Then Edward drew a deep breath. “Winry? Did Tucker really--?”

She turned a shade paler as she recollected herself. “--Yes. It—was a condition of him helping me with the Gate.”

He nodded, his lips drawn in a thin, grim line. “You did it for us. I thought as much.” He got to his feet and gave her a hand up. They turned as one, looking back at the body of Alphonse.
“Stay here where it’s safe,” Edward said. “I’m going to find him right now, and I’m going to kill him, and I don’t want you to see.”

* * *

Ed left the barn without looking back, and strode across the evening field, the scents and sights of his native land rushing back to fill the emptiness inside his heart. All the places where he and his brother had ever run and played in that long-ago dreamtime lay near. His head felt curiously clear, and he felt no hunger or thirst. As he drew near the farmhouse he paused, taking in the small military encampment and the portable radio receiver set up on a nearby knoll. Only now he wondered where the refugees had gone, and his stomach knotted as he realized they were probably prisoners; but that could wait. It all could wait. He had to find Tucker.

The government would have been looking for the Life Sewer, he realized; he was a valuable military asset. No doubt the same reason was keeping Armstrong and his men around the place where he, Edward, had returned. Ed couldn’t see why Tucker would let himself be captured, but he would have to make inquiries before he set out randomly to find him.

Pinako had been by his side as he had grieved, he remembered that now, and she would be in Mackey’s house. Grimly he started out for it; then was stopped in his tracks by someone shouting behind him. Turning, he saw Winry, running and stumbling across the field after him in a blind panic.

“Edward! Edward! He’s breathing!”

* * *

Edward never could remember how he got back to Mackey’s barn; he only knew that he was there, rushing through the door to fling himself, skidding, on his knees beside the body of his brother. It was true; Alphonse was breathing in slow, agonized gasps, his eyes half-open, his great flanks heaving. Edward lifted his head. “Al! Al!”

“How can this happen?! Alphonse, Alphonse!” Winry was hysterical. Edward peripherally noted that the barn was filling with people—Mackey and Pinako, Yung and Siegfried. They’d heard her shouting. Ed turned away from them again to his brother.

Alphonse tried to speak, baring his jagged teeth in a grimace of pain. “Ed. Help me.”

“How do you need?”

Al continued to breath with difficulty, eyes shut, struggling. “I need blood.” It was only a whisper. “Turn— the bullets-- into blood.”

“Right!” Ed straightened. “Of course! Out of my way, everyone!” he said, his voice gaining new strength. Tenderly he lay Al’s head down in the clean straw and got to his feet. He clapped his hands together, circulating the alchemic energy which he felt as a sudden marvellous surge from the ground up. It lifted him, filled his heart, and as he lay his hands on his brother’s fallen body his alchemic powers, so long dormant, came back all in a rush and the world turned right side up again.

Then he caught his breath in horror. The tide of power turned and faded, leaving him gasping, hands on knees. “W-wait. Al. I—can’t!”
It was the knowledge, sure and certain, of the source of his ability. For every alchemical transmutation in Amestris, Earth humans suffered and died. What right did he have to save his own brother when he was killing others?

“Al,” he said brokenly. “If I save you like this, we’ll never be human again, either of us.”

“Hey! Hey there!” Siegfried was yelling at him all of a sudden, trundling unceremoniously into their sacred space to grab him by the shoulders and shake him vigorously. “Edward! What gives?!”

“I didn’t tell you, Siegfried,” Ed said wretchedly. His eyes were fixed on the gasping creature at his feet. “My kind of alchemy hurts the Earth world. It kills people there every time I use it. I can’t do it, even to save Al.”

There was a very long silence, punctuated only by Al’s increasingly labored breaths, during which Edward knew with a leaden, hopeless heart that he wouldn’t even get his one remaining wish—to die when Al died. He had a responsibility to Winry, and to Siegfried, and to everyone in both worlds—a responsibility to live; even if he lived in anguish, forever separated from the one who would always mean the most to him.

“Of course you can!” It wasn’t Siggy who answered; it was Yung, who stood perilously near, Pinako on his arm. “Use geopower!” He gestured at the deep rock energy wells. The wreckage of the Gate and platform lay precisely in the center of the array created by the glowing green columns.

Edward’s eyes went huge. He pushed Siegfried away, already probing with his sixth sense for this new source of power, flowing in the background of his consciousness since he’d arrived through Winry’s Gate. Quickly he latched on. “Get back, Siggy.” His voice rose with sudden excitement. “I can do this. Al! I can do this!”

He dropped to his knees, laying his hands far apart along the length of the dragon’s heaving body. He felt the bullets at once. There were, he realized in astonishment, forty-seven of them, riddling Al’s body from nose to tail. The composition of the metal came to him; he broke it down. He analyzed it, understood, broke the molecules down further into their constituent elements, brought in other elements from the air and surrounding tissue, reassembling them all into dragon hemoglobin. It was a biological transmutation the likes of which even Shou Tucker would have difficulty visualizing, let alone performing at a moment’s notice. And all of it, every last drop, drawn from the rivers of power running deep in the earth beneath them, and not from human bodies at all!

Drained, Edward slumped forward over the dragon’s horns. “Is that better, baby brother?” he managed weakly.

There was a long silence. Then: “Yes.” Alphonse slowly opened one eye to look kindly at him. “Thank you, Ed.” His head lolled to one side as he quietly faded out again, but his flanks continued to rise and fall, gently and evenly.

Edward drew a huge, shuddering breath.

“Ed.” Winry and Siegfried said it at the same time. He didn’t look up, but extended a hand to them as he hung sobbing over Al’s blunt antlers. Then he felt himself sliding helplessly down to the floor.

* * *

The consensus on Alphonse, provided by an earnest conversation between Pinako, Winry and Siegfried, was only that his wounds had clotted and needed some kind of dressing. There was no
analyzing his sudden return to life, other than the fact that Edward had managed to fabricate several gallons of blood, or a reasonable facsimile of it, for his brother’s use. Now Al lay deeply unconscious, barely breathing. Neither Pinako nor Siegfried knew anything about dragons, and neither did the various colleagues she called throughout the day. All pointed her to Johnny Windwalker, the last dragon doctor in Amestris, but, though she tried repeatedly, she couldn’t raise him on the landline.

Dragons were notorious for their unusual chemical tolerances and intolerances. Siggy and Pinako were reluctant to try any medications on him whatsoever; but Siegfried at last suggested the old standby, honey, to spread as an antibacterial agent over his still-open wounds. This seemed harmless enough, and they did so, carefully, as his blood hurt their skin; but then they discovered that bandages would not stick to his scales, and the surface of the honey began collecting dust and dirt immediately. At last they threw a lightweight sheet over him, tucking it closely around him, and Pinako went off again to try Winry’s wireless.

* * *

Evening came, but still neither of the Elrics had woken. Knowing that separating them was the worst thing they could do, they had situated Edward on a cot near his brother. Noting his exhaustion and dehydration, Pinako brought a couple of bottles of electrolyte solution from the automail shop. Winry helped her by starting a slow drip and hanging the bottles over the cot, but she was exhausted and moved unsteadily, her skin as white as Ed’s, and when she was done she sat down on the edge of the broken platform. Pinako watched her keenly for a moment before covering Ed with a warm blanket, drawing it over his little crumpled body with great tenderness. She clicked her tongue. “He’s lost a lot of weight, Winry, and he never had any to spare. I doubt if he weighs a hundred pounds now.”

“Yes, I know. At least he’s got a nice beard.”

“Peach fuzz, if you ask me.” Pinako stroked Ed’s face once, lightly, before seating herself beside Winry. Al’s head lay at their feet and she gazed down at him. “Well, I managed to get hold of Johnny Windwalker this evening with your radiophone. He’s in the West Range only a day from here. He said to keep doing what we’ve been doing, and he’d be here tomorrow afternoon at the latest.”

“Oh, Grandma, that’s wonderful! I hope Al can go that long on his own.”

“I may not know anything about dragons, but I feel sure he can. Especially after that little back-to-life stunt he pulled. I’ve been meaning to ask you for some time, Winry, whether you thought there was anything to that resurrection myth they’ve been spreading about these two… but my question just got answered.”

Winry drew a deep breath. “Well,” she said, “If anyone really could do such a thing, it would be Alphonse, all right. After all, he’s an expert Spirit Alchemist now. But before he left, he wouldn’t talk about it.”

“His followers certainly did. I hope Johnny knows to keep his mouth shut, or the whole country’ll descend on us.”

Winry straightened. “Oh, no! Did you tell him Al was back?”

“I only told him we had Edward Elric here with a dragon who urgently needed help.”
“You shouldn’t have even said that much.”

“I figured I had to. Before I could even tell him what was going on, he said he’s in the middle of a vaccination expedition and didn’t want it to be interrupted if he could possibly help it. But when he heard the name ‘Elric’ he brightened right up.”

“He’s famous for his love of dragons, Grandma. All you had to do was tell him you had a sick one.”

Pinako sighed heavily and looked down again at Al.

Winry followed her gaze. “Do you think he’ll ever be human again?”

“I’m sure he will, dear.”

There was a muffled cough and they both looked up. Siegfried stood in the barn door. “I brought some soup,” he said, ducking almost apologetically.

“You shouldn’t be out where you can be seen,” Pinako said, but she reached for the basket eagerly as he trundled over and sat down heavily next to them.

“Oh, that d-d-doesn’t matter. I’m just your friend, a farmer from the hills!” And he gestured to his outfit. He was wearing some of old man Mackey’s clothes, complete with bandana and hat. Pinako had already noted that his mellifluous alien accent had greatly diminished.

Winry smiled. “Thank you, Siegfried!” She lifted a steaming mug to her lips. “None of us have been taking proper care of ourselves lately.”

“And you least of all.” He gave her a meaningful look, and she had the uncanny realization that he knew exactly what was wrong with her.

Pinako seized this opening without blinking. “I trust you’re going to come clean to us now, Winry,” she said simply. “You can’t expect us to be able to help you unless you tell us what’s wrong.”

Winry looked at the floor. Now that Edward and Alphonse were back, there was much less for her to fear— even if they were, at the moment, both unconscious on the barn floor. Still… “I can’t. Not yet,” she said simply.

Siegfried nodded slowly, understandingly.

“Oh, for heavens’ sake!” her grandmother burst out in exasperation. “What are you afraid of, girl? Whatever idiotic thing you did, I’m not going to disown you!”

“No,” said Winry. “But I don’t want you going off and getting hurt over this. This is a job for Ed and Al.”

Pinako was startled silent for a moment. Then she said, “It’s that bad, eh?”

Winry nodded.

“That Tucker creature has something to do with it. Don’t deny it!”

There was no point in denying it, but whether Pinako had guessed at the horrific truth of it all was beyond Winry. It was something that seemed so utterly impossible that surely no rational mind would stop to consider it for more than a moment. Still, she thought, her grandmother knew too well that sometimes the unspeakable became reality. It had happened to them time and time again, starting
with Winry’s parents being shot in cold blood as enemy sympathizers by Roy Mustang— that same hateful military man who had later stolen Edward from them in more ways than one. She was hoping against hope that she would never have to see him again, but in her heart she knew that wherever Ed was, he would eventually show up.

Winry swallowed, forcing back the emotions that always rose up when her mind strayed to what she considered as Mustang’s transparent exploitation of Edward, and Ed’s complete lack of sensitivity to her while freely giving up his virginity to her parents’ murderer. The child in her belly seemed to thrive on all of her feelings, but especially ones connected with this.

Winry knew by now that the thing taking shape inside her wasn’t normal. Part of her wondered if it was really some sort of homunculus; most people would surely call it ‘evil,’ but her maternal instinct denied this, or at least hoped, perhaps a little unrealistically, that whatever it was could be turned. Still, she could feel it sapping her strength every moment—except when she was near the Elrics, she realized suddenly. There was something about them that remained protective of her, unconscious as they were.

“Winry?” Pinako asked. “Are you in there?”

“Oh!” She came back to the present with a start. “I’m sorry, Granny.”

“It has been a tiring day for all of us,” Siegfried said gently. He had been sitting all this time beside her, not saying a thing. “You had better g-get some sleep in a real bed tonight. You, too, Granny. I will watch the IV, as well as our brothers.”

There was something about Siegfried that both Winry and Pinako trusted without question. They left the barn quietly as Siegfried dimmed the electric lantern and situated himself comfortably in the straw next to Ed’s cot. He pulled Mackey’s woolen blanket over himself and settled down to wait out the long dark night, bathed in the eerie green glow of the deep rock energy wells.

* * *

The night stretched on, long and uneventful. Siegfried sat unsleeping and meditative by the side of his lover. What thoughts had passed through his mind upon his seeing Winry and the people of Edward’s homeland, he was still mostly keeping even from himself; but he reached up once or twice to pat Ed’s hand reassuringly as he stirred in his deep slumber. Just after midnight he got up and changed the IV, and then knelt by Alphonse with some concern. The dragon was snoring quietly, his eyes moving rapidly under closed lids as though he were dreaming; then his nostrils twitched twice, and he snuffed in his sleep. Something made Siegfried turn quickly and he yelled. A hideous figure, hooved and horned, stooped low over Edward’s cot.

“You! What are you doing!” Grabbing the pitchfork that lay nearby, Siegfried advanced threateningly as the thing straightened and faced him. It was all the little doctor could do to not drop his weapon as he recognized, by Ed’s previous description, the Sewing Life alchemist Shou Tucker! Nevertheless he pressed forward, and Tucker backed away from the cot.

“You!” It was a low, grating whisper. The inverted face frowned. “Where is Winry?”

Siegfried advanced one more step, nose wrinkled against the bearlike stench that almost knocked him down. “I am Siegfried Schauer, f-friend of the Elrics. W-what more would you want with her?”

Tucker’s massive bulk bent forward, dwarfing Siegfried as he stood his ground with shaking legs. “I
need to consult with her, but she must be at home now. Very well; I will go there.” Dismissing
Siegfried, he made as if to exit.

“Stop! Wait!” Siegfried’s voice commanded attention and the monstrous alchemist turned back. “I
know what you’re doing to her,” Siegfried growled. “You will answer to me right now!”

Tucker paused in astonishment; then he hissed with rage. His forward spring was very sudden
despite his massive bulk; Siggy stabbed hard with the pitchfork, connecting with a single tine before
Tucker bore him down. There was the sound of a glass bottle breaking as Edward leaped from the
cot.

“I’ll kill you, bastard!”

Startled, Tucker looked up as his claws closed around Siegfried’s throat, and as he did, Edward’s
steel foot kicked him in the face. As he toppled into the straw, clutching at his jaw, Ed hauled
Siegfried to his feet. “Siggy! Are you all right?!”

“Yes, yes! Give me your arm!”

Ed thrust his live arm at him as Tucker rolled over, stunned, and Siegfried quickly removed the
bleeding line that was trailing from it. “No harm done. Now what are we going to do with that--?
Siegfried demanded, pointing aggressively at the monster.

“I’m gonna kill him, just like I said,” Edward growled through his teeth, pushing him aside and
advancing on Tucker; but the Sewing Life alchemist had rolled over one more time and was putting
his paw down through the straw. “I doubt you’ll find it so easy, Edward Elric!” he snarled, his face
consumed with concentrated rage as a great thicket of brambles erupted from the floor.

“Looks like you’re gonna see some high-level action, Siggy,” Ed said as they fell back several paces.
He clapped his hands together, rubbing his palms against each other before dropping to one knee to
pick up the invisible threads of geopower that would let him use his ability with no collateral
damage. Behind them, Alphonse suddenly opened his eyes, but held back his cry as he realized his
brother was working alchemy. In the next instant Edward had thrown a reaction that caused the very
earth to rise up, overwhelming Tucker and his mutant plants and slamming him clean through the
side of the barn.

Edward and Siegfried glanced at each other triumphantly; Siegfried puffed out his cheeks. “I must
learn this!”

“I don’t know if you can, Siggy. Special cells, remember?” In the distance they could hear Den
barking; lights were turning on, they knew. As they rushed forward side by side through the massive
hole in the barn wall to collect Tucker, they were caught suddenly in a blinding stream of headlights
as a small detachment of military vehicles pulled up next to the building. Ed swore, lifting a hand to
fend off the glare as he cast about for his enemy, but Tucker wasn’t there.

“Damn, he’s fast!” Cursing roundly, Edward ran a little way off into the field to look in all directions
before returning to Siegfried. As he did, a car door slammed shut; someone had gotten out of one of
the vehicles, and Ed froze in his tracks. It was Roy Mustang. Seeing his reaction, Siegfried followed
his gaze.

Mustang strode up to them briskly, the same broad, confident, impersonal smile on his face that Ed
had seen him give the troops a thousand times, and for some reason he couldn’t immediately name,
his heart sank. “Edward. I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner. It’s good to see you.” And Roy grabbed
his artificial hand and shook it hard.
“It’s good to see you, too,” Ed replied, a little cautiously. “I almost had Shou Tucker just now, but it looks like he got away.”

“That’s too bad, but he should be the least of your worries.”

“What do you mean by that?”

* * *

“So the Amestrian government doesn’t know whether or not it wants us back?” Ed’s voice rose incredulously; Al, his ears pricked forward to hear Roy’s soft explanation, snorted. He was feeling better, despite the ongoing pain of his wounds, and had surprised them all by involving himself in the conversation. Having greeted him with astonishment, General Mustang sat down on the wrecked platform’s edge, subtly outlined with the eerie green glow of the wells. “That’s right.”

“So we’re going to be deported or something?”

“I doubt that. But tell me the truth about this resurrection thing, Edward. Did Al, or did he not, come back from the dead?”

“I’m not a doctor,” Ed said evasively. “I don’t know for sure what happened. Who told you about it, and why do you even care?”

“The state cares about this because it’s afraid it’ll cause a major disruption. There are several sects that tell of the arrival of a Messiah, either in the past or the future, and we’ve been following what they say about Al. First he’s said to have resurrected you; now he’s resurrected himself. This is in line with several ancient prophecies about two brothers. When they get wind that Al has returned to Amestris, these factions will be fighting among themselves over him—and you.”

“Why not just ignore them?” said Al.

“People get killed for ignoring religious cults.”

“And this is why the government doesn’t want us back?”

“No, it’s only one reason.” Mustang grinned at Edward’s irritated look. “After all, you are the ‘Fullmetal Alchemist’—both of you.”

Alphonse spoke again, his voice heavy with the exhaustion of the ill. “So what do we have to do to get back in their good graces?”

“I’m not sure there’s anything you can do, except give us as much information as you can on the world beyond the Gate.”

A chill went down Edward’s spine. “They’re not thinking of invading it!”

Mustang shrugged, and Ed bristled. “You of all people should know that you can’t stop a war if you just keep punching back. I’ve got a better idea. Destroy all traces of this Gate here and I’ll guarantee they’ll never find their way back again.”

“I’m not in a position to decide such things. A lot has changed since you were away, Ed.”

Edward waited for him to continue, noting as he did that his lover from times past was looking almost gaunt. The eyepatch, which had given him a rakish air the last time Edward had seen him,
served now to accentuate the hollow of his cheek, and the way he slumped as he sat revealed his weariness. After a moment he continued: “There’s been a schism in the country. The breakaway faction is a large fundamentalist group called God’s Warriors. Like the Ishvarlans, they think all alchemy is a violation of nature. While you were away they started infiltrating the military, and it’s estimated that almost one third of the standing army are sympathizers. I had Armstrong keeping an eye out for you and he got here first thanks to Sciezka. You’re lucky he did, because the opposition wants to kill you both for blasphemous acts.” He looked down at the ground. “I’m afraid we’re headed for civil war.”

Al gasped softly, but the conversation was abruptly interrupted as the barn doors opened and Pinako and old man Mackey rushed inside. Winry followed more slowly, halting as soon as she saw that her friends were safe. Then her eyes widened as they fell on Roy Mustang; she took a step forward. “What was that racket?” she said, her voice quavering. “What are you doing here?”

He stood up, moving toward her in involuntary concern. “Pinako. Winry. I came to help Ed and Al.”

“Really?” Winry said coldly, before Pinako caught her arm in a silencing grip. She ignored it. “Edward?” she demanded, turning toward him. “Is this true?”

He looked at her blankly. “Yes,” he said. “Why would I doubt it?”

She almost shot back a rude reply, but Pinako shook her a little and she subsided. Her cheeks blazing red, she picked her way unsteadily through the scattered clumps of straw to sit down on Edward’s empty cot, crossing her arms. The gesture was clearly proprietary and Mustang retreated a little, clearing his throat. There was an awkward silence.

Then Siegfried spoke up. He had been standing, unnoticed, at Al’s side. “The Earth world. Germany. Is there truly a possibility. That your government will invade her?”

Mustang turned to him, relieved. “Sciezka’s given me some intelligence about you. Siegfried Schauer, is it? Friend of the Elrics, from the Earth world?”

“Yes! As are all those Roma. Whom you are holding captive.”

Al gasped. “What?” He tried to rise up, but quickly subsided with a groan. “Edward! What is this?!”

Edward realized with a guilty start that he hadn’t really thought of the Gypsy refugees since Al had come back to life. “Roy! Are they all right?”

“You know I don’t abuse prisoners.” Mustang’s voice chided him quietly. “But what were you trying to do? These are illegal aliens, subject to immediate processing and deportation.”

“They’re people looking for a home,” Ed shot back. “And just how are you planning to deport them?” He gestured to the shattered Gate.

Mustang grimaced. “Things like this are the number one reason so many people don’t want you back.”

“Yeah, well, they may prefer their weapons without a brain, but I’m nobody’s weapon now. I quit the military the minute I landed in the Earth world years ago!”

Pinako and Winry erupted in sudden spontaneous applause. Edward was mortified; he glared at them with a red face. Roy Mustang closed his remaining eye in exasperation.

“Hey!” Al rumbled, a hint of a snarl to his dragon’s voice. He bared his teeth. “Those are our friends
you have prisoner. Bring Uncle to see us. We’ll let him decide if there’s been any abuse.”

“OK. All right.” Mustang held up his hands. “But don’t expect any sympathy from the higher-ups. As far as they’re concerned, your friends are leaving Resembool on the next train.”

Everyone glared at him; then Winry spoke, unable to contain herself any longer. “You should be, too. Ed and Al don’t need your help.”

“Don’t be stupid!” Roy snapped. “I’m talking about them facing fanatic assassins, not schoolyard bullies!” Involuntarily protective, he glanced at Edward, who stood stony-faced by Siegfried and Al.

“Have you told him yet?” Winry asked point-blank. Perhaps her illness had strained her to the point of indiscretion; perhaps she merely wanted to embarrass all participants; perhaps she wanted to force the situation; she didn’t know herself which it was.

He blinked at her, taken aback. “What?”

“Have you told him.”

“Told me what?” said Edward.

“That is not appropriate for public discussion!” Mustang snapped.

She stood up, moving from the cot like a stalking lionness. “I told you before—you owe me this.”

Edward glanced from one to the other. “Hey,” he said sharply. “I don’t know what you two are talking about, but—“

“—Back in Central, he promised me he’d never bother you again,” interrupted Winry.

There was a flat, astonished silence.

Edward stared at her for a long moment before he regained his voice. “Winry?” he said, made mild with surprise. “I can’t believe you’d do something like that.”

“Believe it. It was as good a time as any, and he owed it to us.”

“Owed it to us? Winry, what the hell are you talking about? Aren’t you marrying Alphonse?”

Roy Mustang stood quietly, shading his hot face with one hand, while Pinako, Siegfried, Mackey and Alphonse all stared with open mouths. Glancing briefly back at the latter four, Winry drew a deep breath; then she forged ahead, pointing at Mustang as she addressed Ed. “He pulled rank on you, exploited you like he exploited my parents. You were young and naieve and you thought that you liked it. I can see that much. But it had to stop sometime, Edward.”

Ed flushed scarlet, moving forward. “No rank was pulled, Winry. No exploitation happened. You’re just taking your revenge on me instead of him. I should have seen this coming.”

“Enough!” Roy snarled. “If we can’t have a civilized discussion—“

“—Who are you to talk civilized!” Winry interrupted, her face streaked with sudden tears and her breast heaving. “You killed my parents and took advantage of Ed!”

“—Winry!” barked Al and as quickly subsided, panting with the effort.

They stared at each other for a long moment, unconscious of the crowd assembling around them. At
last Edward broke the silence. “You bitch!” he burst out, and ran off with a barely concealed sob.

***

Siegfried took it upon himself to disperse the onlookers before running off after Edward, while Mustang retired from the scene without further comment. After a few sharp words between them, Winry disengaged herself from her grandmother’s iron grip and staggered across the barn to fall to her knees sobbing in the straw.

Al’s voice came to her, as soft as a dragon’s could be. There was no anger in it at all.

She looked up. He was gazing at her with eyes made wide by emotion. “Winry? Why did you hurt Ed? He loves you.” The question was put with all innocence, but Winry felt Al’s wisdom. Behind her, she heard the barn door slam. Pinako had left her to stew in her own pot.

“No, he doesn’t,” she said darkly. “He never did.”

“Maybe not like I love you,” Al said. “Not like that. But he really does love you, Winry, even if he doesn’t realize it.” He sighed carefully; his sides ached deeply with his slowly healing wounds. “Ed can be really stupid sometimes. But I never thought I’d see you act that way.”

His words stung her more than they should have. “I—I don’t know why I brought it up like that. Probably because I’m almost never with Roy and Edward at the same time. It was my chance.”

“Did you really make Roy promise to not bother him again?”

“No… I made him promise to never touch him again.” Winry’s face flushed deep red; she dropped her gaze to the straw.

“Oh, Winry!” Al’s exclamation was hushed with a kind of horrified awe. “Now they can’t touch each other ever again. Why did you do that?” There was still no anger in his voice, but much hurt. “I mean, he does have someone else now, but it’s still so cruel.”

She shook her head, almost stuttering. “It wasn’t-- it wasn’t real love, Al. Ed might have convinced you otherwise, but—“

“Yes it was. It was real.”

“But how could it be?”

Al blinked. “Winry? When Roy killed your parents, he did it under orders. He’s tortured himself ever since, and Ed knows it. That’s why it was OK for them to be together. Hasn’t he told you that?”

“I can’t believe that’s true either… but that’s not what I meant.” She drew a deep breath, then let it spill. “I think Ed got sucked in by some things he heard in Central. Boys can’t fall in love with one another, they just can’t. It’s an illusion.”

“No, it’s not!” Al said, a little more sharply this time. “Winry, love is love. It really doesn’t care.”

“How do you know? Have you ever been in love with a boy?” Winry instinctively regretted the words as soon as they came out of her mouth.

Al closed his eyes for a long moment. Then he said, “This had better come out right now. You know I love Ed too, just not like that, at least not usually. But when I still had my real body in the Earth
world he taught me the Seven Secrets. One of those is the different ways guys can make love with each other, and we did it too, and it was really nice. Probably as nice as doing it with a girl, I think. But Ed said it didn’t count because he was just teaching me,” he added, to soften the blow.

Winry became aware that she’d temporarily stopped breathing, and it took her some moments to regain her voice. “Are you telling me you’ve—you’ve— Al! How could you! He’s your own brother!”

“Brothers are allowed to pass on the Secrets,” Al said. “He was just helping me get through a really hard time. He kept me alive that way, Winry. I was desperate. If he hadn’t given me a good reason to live to see each day, I would have killed myself right there in Munich. I love him forever for what he was willing to do, and for everything else he’s ever done for me. And I know that underneath, he’s still wondering if he did the right thing. He’s still wondering if he was really being a good brother. Being my brother is his whole life. So please, don’t be hard on him, Winry. He’s sacrificed everything for me.”

She stared dully down into the straw, her eyes fixed. “Do you love him more than me?” Another question she regretted; she already knew the answer, and had known it since he’d left her to seek Edward years before.

Alphonse did not lie or dissemble. He did not even answer the question. He only looked at her compassionately. “Winry, I don’t want you two to fight or hurt each other ever again. I can’t bear it,” he said after a long moment.

Winry rested on her hands and forced herself to breathe deeply and regularly, the shock of reality still running through her veins like icewater. Somewhere deep inside her she felt her child’s dark glee as it fed, and a wave of profound weakness came over her. Al raised his head a little, as though suddenly sniffing its presence, but said nothing more. She rode out the silent tidal wave of her emotions in silence, her shoulders rigid, her fists bunched in the straw.

Inevitably, she began to weep, great salt tears that spilled warmly down her cheeks, and she sat abruptly down, feeling suddenly, terribly humbled. She’d always secretly known that Ed and Al didn’t really need her. But they’d still come back to help her, and Al had told her truths he had not needed to tell anyone, and this was how she treated them. She thought for the thousandth time of Sciezka, and curled up on herself, sobbing.

“Winry?” Al crept forward painfully to nuzzle her. “It’s OK. It’s OK… I forgive you. Ed forgives you too.”

“How—how do you know?” she hiccuped miserably.

“He will. Don’t be afraid.”

She leaned forward tentatively against his head, her arms encircling his great blunt horns. “I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve any kindness at all. I’ve been horrible, Al!”

“Don’t blame yourself for everything.” He reached forward with his great paw, very carefully, drawing her close. The gesture was not only to comfort her; he was trying, with his sixth sense, to determine more about her child. What he felt startled him; he flinched a little, and she drew back at once. “Al?”

“It’s nothing,” he said dismissively. “One of my wounds.”

“And I haven’t even bandaged them.”
“They’ll wait a little longer.” Then, more softly: “I’ve missed you, Winry.”

“I’ve missed you too.” She spoke a little awkwardly as she fought to control herself, reaching to tentatively stroke his cheek. It felt… scaly. “We-- we thought you were dead.”

“I was dead.”

“But you came back.”

He nodded slowly, offering no explanation for something that he himself didn’t fully understand.

There was a short silence, during which Winry thought of all the things she had been planning to say to him when he returned, and she wondered if she still could. Then she cringed a little at herself. It was time and past time, she thought, for her to cast off this selfishness. After all, Al’s nonhuman shapes had never seemed to faze Edward in the slightest; the least she could do would be to emulate his example.

As if reading her mind, Al smiled a little. At least, she thought he was smiling, his lips drawn back in a kind of half-grimace over his jagged teeth. His resemblance to his human self was eerie; the eyes and hair appeared almost the same, just larger; but the rest of his body had been altered beyond recognition. It made her skin crawl.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “This dragon thing is only temporary, just like my armor body was. Once I’m human again, and we deal with Tucker, we can get married.”

For a moment she didn’t know how to react. His head drooped a little at her hesitation. “If you still want me,” he amended quietly.

“Oh, Al. Of course I still want you!” she heard herself saying. “You came back for me.” Then she added quietly, “I once told Sciezka that I was afraid of getting between you and Edward. Maybe… Maybe I won’t have to worry about that so much after all.”

Al brightened a little. “Oh, you shouldn’t ever worry about that,” he said reassuringly. “Now please, get Ed’s blanket and lay down by my side. I need to feel you by me.”

She nodded a little, blushing scarlet; retrieving the blanket, she sank with a great weary sigh down against his side. He turned his neck carefully so she could rest her head on the soft pillow of his copious mane, and she did so, putting her arms around him while making sure she didn’t bump any of his wounds. “Are you comfortable?” she asked softly.

“Yes.” He nuzzled her tenderly. “Are you?”

“Yes.” She drew a deep, shaking breath. “I just wanted to say—well, I love you, Al.”

“I love you, too. I always have. Always.” He sighed with deep satisfaction. “I’ve been waiting a long time to tell you that.”

Silence ensued. Winry found herself stroking the rounded edges of his scales. It felt as though she were touching many polished bits of shell.

“Do you think Ed’s OK?” she asked after awhile, hesitantly.

“He will be. Don’t worry.”

The darkness enfolded them kindly. Al sighed again and blinked once, slowly. He did not seem at all
anxious. Presently his head sank down again into the straw beside her, and he closed his eyes.

* * *

Siegfried caught up with Edward as he was storming up the back stairs into Mackey’s spacious attic. Following him up the steep steps with much huffing, he paused just long enough to see Ed flinging himself down on the polished hardwood flooring, marring it with his steel elbow. There he lay, breathing in great uncontrolled gasps. Knowing his violent nature, Siegfried approached cautiously. “Edward. Please calm yourself.”

Ed laughed without humor. “Sorry, Siggy,” he said bitterly, sitting up. “I guess now we both know how much I was looking forward to being back with Roy.” He looked away.

Siegfried shrugged and sat down cross-legged beside him, a little clumsily. “Oh, this strict m-m-monogamy stuff is crap anyway,” he said frankly.

Ed’s eyebrow twitched. “Siggy!”

“Seriously. It is unnatural for human beings.”

Edward stared at him for a moment, then glanced away again. “Whatever. You know what hurts the worst?”

“Yes. You returned to save your Princess, but in the meantime she betrayed you.”

“That’s a damned romantic way to put it.”

“It is the truth.”

“Roy keeps his promises, Siggy. If he really swore what she says he swore, that’s the end of us.”

For a long time they sat silently side by side, watching the setting moon’s shadows move over the attic floor. After awhile Edward leaned forward, arms around knees, and Siegfried heard him weeping in the dark.

Siegfried moved to embrace him, wondering again that this stunted and mutilated body could house such a mighty spirit, so alive to the joys and agonies of life. “Edward,” he whispered. “Dear, dear Edward. You have been hurt so much.”

* * *

The rest of the night passed uneventfully. Early next morning, Alphonse woke, to Winry’s urging, to the sight of Uncle standing before them, none the worse for wear.

Al rolled over slowly and propped himself up on his elbows, gritting his teeth at his wounds. “Uncle! I’m so glad to see you!”

“I’ve got a present for you, Alphonse,” the old man said with a grin, and out of one of his capacious pockets he produced a white kitten about twelve weeks of age. Without waiting, he put her down in the straw. The kitten clambered fearlessly up Al’s muzzle, waving her tail from side to side and mewing in friendly greeting. Alphonse caught his breath, holding very still. “Beauty!” he exclaimed in delight. “Oh, Beauty! I knew you were here! Uncle, where’d you find her?”
“Oh, some of the military stiffs found her. They handed her over to me before they brought me here, when I said how much you loved cats.”

“But I thought cats meant pollution to the Roma,” Al said in some confusion.

“Different world, different rules,” Uncle said philosophically. “Since you’re so closely associated with cats, we’re thinking they really bring good luck instead of bad.” Then he smiled. “It’s good to see you, too, son. For awhile there we thought you were a goner.”

“I’d feared the same of you. Are they treating you kindly?”

“Since yesterday evening, they’re treating us very kindly. Someone must have interceded on our behalf. I’m hearing rumors bandied about by the military men that they’re thinking how to set us free.”

Al nodded to himself. Roy, he realized, overcome again with his chronic guilt—a good thing for all concerned, at least this time. “Amestris is a big place. There are a lot of places where no one has ever been. I was hoping your people could settle one of those outlying provinces, and maybe even get a government stipend for doing it.”

“I heard that, too. But we need no stipend—only our freedom, Alphonse.”

Al lowered his head in assent. “I’m so sorry for the way you were treated,” he said honestly. “You must promise me that when they set you free, you’ll gather your people and leave as quickly as possible. It’s the only way you’ll be safe.”

Winry watched their exchange in silence; but when Uncle was escorted back to the waiting vehicles, she went with him after casting a long glance at Al. He nodded at her meaningfully, knowing that she understood, and would petition Roy Mustang to arrange for the immediate freedom of the Roma. Roy couldn’t very well refuse her anything, no matter how angry he might be at her. At least, he would have liked to think so.

Beauty mewed sharply. She’d climbed up his horns and couldn’t get down. He chuckled a little, wincing, and was just tipping his head so she could jump off when Edward strode into the barn. Tossing aside his jacket, he paused to help the kitten. “Hey!” he said, putting her on his shoulder. “That’s Beauty, isn’t it? I think I recognize her!”

Al smiled. “It sure is. Edward, could you please take care of her for me while I’m a dragon?”

“Sure thing, brother. You know,” he said, continuing as lightly as if the disaster of the previous night had never happened, “I think I’m actually starting to like cats.”

“Wow. You are changing, and so are the Roma.”

“Did I miss something?” Ed sat down by his side.

Alphonse told him briefly about Uncle’s visit. Afterwards, there was a companionable silence until he said softly, “So you’re OK? I was worried about you, brother.”

“Yeah, I’m OK, Al.” Ed nodded to himself, as if it helped to articulate his thoughts. “It would have happened anyway, sooner or later. She just made it happen sooner. I already told you Roy would never marry me.”

Another silence.
Al thought it best to change the subject. “Ed? When you helped bring me back to life? Don’t feel bad about thinking that you couldn’t do alchemy to save me. I wouldn’t want you to, if it would hurt anybody else.”

“I know that,” Ed replied. “I don’t feel bad about it.”

Al snorted softly.

Suddenly Ed leaned forward. “Al, I don’t really know how to say this, and I don’t know what it means...” Uncharacteristically, he hesitated.

Alphonse regarded him with affection. “Just say it, brother. I’m not going to yell.”

“Well… I’m getting the feeling something pretty profound happened to you on the other side. Can you tell me about it?”

Al’s eyes widened. “Yes!” he said. “I found part of myself that was missing.”

Edward was fascinated. “What was it like? We’ve both been there before. This time was different?”

Alphonse nodded slowly. “Mm. I went much deeper this time. Further in. The Gate doesn’t just lead to the Earth world. It leads beyond. It leads to all places—wonderful places I can’t describe. Not because I don’t have the words, but because we don’t even have those senses here. On this plane we’re extremely limited, Edward.” He smiled at something. “It prevents us from making too much of a mess.”

Ed was about to inquire further when there was a rapping at the main door. “Come in,” he shouted, expecting to see Pinako or Sciezka.

The door opened slowly. Into the barn came a seemingly endless parade of monks.

By this time, old man Mackey had seen it all and had given up barring his premises to intruders. The monks had entered the property with no challenge, not from Armstrong’s men and not even from Den. Edward stood up, mouth open in astonishment as they ranged in a wide circle round Alphonse, curled in his green-glowing nest between the energy wells. He counted forty-two of them when the last one had entered.

“It’s the Dragon Cult,” Al said softly. “One of the groups who seem to think I’m… special.”

“Is that so!” Edward said indignantly. “We’ll show them!” As he said it, the head master bowed deeply to them. “Edward Elric!” he said. “Guardian of the god!”

Edward groaned out loud, not caring if they heard. All he’d wanted was a little time for himself to rest and recuperate. Instead, he got a visit by religious fanatics. There was no avoiding them, he thought, no matter what world he was in.

“Alphonse Elric!” the headmaster continued, turning back to the dragon. Al nodded eagerly. “That’s me!”

Ed realized with some shock that Al was actually looking interested in what the monks had to say. Was his brother going crazy?

“Soon it will be time for the Great Transmutation. We are come to summon you to the Temple of the Dragon God at the appointed hour, one moon hence.”
“I’m sure I’ll be there, wherever it is,” Al said simply. “Say, is that you, Brother Daiwa?-- I hardly recognize you in that outfit!”

“It’s me!” laughed the young man, pulling off his headdress, and the rest of his acolytes smiled and murmured among themselves.

“Looks like you got promoted,” Al observed.

“You know this guy?!” Ed demanded.

“Sure. He’s my biggest fan.” Al grinned, slowly swinging his big head around to wink at Edward.

“Back when I was still human and I was looking for you, we’d run into each other every so often, until I finally realized he was following me around. You haven’t quit yet, have you?” he said with genuine humor and affection, putting his attention back on the monk.

“Never!” Daiwa said fervently, and Alphonse smiled. “Well, you’re still likely to be disappointed,” he said gently.

“Oh, we are not disappointed in the slightest! You have turned into the dragon just as our prophecies say! This is so awesome!”

Al laughed—a soft, good sound. “I’m just glad you’re so happy about it. Ed, will you please take them all down to Granny Pinako and see if she and Sciezka can get them some refreshments?”

* * *

“And when I saw him bring up a fountain of water out of the desert sand, I knew the prophecies were correct!” Shin Daiwa said, gesturing expansively over his plate. Pinako hadn’t been fazed in the slightest by the appearance of an entire monastic order in the front yard, but had immediately busied herself boiling a huge pot of oatmeal, which the monks had accepted happily.

Edward grunted noncommittally. It was well-known to alchemists and laypeople alike that a huge ice sheet lay beneath the Lior Desert, preserved for thousands of years by the insulation of the sand. It wouldn’t take that much to create a dramatic artesian well, he thought. Still, he appreciated the drama of this archetypal action and part of him understood how a religiously-motivated young man could have been so overwhelmed by Al’s thoughtless stunt. Add that to the ensuing mayhem in the desert town when Armstrong’s men had been attacked by the Thule troops coming through their first successful Gate—a carnage that Alphonse had been instrumental in stopping—and it was clear that his little brother had become a legend. Edward couldn’t help feeling very proud of him even as he disdained the simple-mindedness of Daiwa and his followers.

As he finished his oatmeal in silence, a small military transport entered the drive, and everyone’s attention was drawn to it. Watching through the window, he saw Winry get out, supported by two of Armstrong’s men. They nearly carried her to the front door. Pinako dropped everything and hastened to open it. “Winry, dear!” she said. “Weren’t you in the barn all this time?”

She shook her head mutely. Her eyes showed her exhaustion.

Edward got up and went out the door past them, thinking he’d somehow seen his old friend Havoc in Winry’s escort. It wasn’t the case, but Roy Mustang was standing by the transport. Edward drew a deep breath and approached him. “What’s going on?”

“I’m going to try to engineer the release of your immigrants,” Roy said with a wry smile.

“Glad she could persuade you,” Ed said, somewhat cautiously. “They had it rough in the Earth
world.”

“So have you, from what I’ve heard.”

Edward grunted. “I’ve had it worse.”

There was an awkward silence, which Mustang broke after a long moment. “I am glad to see you and your brother safely back, Ed.”

Edward drew a deep, difficult breath. This was not at all how he’d pictured his eventual reunification with Roy Mustang.

“I’m glad to see you, too,” he said. “But what’s with the general’s uniform? I thought you got yourself demoted to corporal.”

Roy Mustang shrugged, leaning against the side of the army transport. “I guess I got tired of being ordered around by idiots.”

Ed nodded, forcing himself back to the subject of the people he and Al had rescued. “Al and I talked about the Gypsies. We were hoping they could settle in the outer provinces.”

“I can’t make promises, but I can pull some strings. They’re a tough people,” Roy added, as a compliment. “And just as insular as the Ishvarlans. The two might like each other.”

“Try living with them for months at a stretch like Al and I did. I love ‘em dearly, but they’re enough to drive you crazy. I hope you’ve been accommodating their laws.”

“We’ve been trying. The main difficulty is supplying them with food. Between feeding them and our own troops, we’ve buying out all the local farmer’s markets.”

“That’s why Pinako’s been going so heavy on the oatmeal.” Ed blinked as the food shortage suddenly became clear to him.

Mustang looked keenly at him. “There was a time when you would have known that without being told,” he said with a hint of concern.

“Yeah, well, dying can do things to you, and travelling through the Gate is even worse,” Ed admitted. “Al says my brain’s gone a little flaky. All the more reason for me to quit the military.”

“Can’t have defectives,” Roy said in agreement. It was not as callous as it sounded; it was simply factual. That much Edward did understand, and he took no offense; but he started a little at his old friend’s next question. Roy straightened, his affectation of laziness forgotten. “So you admit it’s true. You and Al were brought back from the dead.”

Ed said nothing for a moment; then, reluctantly, he nodded. “Al’s been dead twice now. I was gone twice too, but the first time he brought me back using the Philosopher’s Stone.” He was not fully prepared for the swift look he saw pass across Mustang’s brow—awe, inspiration, the keen joy of a jaded man suddenly brought back to the wonder and possibilities of childhood.

“Then they’re right!” Roy muttered. “The Dragon Cult is right. I thought it might be so.”

“What do you mean? I just had breakfast with them, they’re a bunch of lunatics!”

“Not so fast. Did you even bother to listen to what they had to say? Did you listen to the legend of the two brothers?”
“No,” Edward admitted reluctantly. “I mean, who could really see the future?”

“Who could come back from the dead?”

“That was different. That was technology, the Philosopher’s Stone.”

“Not the last time. Not with Al. Believe me, I had an earful from Sciezka.”

“OK, OK.” Ed threw both hands up in the air. “But just because we don’t know how it happened doesn’t mean there’s not an explanation.”

“I’ll grant that. But what if the explanation really is supernatural?” Without thinking about it, the two men had wandered away from the waiting transport and were standing in the yard.

Ed put his hands in his pockets. “The supernatural seems to be my forte lately,” he said wryly. “I’ve always thought of myself as a scientist, but how do you explain all those ghosts I’ve seen, or that our dead father is somehow still alive somewhere?”

“I don’t know. But all of it serves to indicate that I was right about you two. There is something special about you.”

“Oh, no. Not you, Roy.”

“What do you mean, ‘not me?’ A person would have to be stupid to think it wasn’t so. Not everyone is privileged with being resurrected, Edward.”

“You’re siding with the religious nuts.”

“Hah!” Mustang laughed sharply. “Not on my life! The Dragon Cult is apolitical. They’re not the ones infiltrating the army.”

“Then you’re a closet Dragon sympathizer, and that’s why you let them through.”

“That’s right.”

Edward gratted his teeth. “I’m disappointed in you. I thought you were smarter than that.”

“You should be more disappointed in your own brother. He’s been a good friend of the cult leader for years, and he’s done nothing to discourage the group.”

Edward almost snapped at him. “Al had other things on his mind. He was humoring them.”

“Oh, Right. Like he didn’t have time to think about the ramifications of it all.”

They glared at each other. Edward was just thinking that Winry might have done them both a favor after all when a soldier yelled, and they both turned to see a lone tank coming over the far hill.

“What the--?” Roy said in astonishment. “I didn’t order that!”

“It’s Johnny Windwalker,” Ed said after a moment. “The dragon doctor!”

* * *

By the time the old green tank rolled in, Edward, Siegfried and Pinako were waiting for it outside the barn. Its gun, bent and broken, comically sported a large linen bandage, and Ed couldn’t help but grin. “Well, this is it, Siggy. You’re about to meet Johnny Windwalker, the last dragon doctor in
Amestris!” No sooner had he uttered the words than the tank’s hatch popped open and out clambered an extraordinary figure.

Windwalker was taller than most men, with broad shoulders, and he slid to the ground with a thump, pausing immediately to take careful stock of the situation in a way that told them he often encountered the unexpected. “You would be Pinako?” he said after a moment, with a grin that lightened his rugged face the same way the sun illuminated the crags.

“I’m glad to see you could come so quickly,” Pinako replied, surreptitiously fanning away the sulphurous odor that seemed to come with the doctor’s presence. “We have an emergency in the barn. It’s his brother,” and she nodded at Edward.

Windwalker’s eyebrows shot up. “Edward Elric?! His brother?! How are you, boy?! I’d heard you’d returned! It’s good to see you back!” And he grabbed Ed’s prosthetic hand and shook it so firmly that it rattled. Without giving him time to reply, he continued, “But your brother?! Alphonse, the Spirit Alchemist? I’d heard he shucked the can and disappeared!”

“Yeah, well, he’s here now,” Ed said. “He came back with me. As a dragon. It’s a long story.”

“Whatever.” Windwalker turned to Siegfried. “I don’t recall meeting you before,” he said.

“I’m Dr. Siegfried Schauer. Naturalist. Explorer. Master of Frogs!” Siegfried grinned, and Johnny Windwalker grinned back as they quickly shook hands. “Master of Frogs, eh?”

The foursome proceeded to the barn, where Al lay stretched out on his side. His flanks still rose and fell regularly. He opened one eye as they approached. Ed quickly knelt by his head. “Hey, brother mine. We finally got you a real doctor,” he said, gently stroking Al’s scaly face. “You’ll be better soon. I promise.”

“Now what the heck happened here?” breathed Johnny Windwalker as he set his bag down on a bale of hay. He took one sweeping glance around the barn, taking in everything: the listing Gate, the broken platform and the energy wells, everything, before approaching the dragon to slowly walk the length of his body. “Multiple flesh wounds. Wouldn’t have been that serious except for the number of them. Pretty heavy artillery, too. Edward? Do you know what kind of guns these were?”

Ed drew a deep breath, reluctant to recall the scene. “Yeah. It was guns mounted on flying vehicles. Fighter planes, they called them. Al got in the way.”

Johnny Windwalker’s glance was sharp. “I’ve been everywhere on the planet and I don’t recall ever seeing any weapons like that.”

Ed nodded without saying anything further.

“Well, don’t worry about it, boy,” the doctor said comfortably. “So Alphonse here was flying on just his own helium and windfins, and he ran afoul of some kind of military experiment, is that it?”


“All right. That’s good enough for the official report.” The doctor leaned closer, examining several of the wounds. “Hmmmm. There’s something else unusual going on here. Granny, you said he’s had these wounds for four days?”

“That’s right.” Pinako stood just behind him, hands on hips.

“These wounds are fresh. They’ve just begun to heal! They can’t be four days old.” He cast her a
brief but challenging glance as he reached for his kit.

Pinako shrugged helplessly, looking quickly at Edward. He was a little startled by her lack of a retort, but rallied instantly. “Doctor, something happened,” he said. “Something wonderful. I don’t think anyone can explain it. If we tell you about it, you have to promise not to spread it around.”

Windwalker pinned Ed with his bright blue stare so like Siegfried’s, eyebrows raised, until Edward continued uncomfortably: “See, right after Al landed here four days ago, he died.”

“Oh. Another resurrection. That explains it,” said Johnny Windwalker, and got some surgical implements from his kit without further comment.

“You won’t find any bullets left in him,” Ed said. “I transmuted them all. But what do you mean, ‘another resurrection?'”

Windwalker tossed the scalpels back into his bag. “Everyone talks about resurrection these days, especially where you and your brother are concerned. There are whole cults based around the idea. Though I admit, I think the whole thing sounds ridiculous, and I’ve never seen anything like that happen in a dragon, or in anyone else, for that matter. Didn’t you two originally get into trouble because you tried to resurrect your own mother?”

“Doctor Windwalker,” Pinako suddenly interrupted, “Is there any other way Al’s wounds would not have shown signs of healing?”

“Well,” the good doctor said thoughtfully, “There have been cases of dragons being frozen, or caught in suspended animation. Both of those conditions would certainly slow down the metabolism.”

“He had no corneal reflex,” Edward said.

“Neither does a tundra frog when it’s frozen solid,” Windwalker pointed out. “As I’m sure Dr. Siegfried here can attest.”

“But Al was not frozen. Nor was he in a suspension array. I would have known it.”

“Well, then, Edward, I can’t explain how your little brother did it… but I can explain how you can fix it.” He handed Ed a container of wound salve and a pair of thick gloves. “First, you need to put this salve on every wound once a day for a week. Be sure to wear the gloves, or it’ll burn your skin right off.”

Edward took the articles. “OK.”

Windwalker turned back again to his bag. “And he needs a little shot to get his fire back.” He came up with a large glass vial, elaborately sealed, and a syringe to match. With a start, Edward recognized the enormous long needle as being manufactured of hardened orichalcum.

“Hydrazine,” said Johnny Windwalker with satisfaction, removing the first cap on the vial and thrusting the needle through the second to fill it. “Straight into the cardiac sac. That’ll kick-start him!”

On the sidelines, Siegfried gasped and sputtered with horror as Edward gave a low but dismayed exclamation. Windwalker turned suddenly in Siegfried’s direction, raising an inquiring eyebrow as he continued to fill the syringe. “Yes, Doctor?”

“Pardon me, sir, b-b-but hydrazine?”
“That’s rocket fuel!” Ed said. “A pyrophoric, and it’s toxic!”

Siegfried nodded vigorously. “Very poisonous. Very bad!”

“Yes, and it’s produced in nature by several creatures besides dragons, but dragons manufacture it in an almost pure form. It’s what they use to produce their flame, but it also regulates their metabolism. Kind of like thyroid hormone, and he’s clearly deficient. He’s been fighting lately. Haven’t you?” he said to Al, who cringed.

Edward sat down abruptly by Al’s head as Windwalker, Pinako and Siegfried coordinated their efforts to slowly roll his serpentine body over. “Don’t be afraid, Al,” Ed said, trying to stifle his own panic. Needles were his weak spot, and the thought of that orichalcum skewer being pushed into his brother’s beating heart was terrifying. “Nature must have balanced herself on your account by now. Just this one last treatment, and you won’t suffer any more.”

“Oh, I believe that,” Al groaned. “Just not the way you mean!”

“Hold your breath,” said Johnny Windwalker to Alphonse, and Al did, whimpering a little. Edward did not watch the proceedings or close his eyes, but kept them fixed steadily upon his brother’s, quietly sending reassurance. Al reached vainly forward, trying to grasp Ed’s hand, coat, anything. Then the needle slid smoothly into his chest.

“Uhh…!” Al’s body went completely limp. Siegfried’s gasp was audible. Unruffled, Johnny Windwalker completed the injection and gave the pearl-and-ivory flank a gentle pat. “Wake up, you big baby. It’s all done.”

Al opened one eye. “I’m still here,” he said in wonder. Edward grinned with relief and ruffled his hair.

“Here and better than ever,” the doctor said, starting to pack away his equipment. “That shot’ll kick-start your healing processes and get your fire going again. Try not to flame anything for a couple of weeks so you don’t deplete your natural hydrazine, and if your brother there just applies the salve like I told him to, you’ll soon be as good as new. All right? Now—” He got up, picking up his bag—“Is there any coffee around here?”

* * *

“Siegfried Schauer. Have I heard that name before?” the dragon doctor mused as he sat at the kitchen table. Old man Mackey had retreated into the great room, Winry was still in bed, and Pinako was busy over the stove; only Siegfried and Edward were with Windwalker, and Ed was restless to get back to Al.

“I don’t know,” Siegfried said. “In my land, which is called Germany, I have written many books, but you will not find them here.”

“Yes you will!” Edward said, to everyone’s surprise. “They’re in my bags upstairs. I brought through copies of most of your stuff, Siggy.”

Siegfried gaped at him like a fish. “Edward! This is wonderful! I had forgotten it myself. But why?”

“Because I figured you’d need a head start here, and because your books tell us so much about your world.”

“His world?” asked Johnny Windwalker.
“We made a teleportation array,” Ed said vaguely. It was not—quite—a lie.

“Top secret, no doubt.”

“No doubt.”

“I’d like to read those books,” Windwalker said.

“Really?” Siegfried’s blue-eyed gaze was intense.

Edward glanced from one to the other, suddenly feeling a little left out. “I’ll just go get them,” he said lamely.

“So you have Arctic tundra frogs in your world?” said Johnny Windwalker, with the same intent stare, ignoring Ed completely.

“Yes,” replied Siegfried. “We have a species of arctic frog which freezes solid each winter.”

“Interesting. Do you have Ishvarlan fire frogs?”

“No not that I’m aware of. What about your homeland? Do you have Swedish swamp frogs?”

The dragon doctor shook his head emphatically. “Not that I’ve heard of.”

Siegfried’s gaze was growing more intense. “What about-- spring peepers?”

“Yup. Rocky Mountain toads?”

“That is a North American species. My great American colleague Mary Dickerson wrote the book about them, but she died recently,” he finished sadly.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yes. We exchanged letters for many years.” Siegfried looked down at the table. “She helped me get our local species of tree frog properly classified. It meant so much to me.”

“Which college did you attend in your world?” Windwalker leaned to rest his chin on his hands. Edward, still at the table, was appalled at how easily he was picking Siegfried’s brain, and how willingly Siggy was giving up the information, and he noticed, strangely, that Siegfried’s stutter had all but disappeared.

“University of Munich,” Siggy said proudly. Edward almost snorted at his sudden pride in the institution that had kicked him out. “I have three doctorates. Medicine, biology, and chemistry. And you?”

“Central University. Master’s degree in dragon physiology, and a Doctor of Medicine.”

“You do humans, too?”

“Only when I’m desperate.”

It was an in-joke on the dragon doctor’s part; Siggy did not know what others knew about Windwalker; but they both grinned at the same time anyway, and neither of them looked away.

Edward remained at the table, following the ensuing conversation with a quickly growing sense of dismay and despair. He, Edward, had no such college degrees; much of his experience had been
gained in the field, and much of the rest, illicitly. While he did belong to a proud traditional school of alchemy, he had about as much in common with the average institutionally-trained alchemist as he did with Shou Tucker. Even if he was the world famous Fullmetal Alchemist, the youngest alchemist ever to become a military officer and the brother of the renowned spirit alchemist Alphonse Elric, he could not begin to compete with such a flamboyant figure as Johnny Windwalker. To add insult to injury, the big, rugged man was noted for his maturity, comic grace, and sense of humor—and the fact that he had never had a wife. The story of his tragic love of the Dragon Prince of the Highlands was known to many.

Edward had not expected his days with Siegfried to be terminated so quickly, but there it was, he thought numbly. He’d known long before they returned to Amestris that Siegfried would like Windwalker—he just hadn’t thought it out, and certainly hadn’t reckoned on watching him fall in love right before his eyes.

“Edward?” Siegfried said gently, breaking his stupor.

“Huh?” Ed shook himself.

“Would you be so good as to retrieve my b-books, please? I thank you again for bringing them here.”

“Sure, Siggy.” Ed finally rose from the table, yawning and stretching, and headed for the stairs. His books and the things he’d brought back from the Earth world were all in his packs and the two sets of saddlebags he’d had on Al. These had been brought, most unhelpfully, to the house by old man Mackey almost immediately after their arrival.

Winry’s bedroom and hobby-shop was at the top of the stairs. He hesitated as he passed it; he hadn’t seen anything of her since she’d returned with Mustang’s men. Whether from guilt or concern, he doubled back to knock lightly on her door. “Winry?”

She didn’t answer. He hesitated, knuckles raised to knock again; then, deliberately following instinct, he instead turned the knob and pushed the door open slightly, a shock of golden hair preceding his eyes as he peeked through. The small drill press and electric jigsaws were clean and unused. The bed was empty.

“Go figure,” he said. “It’s just like old times. She’s in the bathroom right when I need it.”

But as he went by, that door was open and room was dark.

At a loss, Ed stood for a moment looking down the hall. Then he tore off at a run for his own room. “Winry!” he shouted. “Winry?!”

Pinako yelled up the stairs, her voice thin and sharp. “Edward! What’s going on up there?”

Ed ran back to the top of the stairs. “Winry’s not here. When was the last time you saw her?”

Pinako’s little eyes widened. “Just after she came back with Mustang! She said she was going to feed Den.”

“It’s Tucker,” Edward said grimly and breathlessly as he flew downstairs again, landing heavily at the bottom.

* * *
“Ed!” Al said. “You’ve got to go after them right now!”

“I know, little brother!” Edward was pacing restlessly in front of him. Pinako, Siegfried, the monks and Mackey had all spread out to search the farm; the only thing they’d found so far was that Den was also missing. Ed had come back to the barn on the chance their paths had crossed, but Alphonse had seen no sign of Winry. “Windwalker’s left. He’s going to search the West Slope. Are you going to be OK without me?” Edward asked.

“Of course I am! Geeze! With Granny Pinako and forty-two totally devoted monks taking care of me, what could possibly go wrong?!”

“All right. I already told Shin Daiwa I’m leaving, and he’s promised that he and his monks will guard you with their lives. I gave your ointment to Granny and told her what to do. If Roy Mustang shows up again, tell him everything that’s happened, but use your discretion.”

“I’m better at that kind of thing than you are, anyway.”

“Right.” Ed stopped pacing and knelt in front of him. “I have the feeling this is going to get ugly before it’s over, Al. I might need your help, but in no circumstances do I want you to follow me until you’re really up to it. Please promise me this.”

“I understand, brother. And I promise.”

“OK.” Edward leaned forward, grasping Al by the horns so he could kiss his scaly cheek. “If we don’t meet again before then, we’ll rendezvous at the Dragon Monastery in thirty days.”

“Right.” Al nodded, then winced. “Go fast now—and be safe, brother!”

“Be well, Alphonse!” And Edward ran from the barn.
Cages of Bone

Chapter Summary

Shou Tucker is on the loose, and worse, he's kidnapped Winry! As Al continues to recuperate, Ed pursues the Sewing Life alchemist; but unknown to him, the Restorationist Army is on the march!

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains a somewhat detailed description of dragon sex, as well as a nod to one of my favorite childhood books-- "How Fletcher Was Hatched." :)

I.

Edward had only been gone for a few minutes when Alphonse sent for Shin Daiwa.

“I need a favor,” Al said. “It’s urgent.”

“Anything!” Daiwa replied fervently.

“I want you to take your monks and search for Winry.”

Daiwa shuffled his feet uncomfortably. “Your brother warned me you would ask. I promised him we would stay here instead and guard you.”

“Am I the god here, or is he?”

At first Alphonse could not fathom why his old friend’s face lit up like the tree at a Solstice party. Then Daiwa exclaimed to himself in amazement, “He actually admitted it! The Admission has happened!” He turned, putting his hands to his mouth to call his acolytes. “Brothers! The Admission has happened!”

There was a flurry of reaction; within less than a minute, all forty-one of Daiwa’s fellow cultists were ranged around Alphonse in various states of genuflection, the general excitement already at fever pitch. Murmurs of “I don’t believe it!” and other exclamations of surprise alternated with, “I told you so!” until Alphonse, losing what little patience he had left, raised his head, towering over them. “BE QUIET!” he barked.
All forty monks came to attention like military officers, their faces rigid with surprise.

Al addressed Shin Daiwa through his teeth in a low, frustrated growl. “I love Winry very, very much. I intend to marry her once I’m done with this stupid dragon thing, so get your men and get moving.”

* * *

Edward had started his quest on foot, ignoring the soreness of his leg to sniff out the fading trail of Tucker’s alchemy. Tucker had been even sloppier than usual in his haste, and that was of great benefit to a field-trained alchemist.

Edward had not yet left Mackey’s property when his alchemic sense became aware of a strange vector in a fallow cornfield; he veered to investigate and stopped short. At first he thought it was a giant spotted puffball; he had fond memories of Pinako slicing and frying these to make delicious suppers. Then he blinked, realizing he was looking at a mutant chicken egg. “What the—!” Circling it, he tapped on the shell. There was something inside. “Tucker did this,” he said grimly. “But it can’t be Winry!” Calculating the safest place to strike the egg, he drew back his steel fist and smashed the shell in one sharp, abbreviated motion. It shattered apart in great slimy shards—and a large, wet animal fell limply into Ed’s astonished arms.

“Den?!”

The big dog had been kept alive by the porosity of the eggshell. He didn’t look in any way different, and Edward sighed with relief; Tucker’s insanity might have caused him to attempt another chimera. Quickly he cleaned the slime from Den’s muzzle and shook him, but there was no response.

“Winry, you’re gonna so owe me for this one,” Ed groaned, and bent to blow hard into the dog’s nose, holding his mouth firmly closed with both hands. After a few breaths Den began to move. Edward released him, staggering away to gag and spit.

The dog’s recovery was more rapid than Ed’s, and within minutes he seemed to be his old self, wagging his tail vigorously and licking Ed’s face as he tried unsuccessfully to avoid him. At last Edward said, “Sit! Den!”—and the dog sat obediently, eagerly awaiting Edward’s next command.

“Where’s Winry?” said Ed, grasping him by the jowls and staring intently in his face. It was an old trick they’d taught him when they were small—to find any member of their threesome, in case one of them got lost in the woods.

Den gave a little bark as though he’d suddenly remembered something, and sprang up, running around him in circles before taking off in an arrow-straight line, running east. Ed followed as quick as he could, so he didn’t see Daiwa’s monks leaving Mackey’s farm in a swift, orderly pack.

* * *

Roy Mustang already had the intelligence of Winry’s abduction and was putting together several well-armed search parties when Alphonse sent for him, informing him that Edward had struck out on his own. The general was raging as he came quickly down to the barn. “Damn him! Couldn’t he have waited for five minutes?”

Al’s temper had cooled a little, but his pink-flushed scales were still on edge. “You know we always
operate best when we work by ourselves,” he said.

“That may be true,” Mustang snapped, “But the military has been hanging around here for a reason, Alphonse, not just because we like your company!”

“Then why are you still standing there? Why don’t you just go after him?”

“Because those monks are no longer guarding you! Maybe you’ve become a little too confident from your travels, but there really are alchemists here who would love to stuff that dragon’s head of yours and put it on the wall!” Roy leaned toward him, pointing a finger. “You do remember Scar? Well there’s a whole army of Restorationists combing Amestris for you two, every one of them at least as crazy as he ever was, and now they know you’re here!”

“Wow. This religious thing has really gotten out of hand.” Al lowered his head. “It’s hard to believe that so many people could think that way.” He huffed noisily, his sore sides expanding broadly. “Anyway, I don’t hear you worrying much about Winry!”

“Tucker needs her, for whatever reason. He went to great risk to kidnap her. She’s safer than you two are, at least for the moment.” Mustang shrugged deeper into his jacket, automatically checking his Pyrotex gloves. “I’m sending out multiple search parties to look for her and Edward. Meanwhile, you’ve got to promise me that you’ll stay where you’re supposed to for the next two weeks. I’m pulling a quarter brigade away from the front to guard you.”

“I wouldn’t stay here if I could get away with it!” Alphonse growled, dropping back down on all fours in the straw and wincing as he landed. “But I can’t fly like this. Roy—name what you want and I’ll try and get it for you, if you’ll just bring Winry back alive.”

“That’s magnanimous of you.”

“I’m not kidding. Ed and I learned some things when we were between the worlds.”

“Yeah? Well, one thing I know you learned a lot farther back is that the things of real value have nothing to do with possessions. You can’t get me what I want, Alphonse. But I’ll do my best to save her anyway.”

* * *

The next few days passed by much too slowly. Roy Mustang and his men scoured the land for miles around, searching tirelessly for some sign of Winry while capturing the occasional Restorationist patrol. Meanwhile Alphonse began to acquire the same pinkish-golden inner glow as he had at August’s, his scales standing up like ruffled feathers, and he began to regress to a state that was not conducive to coherent speech. Mustang stationed his infantrymen to guard him day and night, but they were perennially frightened of his demeanor. Even Roy himself kept a safe distance from his teeth and claws, while old man Mackey was frankly terrified of him and would no longer set foot in the barn. Only Pinako and Siegfried remained unimpressed, trundling in together morning and night like clockwork to offer him food—which he ate little—and to put the dreadful salve on his quickly healing wounds. When he showed signs of threatening to fly off before the prescribed two weeks of rest were complete, Pinako brought her portable forge to the barn and shackled him to a post as he was sleeping.

“There!” she said to his snarling face as, upon waking and discovering her treachery, he lunged and snapped, the chain stopping him inches from her throat. “That’ll keep your britches on for you!”
Al roared and howled to no avail, ignoring Siegfried’s entreaties to stop and Pinako’s repeated admonitions that it was for his own good. For some time the two held their breaths at the possibility that he might free himself through alchemy, before Yung observed that being chained between the energy wells would make him think twice about starting any alchemical reactions that could be accidentally catalyzed.

At last Alphonse appeared to give up, collapsing in despair; had Dr. Windwalker been there to see him chained in his own nest, he might have had some sharp words for Winry’s grandmother.

The next day, and for several days after, he refused to eat. Siegfried began sleeping in the barn, offering him tidbits at every waking opportunity; but though he spoke at length on the virtues of patience, he soon saw that all words were lost on an agitated dragon. Still, his steady presence and his calm demeanor—not even ruffled when Alphonse snapped at him—had a beneficial effect; he discovered Al would eat from a platter set in front of him if he kept a respectful distance away, and afterward, when the dragon was dozing, he crawled fearlessly over his long scaly body, applying the salve to his wounds.

For seven long days, he did not leave Al’s side. Pinako had thoughtfully provided him with a writing pad, and soon the little scientist was creating another book, this one covering every anatomical detail of dragons. Despite Al’s bad behavior, Siggy’s love and respect for the shape-changing alchemist only grew with his continued observations, and in the calm moments when Al’s spirit could see more clearly through the fog of his alien brain, he responded enough that Siegfried could see Alphonse Elric was still there, struggling mightily under the weight of his unusual burden.

* * *

Before Edward was a day out of Resembool, he was forced to cave in to his sore leg and dust off his official state pocketwatch to commandeer the first four-wheel-drive vehicle he came across—a hill farmer’s work truck. After promising him good compensation, Ed drove off with Den in the passenger seat, heading cross country and well aware that the news of his arrival back in Amestris would now spread much faster than he could drive.

As near as he could tell from the residual debris which every practicing alchemist left, Tucker was going eastward at a steady clip, as fast as a man could run and avoiding the roads when he could. The evidence showed that he was headed for the Dragon Hills, and Edward shuddered at the thought of what Tucker’s powerful alchemy could do with such a beast—or several, if he found a warren of them. If Alphonse had been with him, they would have stood a chance against a threat of this nature, but he wasn’t. The best chance lay in trying to get between the Sewing Life alchemist and his destination; Edward drove furiously across the rolling fields, watching constantly for signs that he was gaining on his quarry.

Towards noon, he was negotiating a hilly road when a movement on an overhanging rock caught his eye and he swerved violently, almost rolling the truck as a band of a dozen men swarmed down the cliff face on the slide netting. Gunning it past them by a hair, he rounded the steep curve with a wild yell and crashed right into a tree that had been cut to block the way. The impact threw him and Den from the vehicle; he hit the earth rolling, drawing just enough power from it to cushion their landing using the air. As he scrambled up, he generated a rapid alchemical reaction that shifted the ground from beneath the feet of his attackers and caused a small rockslide to roll down from the hill above. His opponents scattered in terror; but as the dust cleared, Ed’s eyes widened. One figure remained standing—some kind of officer in black and tan camouflage, tall, rawboned, with a strange round rock in his hand and a fearless look.
“What the hell!?” Ed said, taking in the man’s uniform. “Who are you?! Is this a military operation?”

“Restorationist Army scouts,” Longshanks said, with a mock salute. “That beast Tucker was right—
you are Edward Elric!” Without taking his eyes from the staring alchemist, he spoke aside to his men, who were still picking themselves up. “Look sharp! It’s him, boys!”

Edward had a right to stare at his attackers. Though Roy Mustang had tried to emphasize the nature of the Restorationist movement, the thought of a terrorist army freely roaming the sleepy lands near Resembool had not fully registered with him. Between his return to Amestris, Alphonse’s death and spontaneous revival, and Winry’s kidnapping, Roy’s story, urgent as it was, had been only of peripheral interest.

Longshanks smiled grimly at Edward’s astonished expression. “You look just like that young heretic we captured yesterday. He said he was on a mission from God.”

“Everyone’s on a mission from God these days,” Ed replied. “What I’d like to know is what God’s got against me.”

“It’s hard to believe you don’t know your own heresies,” his adversary said, in a voice that began to raise the hairs on Edward’s neck. “You’ve got so many of them.”

From all around, derisive laughter as they closed in on him. It was a very ugly sound. A sliver of fear pierced Ed’s heart as he wondered how Tucker had arranged for the ambush.

“Right!” someone said. “You’re keeping forbidden books that could destroy the country!”

“Trying to steal the power of God!” yelled another; a rock just missed Edward’s face and he ducked involuntarily, gritting his teeth as a shower of them suddenly followed. He thrust up his automail arm, protecting his head, and they clanged off the steel.

Tucker had probably run into this roving squad by accident, he thought as he cringed, one hand still grounding him to the earth; but it was just what he had needed. While he couldn’t really imagine a coherent dialogue taking place between these anti-alchemical fundamentalists and Tucker’s chimeric self, the promise of the capture of the Fullmetal Alchemist would have been enough to smooth over a lot of differences.

More rocks pelted down, mostly stopped by his arm, but one or two getting through to strike him painfully.

“Homosexual!”

“Agnostic!”

“Warlock!”

This was the last straw; Edward was so startled he almost laughed out loud. “Since when am I a warlock? These aren’t the Dark Ages! But since Restorationists hate science so much, maybe you can’t tell the difference!” There wasn’t much time left; Den was barking and snarling and several men were leveling their guns. “I just hope they’re all as stupid as you are!” And he slapped both hands to the earth.

The road bucked like a writhing snake. In tales told later by Restorationist refugees, it became a snake. Men fell again; rocks slid, completely blocking the route back to Resembool. Then Longshanks hurled his special stone.
Edward, crouching low, clapped his hands together while looking away, and the geode exploded with a loud crack in midair, scattering crystal shrapnel through the crowd. There were screams of pain as skin and eyes were pierced by tiny slivers of light. “A little science education would have done you good!” Ed said as he lay his hand on the fallen tree, stretching, modifying and separating the cellulose fibers and mentally weaving it into a pile of rope without even interrupting himself. “Then you would have known better than to try throwing a third-rate geode bomb at a State level alchemist!”

Then Edward strode among them fearlessly with Den following behind him, grabbing them one by one in their wounded and blinded condition, disarming them, destroying their weapons with a touch and binding their hands behind their backs with no effort, until the full dozen, Longshanks included, lay helplessly trussed up in the dirt by the side of the road.

“Now!” Ed demanded, grabbing the scout captain by the hair. “This person you captured. Who was he? And where’s Tucker?!”

The man spat in his face. Edward retaliated by flicking out the long, wicked switchblade concealed in his automail. He set the point at his opponent’s throat. “You had better tell me everything I want to know,” he hissed, “Or I’ll do something else you can add to your list of heresies!”

* * *

In a narrow canyon not far from Resembool, Roy Mustang picked his way grimly among the remains of several of Daiwa’s monks. Captain Hawkeye had discovered the bodies while leading a patrol.

“This was very recent,” he said to General Armstrong, who stalked by his side. “The bodies are barely stiff.”

“Yes.” Armstrong’s face was long. “And they never had a chance. Look at the way their throats are slashed. It’s definitely Restorationists. They’ve got to be holed up somewhere nearby.”

“Too close for comfort.” Mustang’s gaze swept over the craggy hills as though he could somehow determine which way the enemy had gone.

“Sir!” It was Hawkeye. “Over here! We’ve found a survivor.”

It was a teenage monk, hardly more than a child, who had taken shelter behind a rock. “We’d thought we’d found Tucker’s trail,” he said tearfully. “But it led into an ambush.”

“There were forty-two of you, weren’t there?” Mustang said gently, and the boy nodded.

“There are twenty-three bodies here. The rest either escaped or were abducted. Hawkeye!” Roy called, straightening as she came to his side.

“Sir,” she said.

“Take care of him, and tell the men that on no account are they to let Alphonse know what’s happened here.”

“Yes, sir.”

Mustang turned back to the boy. “Do you know which way Tucker’s trail was heading?” he asked.
“Yes. That way.” He pointed at a cleft in an eastern-facing cliff. “Toward the Temple of the Dragon God, just as the prophesy says.”

“Where exactly is this temple?”

“I can’t tell you that. To do so might be to destroy the future. The Book says so.”

“OK. I can’t argue with religion. Take him, Hawkeye.” Mustang turned away, heading back for his vehicle as his men began to collect the bodies. Sliding into the driver’s seat, he reached for his portable crystal set and turned it on.

* * *

It took Edward several hours to repair the damage done to the truck; he worked in grim silence, his captives variously watching, or studiously ignoring, his use of alchemy. Reshaping bent and broken parts was easy for him, but perfecting the composition of the various lost engine fluids was harder—and by the time he was done reassembling the vehicle, everything had been spilled, even the brake fluid.

As a child, he’d never had the time or the desire to delve into the mysteries of cars; it was his memories of Winry chattering on about the derelict vehicles she loved salvaging and repairing which guided him now. But he excelled at creating from simple natural materials; synthetic fluids were much more difficult for him to reconstruct. At last he simply scraped some out of the empty brake reservoir with his thumb, imprinting it directly on an array scratched in the ground to make a ‘carbon copy’ of the molecule; this gesture was not lost on the onlookers, who jeered the illegal act as if the rest of his performance hadn’t been the most brilliant alchemical display they had ever seen—and by this time, even the diehards were secretly watching.

“Save your breath,” he said shortly. “If any of you had gone to science class, you could have become rich just by bulk manufacturing these fluids. Instead, you were fed dumbed-down drivel, and look what you became! See you in detention, you cretins!” he added, getting into the truck with Den and cranking the engine. It started on the first try and he drove away, putting the pedal to the floor as he started down the other side of the hill before his tears could show; he knew from Longshank’s description that they had caught and killed Shin Daiwa, and that the young cult leader had broken his promise to protect Alphonse.

* * *

Roy Mustang went back to the Rockbell house the same day. Sciezka was there waiting for him with transcripts of everything he’d ordered her to supply from her prodigal memory of Central Library.

“So the Temple of the Dragon God is frequently referenced in the more esoteric alchemical texts,” he said after she’d briefed him at Pinako’s table.

“Yes. It’s supposed to be built on top of a mountain of quartz crystal,” she said, and Pinako grunted. “Another natural energy source, I’d bet,” she chimed in over her shoulder. “Too bad we didn’t know about it before.”

A very reluctant truce had been automatically established between her and Mustang; she’d allowed him in the house, but had not offered him refreshments. Roy was grateful merely for that little condescension; the weather had turned colder, and he’d been in the field for days.
“Now why would Tucker want another source of power to do his dirty work when he already had this one right here?” Pinako said.

“With a dragon alchemist—an Elric, no less—guarding it?” Sciezka said. “You’ve got to be kidding!”

“More important than that,” Roy said, “Al is a spirit alchemist—a discipline related to Tucker’s own work. It’s quite possible Al could seriously interfere with whatever he intends to do.”

“And do you have any clue what that is?” Pinako inquired archly, looking at him sideways as she set her pipe firmly between her teeth.

Mustang shook his head. “Not really,” he admitted. “But based on his previous work in Lab Five, I’d say he was still obsessed with getting Nina back.”

There was a long, grave moment of silence. Pinako and Sciezka both knew what had happened to the little girl who once had been Tucker’s daughter; there was no need for Roy to mention Winry’s name, or what the Sewing Life alchemist was capable of doing to her to fulfill his mad fantasy.

Sciezka finished sketching out a map. “According to one source, the mountain is supposed to have ‘horns,’” she said. “It’s supposed to be here.” She turned the map around so Mustang could see it. “In the Dragon Range. This information is highly confidential, sir,” she added hastily. “It’s from the holy book of the Dragon Cult. It’s called The Sons of Light, and it’s not supposed to be accessible to the public.”

“The Sons of Light!” Pinako exclaimed sharply.

Roy Mustang looked up, and their eyes met. “The sons of Hohenheim of Light!” he said. “I knew the Dragon Cult had their hands on some kind of real information when I first talked with Daiwa. Sciezka, I want a copy of this book.”

“I thought you might, so I have it right here,” she said, smiling as she reached into her ever-present rucksack and produced a neatly bound sheaf of notes. “It’s not a very long text.”

Mustang took it from her. “Thanks.”

The silence was almost oppressive as he sat at the table, quickly reading the manuscript. Pinako busied herself about the kitchen while Sciezka rested her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands.

After awhile Roy folded the sheaf of pages and stood up, pushing back his chair decisively. “That’s a very useful book, Sciezka. Now I think I know what the Restorationists are really after.”

“Really?” Sciezka stood up too, and Pinako paused in her work.

He glanced back as he made his way out the kitchen door. “They need to prevent Edward and Alphonse from doing whatever it is they have to do in the Dragon Mountains,” he said. “I believe I understand a little more about Hohenheim now, as well. He was a light alchemist. That’s one step below the rarest kind of alchemy of all—time alchemy. That’s why Tucker’s going there, too.” And he closed the door behind him on these cryptic statements, leaving Pinako and Sciezka to stare at one another.

“But—time’s not a molecule!” Sciezka whispered. “Or is it…?”

* * *
It was evening; Roy Mustang pushed his way quietly into Mackey’s barn. Alphonse was curled in a tight, snakelike ball in the disheveled straw. Siegfried lay sprawled in careless slumber within easy reach of his sharp claws, and for a brief, startled second Roy thought he’d become a victim; but the scientist was unhurt, and Al was not asleep. He lifted his head, his eyes narrowing as Mustang walked slowly and fearlessly up to him. “Al,” the general said. “I need to ask you a few things. It’ll help me find Winry.”

There was a brief silence. Alphonse bowed his head, his jaws working as though he was chewing tough meat; Mustang could see he was struggling to form words. “What things?” the dragon asked finally, in a voice that was strangely hoarse.

“Have you ever read something called The Sons of Light?”

“No. Shin Daiwa mentioned it.”

Roy nodded. It would do no good, and possibly much harm, to mention what had happened to Al’s longtime friend. “Did he tell you what it was about?”

“No.”

“Did he say where the book was from?”

“Yes. The Temple library.”

“And where is this Temple?”

Al shook his head sharply, side to side.

“All right. Did he say anything about time alchemy?”

Al’s eyes widened. “Time alchemy?!”

“That’s right.”

“That’s impossible!” Alphonse spat the words, moving as if to coil back upon himself in dismissal.

“No it’s not. The dragon alchemists of old had that power.”

“Time’s not a molecule. That’s just a story.”

“Suit yourself. But did he mention anything, anything at all?”

“I don’t remember.”

“You need to do better than that.”

Alphonse growled low in his throat, his scales pricking slightly upright.

“Don’t give me that crap,” Roy said. “Al! Think! It’s important.”

“Why don’t you ask the dragon doctor? He will know the lore.”

Roy started. Siegfried was sitting up, looking perfectly alert.

“That’s a good idea. Did he leave you his radio codes?”
“Codes and call signs, at your disposal.”

“Give them to me. I’m going to wake him up.”

* * *

As the days sped by and the chase continued without abatement, Tucker’s trail led ever deeper into the wilderness, and progress became slower as the ground grew rougher. The monster’s speed was amazing, even in a world where amazing was commonplace, but it was Edward’s very nearness to the Sewing Life alchemist that put his teeth on edge. The urgency of his proximity pushed him on, but day after day passed by and he could not seem to gain that last little bit of distance. He barely stopped to rest or eat; but every now and then he was forced to pause, in order to transmute gasoline from natural raw materials in much the same way he transformed breadgrass seeds into flour, and the flour into little cakes.

After all the harrowing events of their reunion and return to Amestris, it seemed strange for him to be traveling again without Al. At dawn or dusk, curling up by an alchemically-started fire to catch a few winks before continuing on, he became acutely aware of that lost little pang in his heart. By extension, he thought of Winry too, and realized a different emotion—one he had thought he would never feel at all. On some level of him too deep for words, Al’s seriousness about her had shocked and hurt him somehow.

It was very hard for him to fathom. He had always been too aware of Winry’s attraction to him—her constant, almost unconscious flirtatiousness, which annoyed him at best and frightened him at worst—so he’d never acknowledged his own deeper emotions for her, he realized with some surprise. Or perhaps he’d just forgotten how much she was like a sister to him. His feelings were confused in a way he had rarely experienced, even with his unusual relationship with Al. But underneath the muddy waters lay a bedrock realization that, for better or worse, he was deeply bound to her, even though his brother had claimed her for his own. This added to his already frantic quest, making him restless and unable to sleep, and his pursuit became even more driven and desperate.

* * *

Early the next morning Pinako struck loose Al’s chain without comment, and Alphonse lunged up, roaring out of the barn like a freight train. As he burst through the doors he saw Sciezka approaching; she ran for him and seized his long trailing whiskers, effectively pulling him to a stop. There was blood in his eye as he cast his head toward her; she blew out her cheeks in determination, cutting a very strange picture indeed. “Al! Take me with you! I’ve been talking with General Mustang. I think I know where Tucker was heading.”

Al’s eyes widened in surprise; he ducked his head, letting her slide onto his neck. “Grab my horns and show me the way.”

“WAIT! Wait!!” Siegfried came rushing around the corner, waving his arms wildly. “Alphonse! Baby brother! I must come too!”

Al gave a sharp bark of impatience. “Then hurry up and get on my back!” He barely waited for the little man to get seated before pushing off into the sky with a mighty roar.

Roy Mustang heard him over the hill and knew he was taking flight. “All right,” he said, putting
The Sons of Light. “It’s time to move! Hawkeye, follow that dragon! Don’t let him out of your sight!”

* * *

After leaving the truck behind and traveling all night on foot, Edward finally caught sight of Shou Tucker on an alpine hill, just as the sun was coming up and Alphonse was taking flight. The incongruity of Tucker’s ugliness, juxtaposed with the breathtaking wilderness around them, almost made Ed laugh. “I guess we’re just that way,” he muttered to himself as the monstrous figure ahead of him stopped, casting about suspiciously. Winry was trussed across his back in a kind of makeshift sling. She hung limply; Ed was certain it was acute anemia rendering her helpless.

Edward’s eyes narrowed. Tucker, like the Elrics, had the ability to restore her blood on a temporary basis, but if he did, she certainly would not be as easy to control.

Edward preferred to confront his enemies face to face; a stab in the back had never been his way. But if Tucker got any prior warning of his presence, he could easily use Winry against him, and the Sewing Life alchemist was already uneasy. They were less than a quarter mile apart; Ed’s binoculars brought his quarry close.

Beyond the hill, the mother mountain loomed high in the sky. Approaching it from a different direction, Edward had not recognized it for several days—the twin peaks of the Hinterschwaertze. He had no idea what it was called here in his homeland. As he scanned the landscape, he recognized, slightly to the south, the high valley where he and Alphonse had seen the searching Envy; only here it was softer somehow, and brighter too, with a profound lack of snow.

His attention snapped back to Tucker. The Sewing Life alchemist was slogging on, his ponderous gait like that of a grizzly bear. Winry swung and swayed on his back like a lifeless doll. Ed’s hand tightened on Den’s leash, and the dog uttered a low, murmuring growl.

“Easy there, Den.” Edward swallowed his own rage. This was the most dangerous part, he knew; one wrong move and it could be the end. His plan might have to depend on Tucker being fortuitously separated from his captive; for now, he would have to wait.

* * *

Edward trailed Tucker and Winry all day. By evening, he was exhausted and his leg was throbbing, and he wanted nothing more than to make some Epsom salts and hot water and have a good soak in a stone tub; but the use of alchemy for any reason, no matter how small, could tip Tucker off to his presence. Instead he settled himself and Den in a dense blueberry thicket, hungrily picking the last of the summer’s berries from the low branches; the bushes were turning yellow and scarlet with the autumn season.

Back in the lowlands, before he had encountered the Restorationist patrol, he’d broken a longstanding promise to Alphonse by making some trimagophane, a powerful stimulant which he’d used almost recklessly during his first couple of years as a State alchemist. It increased agility and stamina, but at a steep price; it would render him dangerously exhausted after it wore off. For that reason, it was also illegal. After he’d had a close call with it in New Heissgart, Al had made him swear on their brotherhood that he’d no longer use it, and he’d kept that promise until now.
But he knew that as twisted and hideous as Tucker’s body was, it was much more powerful than his; and there was no vehicle that could gain him an advantage in this terrain. It would have to be his own two feet, sore and tired as they were, and for that, he needed the drug. He rummaged in his pocket, taking out two of the little pills and swallowing them with some water from his canteen. “Sorry, Al. If I’m to save Winry, I’m gonna need every trick in the book.”

He sat quietly as the drug took hold. The effect would be subtle unless he were moving; keener senses, a tendency to be jumpy; it would last for the better part of twenty-four hours.

From his vantage point on the side of the ridge, he could just see where Tucker had made camp in a low depression a little further up. A fire burned there as the stars appeared, glittering in the twilight air. Wolves began to howl in the distance, and Den tried to answer; Edward admonished him sharply to be quiet, and ended up holding his jaws shut until the chorus ceased. Then he pulled his coat more firmly about himself, hugging Den against his knees for warmth as he strained to detect any sound coming from Tucker’s camp, but he heard nothing, and binoculars did not clarify the scene.

They did, however, clarify what he at first took to be an asterism, until he realized this cluster of stars was appearing on the side of a nearby hill that loomed invisible in the dark. As he watched, more and more winked on, until he was seeing hundreds of small fires.

“It’s an army,” he breathed softly.

When darkness descended completely, he got up, tying Den to a bush before stepping cautiously into the open air. Standing on a nearby ledge, he had a sweeping view of the western slopes of the Dragon range. He swore softly, his breath taken away by the sight of a river of light.

It was streaming up from the lowlands and from the hills to the west; torches in the hands of soldiers or of pilgrims; the cluster of stars on the far hill had grown beyond counting. “How long have they been marching?” Edward breathed, the cold mountain air chilling his suddenly hot cheeks. “Have I been just ahead of them the whole time?”

As he said this, Tucker’s fire faded out. Edward stared up the length of the ridge, straining his eyes. Had Tucker only now noticed what was going on? Either way, the Sewing Life alchemist might be on the move again.

“Come on, Den.” Grabbing the leash, Edward abandoned the shelter of the thicket, moving quietly and cautiously in the dark over the rough terrain in the general direction of Tucker’s camp. It was difficult going; there were no major trails up here, though many of the areas between the clumps of blueberries were relatively clear due to a heavy fall traffic of brown bears. Den was forever pulling this way or that way as he scented animal trails, and Ed had to keep tugging at him to get his attention back.

Edward crept low and slow until he came to the very edge of a shallow fold in the mountainside. Dropping to his belly on the cold and uncomfortable ground, he fended off Den’s tongue as he hitched himself carefully forward. As he did, Winry’s voice rose shrilly on the quiet air, and his breath caught in his throat. She was not screaming, but rather shouting epithets at Tucker.

Hearing his mistress’s voice, Den let out a delighted bark and tore himself away from Edward’s grasp to plunge wildly down the hill into Tucker’s camp, scattering what was left of the fire to fling himself on Winry. Edward swore, pushing himself upright. He had lost any element of surprise. The voices of both parties now rang clearly out. “Den!” Winry was saying, laughing despite her predicament. “I can’t believe it!”

Edward finally spotted her, in the dim light at the very edge of the camp. Her hands and feet were
untied, he noted—Tucker had probably given her a chance to relieve herself—and Den was trying to climb into her lap, licking her face over and over, his tail wagging violently.

“He didn’t come by himself!” he heard Tucker exclaim with a curse. “Look. He has a leash on—a leash made by alchemy! I should have killed that miserable dog when I had the chance! Now he’s led Edward right to us!”

Hearing this, Edward sprang to his feet, threw aside his cumbersome jacket, and came rushing down the slope. “WINRY!” he yelled, already clapping his hands together. “Run! Run!”

“Edward!” Winry screamed. Tucker, hissing with fear and rage, had reached into his pocket and thrown out a handful of green glowing seeds. They fell in the dusk like the remnants of fireworks, taking root where they landed, green coiling snakes. Edward skidded to a stop just short of this barrier and shouted, transmuting the air around him into pure oxygen. “Run, Winry, run if you can!!” he yelled, just before he turned one of his gloves into Pyrotex and struck a spark.

He barely got out with his skin. Though Roy Mustang was called the Flame Alchemist, his real talent lay in manipulating the air, and Edward’s approximation of his lover’s famous trick lacked the necessary skill. The force of the explosion threw him off his feet; he landed in a patch of Tucker’s thorns. They dug into him like steel snares, pinning him down. He snarled, slashing furiously with his handblade before tearing himself away to hit the ground running as he circled the camp. Fast as he had been, Tucker was equal to him: “Edward!” Winry screamed again, reaching for him vainly, her face and hands illuminated by the blaze as Tucker slogged off into the night with her slung over his shoulder, Den snarling and snapping at his heels.

“Tucker!” Edward bawled. “I’m gonna kill you!” He dropped to the ground to transmute the rocks, but as he did, a terrible lethargy came over him. Barely out of range of the still-roaring fire, he collapsed abruptly, gasping, dizzy and weak.

The thorns had been poisoned. Already he felt a numbness creeping over his limbs. As he rolled slowly over onto his back, he reached up, folding both hands over his pounding heart. Only then he noticed calmly that his live hand and arm were severely burned and blistered, as, he realized, was his face.

Alchemy was the answer, he knew; alchemy was the only answer. There was no time to contemplate his approach. He reached deep, deep inside himself, into the blood rushing through his own heart. It was a neurotoxin, and fast acting; he breathed deep and began to break it down. As the structure of the poison fell apart, causing chemical changes within his bloodstream, his legs and then his entire body began to tremble and convulse, and he writhed and kicked and screamed in pain as the stars sailed impassively above and Winry’s frantic cries faded slowly into the distance, to be replaced by the faint howling of the wolves.

* * *

Alphonse found him lying there under the light of the rising moon as he circled low to examine the strange alchemic fire burning on the mountainside. With a cry, the dragon skidded to a rough landing, heedless of Sciezka and Siegfried tumbling from his back. Al rushed to his brother, pushing at him with his snout. “Edward! Edward!”

“Hey, Alphonse.” Ed opened his eyes, smiling weakly. “You’re looking good.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Al answered his own question as he hastily scratched out, and activated,
an array in the dirt beside him. “Poison!”

“…Yeah. Tucker got me good.”

“It’s not all gone. You’re paralyzed.” Al bowed his head, placing one great paw on Ed’s chest; his brother protested faintly at the claws that were poking him uncomfortably. After a moment Al growled dangerously. “You’ve been using trimagophane.”

“…I had to, Al. Don’t mess with it.”

“Be quiet!” Al snapped.

Watching from their nearby vantage point, Sciezka and Siegfried held their breaths. Though he had experimented a little on the long flight out, this was the first time Alphonse had ever performed serious alchemy in his dragon form. He breathed deep, scales bristling, huffing a little as he muttered to himself, then closing his eyes before carefully implementing his array.

Ed uttered a strangled cry, his body starting as if struck with a sudden pain. Then his eyes snapped wide open. He sat up immediately as Alphonse raised his head and shook his mane.

“There!” Alphonse said. “I think I fixed the poison, but Ed, that trimagophane’s going to give you a problem. I wish you hadn’t used it.”

“I know.” Edward sat there, drawing deep breaths, stretching and manipulating his limbs. They were relaxed and free of pain and fatigue. His burns had vanished; even his leg no longer hurt. “You’re a great healer, Al. This is amazing! I feel like I just got a full night’s sleep!”

“Glad to hear it. Where’s Tucker and Winry?”

“Tucker ran off up the valley, toward the mountain.” Ed jerked his thumb in the wrong direction.

“Get on my back,” Al said. “It’s time he paid for what he’s done.”

Nodding to Siegfried and Sciezka, Edward got up and slid onto his brother’s neck. “Stay safe! Follow us on foot, if you can!” he said as Al launched himself into the air.

* * *

Alphonse arrowed through the night, the cold wind whistling over his scales and flapping in his mane as Edward crouched low on his neck, clinging tightly to his backward-sweeping horns. They did not fly too close to the ground; not only was it difficult to see obstacles here, despite the light of the moon, but Tucker could have easily set a number of clever traps for the unwary.

Al did not speak; he was scanning the ground for any signs. Edward felt his urgency in every breath he took. Finally he raised his voice against the wind. “Al! Whose army’s back there?”

“Both of them,” Al called back. “The Restorationists got here first, but Roy’s brigades were on his heels.”

“Damn. We shouldn’t have left Siegfried and Sciezka.”

“They’ll be all right, I hope. But there’s something you need to know,” Al shouted, stooping a little to slowly skim the perimeter of a small alpine lake before continuing on. “Sciezka told me about it. The Dragon Cult’s holy book is called The Sons of Light. She says it’s most likely an accurate
prediction of what’s going to happen at the Temple of the Dragon God.”

“You’ve lost me, Al. Hey, check out those trees!”

Alphonse ducked lower, then yelped and rose so sharply that Edward lost his seat and swung freely in the air two hundred feet above the ground, clinging to Al’s horns. “Did I just see a huge spider web in there?” Edward asked in a small voice, hanging face to face with his brother’s furious eye.

“You did. Tucker’s seen me. He’s close by.” Pausing to hover in midair, Alphonse let him climb back up and resettle himself before going on. “What I was trying to say is Sciezka was talking about time alchemy!” Al continued, as if the episode had never happened.

“Time alchemy?!” Edward nearly lost his grip again. “But that’s impossible!”

Alphonse snorted. “I wouldn’t bet on it.” Then he went alert. “There. I see them!” But his words were obliterated by another dragon’s sudden roar.

Al squawked in astonishment, reeling; the stars turned round and round as his body suddenly stiffened, falling like a stone in a helpless biological reaction. The hilltop flew up in Ed’s face and they crashed together into some blueberry bushes. Cursing and swearing, Edward quickly fought his way out of the tangle. “Alphonse! What are you doing?!”

“I—I don’t know!” Al thrashed his tail as he righted himself, his head coming up with its mane strangely erect. At the same moment, Edward heard growling again, in the nearby brush—a long hollow rumble. He crouched at the ready, noting from the corner of his eye that Al’s scales were rippling in the oddest fashion as the skin on his back began to crawl like a cat’s. “Al?” he said as his brother raised his snout to sniff the air. “Is this one of Tucker’s?”

“Oh, wow!” Alphonse exclaimed to no one in particular. “That is so nice!” And he turned away without another glance at his brother, crawling quickly out of the thicket.

Ed stared, astonished and mystified; as Al’s length slid past him his eyes widened even further. Al’s sex was very much in evidence for the first time since his transformation. While it was a relief to know that it really hadn’t just disappeared forever, Edward was also appalled. It was quite clear what was going on; Al had scented a female dragon in heat, and no matter that he really loved Winry—his gentle soul was no match for a dragon’s body.

“Al!” Edward shouted, but he knew it was useless. For a moment he almost panicked as he wondered if the other dragon might be Envy, somehow transmuted back into this world.

“Damn you, Tucker!” Keeping low to the ground and glancing right and left for their adversary, Edward rushed after his brother; but as he did there was a terrible rending of branches and limbs and the two huge reptiles, already dancing a mating dance, rocketed straight up out of the brush and into the sky. Edward froze where he stood, watching in open-mouthed awe as Alphonse and the fiery maiden circled each other, dipping and dancing as they rose higher and higher toward the starry clouds before vanishing into the vast and eerie darkness of the looming mountainside.

Shaking himself free of the spell, Edward turned quickly on his heel just as a low, rasping laughter rang out nearby. “These are named the Dragon Hills for a good reason,” Tucker’s voice called mockingly.

In the darkness of the night, Tucker was a darker thing, but Ed spotted him almost immediately. “Where’s Winry?!”

“It was a simple thing for me to bring that female into heat.”
Ed couldn’t tell whether he was talking about the dragon, or about the girl; but what he could tell, from his tone if nothing else, was that the Life Sewing alchemist’s already precarious grip on reality had slipped a bit further. Ed’s desperate fear for Winry flared, making his heart pound painfully hard.

“Tucker! Where is she?!”

The inky smudge in the alpine dusk faded and vanished; there was the sound of rock scraping on rock, then silence.

Edward stood still in the night, all his senses alert and his skin crawling. The wind blew softly, stirring his hair and cooling his hot skin. In the distance he heard the two dragons calling to one another.

“All right,” he finally said with ominous gentleness as the stillness dragged on. “This has gone on long enough.”

There were many ores in the rock beneath his feet. Edward selected the most abundant, iron, together with a small amount of platinum; clapping his hands together while drawing up Earth energies through his feet, he transmuted the unrefined metals into a long finished spear, topping it off in one stroke with his signature design—a twin dragon blade with edges sharper than any that could be honed with a grindstone. It had been a very long time since he’d done this complicated trick and it felt good; he snatched the newly created weapon with a grunt as it fell out of the air, and strode purposefully up the hill to the last spot he’d seen Tucker, probing as he went for traps.

There were none. Tucker’s alchemical leakage ended at what looked like a blank rock wall. Knowing better, Ed placed his hands to it and created a simple reaction that blew it apart. The explosion knocked him off his feet but he was up at once, drawing his sleeve across his eyes as a tunnel running deep into the mountain was revealed.

Pausing, he turned briefly to look back. The constellations of torches on the nearby hills were still wavering, and there was what he thought might be a war beacon on a hilltop far away. There was no sign of Al.

Ed sighed and turned away. He knew in his heart that this battle would not be won by armies. Creating a torch from a tree limb close at hand, he plunged forward into the darkness—but he only made it a few yards inside before he was brought to a sudden halt.

* * *

“Sciezka,” Siegfried said as they paused their journey to catch their breaths. “I have not fully understood some things. Will you enlighten me?”

“What would you like to know?” The librarian slumped tiredly, her back against a large rock. Siegfried sat down beside her with a grunt. They had been climbing steadily for several hours up the starlit slopes. During their flight from Resembool, Alphonse had warned them about Tucker’s well-known propensity for setting traps, and their nerves were so jangled from having to stay alert on the mountain path that it was wonderful to merely stop and rest.

“Aren’t you of the State military?”

She nodded a little. “Uh-huh.”

“You are reporting to them?”
“Right.”

“And you really know the monster’s destination?”

“Right again.”

“How?”

She gave him a sidelong glance. They had climbed steadily higher all through the night, roughly following the course Alphonse had taken with Edward. “Because I read the book, same as Roy.”

“The Sons of Light.”

“Uh huh.”

“So whose orders are you following now?”

She laughed a little as she caught her breath. “Mine!” Then she sobered. “And Roy’s. He told me to not let Winry out of my sight… and I did.” She looked back up at him. “I haven’t done my job very well at all,” she said softly. “I… I guess I was probably too busy feeling sorry for myself.”

“Don’t blame yourself for what that monster has done,” Siegfried said gently.

There was silence for some time.

“I’m hungry,” Sciezka said presently. “And I didn’t have time to bring along any food.”

“Hah!” Siegfried said triumphantly. “I have been prepared for days now. I knew Little Brother would fly away soon!” And, out of the bulging satchel at his waist, he produced a small can of corned beef. “This is from Grandmother’s emergency supply,” he said with a wink. “She gave me several. Just in case.”

Sciezka siezed the package from him with a startled exclamation. “This is wonderful! So she knew you’d be going with Alphonse?”

“Mm-hm.” He had already come up with a handful of crackers to add to their hasty meal. “I told her.”

Sciezka got the can open with a deft twist and plunged her cracker into it, scooping out a mouthful. “Mmm! Here, Siegfried. But why?”

“Why not?” He leaned in with his own cracker. “I don’t have any idea why I wanted to come along,” he added, leaning back comfortably against a rock. “I just did. But what I have learned from a long life of journeying, is not to question these imperatives. I have heard Edward speak against listening too much to the instinct, and maybe for him that is true. As for me, I listen carefully to what it says. Obey it always, no. But I always listen.”

“Please don’t think I’m being rude, but when you first came here, you stuttered,” Sciezka said, a little shyly. “And now you don’t.”

“Yes. My words come easily now because this world agrees with me. Just the opposite of what happened to Edward in mine. I wonder why?… Now eat your food, child. We have a long way to go.”

* * *
Edward fought his way through the heart of the mountain, sweating and swearing in the darkness as the moon wheeled slowly across the sky and the battle continued unabated in the hills below. Tucker had created a series of roadblocks—modifying plant microorganisms as he went along to bring down the walls and ceiling behind him—and Ed was using his own alchemy to clear them.

It had quickly become apparent to him that this was not a lava tube or a natural cave. The walls had been cut and polished with the alchemist’s art; but the work was so extensive and the size of the tunnel so vast that he knew it had not been wrought by the hand of man. This was the heart of the Old Kingdom, ruled long ago by dragons.

At any other time, his breath would have been taken by the wonder of such a profound discovery. Now, he didn’t even think about it. Time passed by and he kept toiling, blasting away the rock using its own constituent elements, pausing only to drink a little water, and eating nothing—for he had nothing to eat. Doing alchemy on an empty stomach was never recommended, as it drained the alchemist severely; but even though he could have backtracked to the outside world long enough to manufacture something, he felt no desire to do so. Tucker was clearly sure that he could finish whatever it was he was doing before anyone could catch up to him; Ed worked harder, terror for Winry constricting his throat as he went through the mechanical routine of creating supports by fusing the rocks, then removing what lay beyond them, again and again and again.

By the time he broke through the final barrier, he had lost all track of night or day or his own progress. Startled at the suddenly open path, he stood swaying, looking around. Edward realized that the ceiling had vanished. The night sky, studded with bright stars, shone through far above him as though he were standing at the bottom of a well. He ran forward and the tunnel gave way to a great open space.

Far, far down in the center of a natural amphitheatre, a clear still pool glimmered in the starlight. The reflection from it was unnaturally brilliant, and Edward blinked, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand as he strained to make sense of what he saw. A great carcass of bones loomed beside the water, and Tucker stood gazing down into the pool beneath its shadow. Winry was nowhere to be seen.

Edward’s heart stopped as he realized intuitively where she was. He swayed and almost fell before regaining himself, rushing into the ancient caldera at a stumbling run. Tucker turned immediately, but this time Ed was ready. He’d designed a dozen special alchemic attacks during the long pursuit. As he bore down on the monster he clapped his hands together and unleashed his long-pent-up frustration, the immense power of the sacred ground beneath his feet turning his onslaught into a storm. A white sheet of light shot up into the sky and Tucker, blinded, cast his handful of treacherous seeds at random, missing his target completely. Edward didn’t give him a second chance; he barreled straight into him, knocking him off balance and implementing a rapid series of alchemical reactions, one-two-three.

Tucker stumbled backwards, glancing wildly at his own hands. “That’s right!” Edward said with a feral grin as he grabbed the Sewing Life alchemist and shoved him away from the pool. “I can do bioalchemy, too!”

The keratin in the hair covering Tucker’s body had been modified in an instant, growing long, binding his limbs in soft manacles until he fell to his knees with a groan beneath the huge skeleton that shadowed them. Edward kicked him hard, sending him on his face, and used the mass of the rock beneath them to implement a retention array, localizing the effects to Tucker’s immediate vicinity. “I’ve got you now, you bastard!”
Tucker grovelled on his face, whimpering softly. His glasses were broken. Edward glanced up; his eyes lit on the huge skeleton. It took only moments for him to fashion a cage out of the ancient bones, assembling it neatly around his helpless adversary.

“All right, Tucker,” Edward said shortly. “I’ve got you covered with a rebound array.” He gestured, and an elaborate alchemical pattern glowed for a moment beneath the captive’s body. “Try anything and you’ll get it right back in your face. Got that?!”

He didn’t wait for a reply. Casting a neutralizer at the treacherous seeds the Life Sewer had thrown, he ran to the edge of the pool.

It wasn’t really water, he realized as he stared, transfixed. The surface was a film of it, and also of something he could not readily identify; but there were stars in its depths as well as liquid, and probabilities as well. It wasn’t a Gate, he thought, but some other kind of portal, and it didn’t lead to any reality he knew.

Then he saw her—a flash of gold, sinking slowly into a deep green nothing.

“WINRY!!”

If this was a trap, Edward knew it would be the end of him. He slogged in anyway, and the placid, shining surface closed over his head.

The world changed and his alchemic senses screamed, railing against the unfamiliar. Edward was immersed in time. Here, in this place, time was literally fluid; and somehow, in some way entirely beyond his ken, the world outside, right down to the mountain he’d been standing on, was entirely contained in the depths of that emerald pool. Though he was within it, he was simultaneously outside of everything.

Edward walked through clouds of stars, a bottomless expanse of galaxies beneath his feet. He thought he might be lost in them, but Winry was near.

Once upon a time in the distant past, while playing along the banks of the Rain River on a summer’s morning, Edward had watched her angrily throw one of her dolls into the water. It had sunk slowly, drifting away on the currents as he’d stared, a strange, inexpressibly sad feeling in his heart. Now he saw Winry drifting the same way, her golden hair loose and flowing in the streams of time. She was aware, but helpless; her limbs trailed her in the slight, inexplicable current. Edward’s sympathy welled up, stronger this time by a hundredfold; he reached for her, missed, reached again—and caught her.

He opened his mouth to speak to her and found he could not breathe. Clutching her to him, he looked back. There were faces below them, gazing up out of the abyss. One of them caught his eye and he gasped, breathing in just before he broke back into reality.

* * *

“Edward. Edward.”

He opened his eyes expecting to see his father. Instead, Winry was there, hovering just over him. She was soaking wet; her limbs were trembling. Ed became aware of the remnants of her breath in him. In the distance, he heard Tucker gibbering vaguely to himself.

“--Winry.” Coughing, Edward struggled to sit up; she struggled to help him. The two of them must
look a sorry sight, he thought with grim humor as they huddled shakily together on the banks of the pool. Winry was too weak; her face was pale and her limbs were cold. The last of her energy had been expended in saving him; she leaned heavily against him. Edward realized with a startled shock that she had fallen unconscious. “Winry?” he gasped, clutching her to his chest. “Winry!”

It was the anemia. He closed his eyes, ignoring Tucker’s mumbling, dredging up his strength from the mountain beneath them as he carefully altered the iron content of her blood. It was not a complete restoration; he would have needed more time and thought for that; but it was an improvement.

“Ed--?” Her blue eyes fluttered slowly open, then widened. She fought to sit up, and he belatedly realized how tightly he was holding her. “Next time tell Granny Pinako when you’re going out to feed the dog,” he said by way of greeting, releasing her gently.

To his embarrassment, she stared at him for a long moment with stricken eyes.

“Ed. You came for me.”

Edward knelt by her uncomfortably. He had never known quite how to react when she got emotional in his presence. He put a hand on her shoulder rather self-consciously. “Yeah. It’s OK. Al’s on his way.” He didn’t let himself think about his brother’s diversion. “Winry, what happened here?”

Grasping his arm, she half-turned to point unsteadily at the nearby pool. Edward could see the faint green glow emanating from its depths. “It’s full of spirits,” she whispered. “One went right into me.”

Edward gasped. “Tucker quickened the child artificially?”

“I don’t know how,” she said shakily. “I just know it has a soul now, and he did it.”

It was almost too much. Edward knew all about putting soul to body, but, to put it mildly, it was not an everyday transmutation. “He did that? He bypassed the law of equivalent exchange?”

She stared at him. “Don’t you care about me?”

“Don’t be stupid!” he snapped, then quickly added, “Of course I care about you! But I’ve got to understand what Tucker did to you if I’m to undo it!”

“No! You can’t undo it. Edward, this is my child.” She pulled violently away from him before collapsing again.

Edward turned away. “Listen up, Tucker!” he snarled, approaching the cage of bone. “You’d better tell me exactly what you did to her.”

“I did what she said. Put a soul to the child in her. A special soul.”

“You’re not a spirit alchemist! You can’t recognize souls!”

“I know this one. It’s been waiting for me in the bardo for years,” Tucker said.

Edward was taken aback. Without Alphonse, he couldn’t verify that Tucker’s words were true. What he could verify was that Winry was too far gone; even with alchemical help, she was going to die soon unless something drastic was done.

* * *

Siegfried and Sciezka slogged slowly up the steep incline, still following the ancient trail. Below
them, they could hear faint sounds of artillery, and when they came to a rock outcrop at a bend in the path, they got a clear view of the battle.

The Restorationist forces had the high ground, having arrived just before Mustang’s battalions; they were holding the hills, their flags fiercely planted as they fought to stave off the superior army attacking them. The flare of alchemic charges lit up the morning sky.

“Our military is surrounding the rebel army,” Sciezka said shakily. “They were very stupid to concentrate all of their forces in one place. Now it’s only a matter of time.” She looked exhausted; her chitinous skin was streaked with sweat and she was breathing heavily. Siegfried had her arm, supporting her sturdily as they gazed out over the landscape. “Phew!” he said, mopping his forehead with his kerchief. “This climb is a battle too!”

She glanced sideways at him. She had not inquired as to why he had insisted on coming, but she was glad that he had done so; his presence was a comfort. “We have to get going, Siegfried. If I’m right, we have less than a day before whatever’s going to happen up there, happens.”

* * *

“We don’t have much time left,” Roy Mustang said to Riza Hawkeye. They were huddled in his vehicle, parked on a low hill behind the front lines, where they had a clear view of the fighting.

“It won’t take much time. Those Restorationists are such amateurs,” Hawkeye said sourly.

Roy nodded. “We’ll probably be rounding them up by nightfall, if not sooner.” He stretched his arms and yawned, his gaze automatically flicking to his Pyrotex gloves.

“At least I have faith in Edward,” he added. “He’ll figure out what it is he’s supposed to do up there.”

“I understand your faith in him,” Hawkeye responded neutrally. “What I don’t understand is what this is all really about.”

Hawkeye rarely needed explanations; Roy said nothing for a long moment, putting his hand on the book that was resting on his knee. The dragon doctor, Johnny Windwalker, had given him some information which was very illuminating. It seemed that this mountain, known locally as the Dragon’s Fangs, had once been the gathering place of the ancient draconian alchemists, and at its center was something called the Pool of Time. That it was an important alchemical artifact, there was no doubt; but there was also little doubt as to what would happen to it if the Restorationists reached it first.

“I don’t really understand it either, apart from the fact that we have to preserve the Dragon shrine at all costs,” he said at last. “My belief is that it’s a Gate, but unlike the Gate to the Earth world. I’d offer you the Dragon Cult’s holy book to read, but it’s just mumbo-jumbo mixed with some technical material.”

“No,” she said. “I’m not an alchemist.” Then: “It’s enough that you and Armstrong think this necessary.”

“Riza? You’ve been acting a little strange lately.”

This frank statement clearly caught her by surprise. Her attention jarred from watching the battle, she glanced over at her longtime commanding officer. His gaze was inquiring, but kind.
Her cheeks flushed; she looked down at her feet. “...Yes. I guess I have.”

“Well?”

“Isn’t this the wrong time to be practicing psychology?”

“On the contrary. It’s the perfect time.”

She almost snorted, but caught herself. “Ask me again after the fighting’s over.”

“I’m asking you now.”

“All right.” She gathered herself visibly, something that was unusual in itself. “Why did you let her do it? Put herself between you and Edward?”

It was his turn to be surprised. Though they had been intimate in the past—she had always loved him—the tone of her voice indicated disapproval. “You don’t like it?”

“I had thought your relationship with him was a serious one.”

The light dawned. “And you were ready to support it, just like you support all my endeavors, even at great cost to yourself.”

She looked at him unblinkingly. So strong, he thought.

“You know what I owe Winry,” he said at last.

“I know. But there are many other things you could do for her besides giving up the one you love. Besides, you’re indulging her in foolishness. No one can be forced to love another; if Edward felt for her in such a way, it would have come to light long before this.”

“That’s true. But his sense of responsibility doesn’t stop with his brother. Most likely he thinks he owes her something for her loyalty. Good relationships have started with less.”

“Does he owe her?” The question slipped out before she could prevent it; she blushed again and looked away.

“Yes.” Mustang hesitated; then he lay a hand gently on Riza Hawkeye’s arm. He was about to continue when a flurry of activity erupted behind them; they both turned to see foot soldiers fleeing left and right to avoid a large tank that was bearing down on them. “What the—!”

Roy leaped out of the truck, in the same motion snapping his gloved fingers. A huge explosion just in front of the tank set it bucking; it halted abruptly on the edge of the crater. Just as Mustang finally recognized the vehicle, the hatch popped open and the rugged countenance of Johnny Windwalker was revealed. “Hey!” he said indignantly. “Don’t blow up my tank!”

* * *

Alphonse flew up to the mountaintop as dusk was falling, his heart aching with urgency and guilt. Circling the Dragon’s Fangs, he scanned the flanks of the peak. This version of the Hinterschwaerze was larger than its otherworld counterpart, and lay in warmer climes; trees marched far up its steeply sloping sides, and only the topmost peaks—the two ‘Fangs--’ sported a cover of gleaming snow.

Far below him in the foothills, he could see Mustang’s blue-uniformed regiments erecting hasty
stockades of manufactured stone for the containment of many prisoners. The battle was over.

Al flew on, the last rays of the setting sun catching on his gleaming scales and setting them on fire. “Winry. Ed. Where are you?”

As he rounded the Fangs, he saw a small, strange-looking crater between the peaks—only a dark spot to his eyes. He dropped down by stages, drawing closer and closer until he realized it was an opening, a great rent leading into the mountain. It had been sculpted by alchemy to resemble a dragon’s open mouth, and as he reached it he cast his astonished gaze from side to side. “This wasn’t made by humans!” he said.

He dove down into it. The light on his scales was suddenly extinguished. Alphonse fell on and on through the dark, his claws outstretched before him. As his eyes adjusted, he saw the ground coming up fast and he pulled up in the nick of time to land with a heavy grunt on hard rock. He rested, gasping, for a long moment before finally blinking and looking around.

The first thing he saw was the great cage of bone and Tucker, hunched absurdly small inside it; the second, the green-glowing pool. Then he saw Edward and Winry, two tiny bright blotches on a dim gray surface. Choking back a cry, he rushed toward them, but brought himself up short as Tucker moved suddenly to stand up in his cage.

At the sight of Winry’s kidnapper, Al’s rage returned. He bristled dangerously. “There you are,” he hissed, coiling up on himself like a snake about to strike. “I should flame you where you stand.”

“It would hardly matter if you did,” the chimera responded in a weary voice. “I’ve failed.”

Al stared at him. “Has something happened to Winry?”

“No, no. She lives.” He gestured in the direction of the figures by the pool. “I meant only that you and Edward will never give my work a chance.”

“We’ve seen your work. We’ll never forget what you did to Nina and Alexander.” Al moved around the cage in a single sinuous motion, heading for Winry and his brother. Tucker stared blankly after him.

* * *

Edward and Winry were asleep under the protective overhang of a large boulder; he rested close by her side, handblade out, his prosthetic arm laid gently over her. It looked as though he had fallen asleep while guarding her. Al’s keen senses picked out the regular depth of their breathing. He blew softly in relief. “Ed. Winry,” he whispered, love welling up in his heart.

Their faces were white and drawn; they desperately needed their rest. Alphonse, exhausted from his own adventure, wanted nothing more than to lay down beside them. Then he looked back at the water.

“There’s something going on here.” In the dusky light, the pearly white dragon crept down to the motionless pool.

* * *
Edward woke with a start to find his brother crouching beside them, breaking the cold draft that wafted along the crater floor. “Al! I must have gone to sleep.”

Alphonse seemed lost in his thoughts; he stirred slowly, then looked up with a grunt. “Oh. Ed. You woke up.”

“When did you get here?”

“A couple of hours ago. You looked like you needed your sleep.”

Ed glanced down at Winry. He had made a pillow for her out of his light pack. She hadn’t stirred; her sleeping breath came a little too quickly.

“How is she?” Al asked.

“Not good. She’s very anemic. I tried to restore her blood, but what she really needs is a good bioalchemist.”

“Just don’t let Tucker do anything else to her.”

“You’ve got that right, brother.” Their voices were very hushed in the stillness of the moonlit night. Across the pool, Tucker was a black shadow, crouching in his prison of bones.

“Al? What happened?”

Alphonse moaned. “I’m so sorry I left like that!”

“It was instinct. You responded as a dragon, you couldn’t help yourself.”

There was a long, heavy silence.

“Al?” Ed said again presently.

Alphonse had not taken his gaze from Winry. “She’s gonna kill me for this, Ed. How can I ever explain it?”

“What happened?” Edward controlled his curiosity with effort.

Al shook himself a little. Edward noticed his scales were lying flat as he grew calm again. “I’m sorry, brother. Of course, you want to know!” He sighed, gathering his thoughts before speaking again. “…The first thing I’m going to tell you, is the books have it all wrong.”

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“That’s the beacon I saw in the foothills last night!”

“See, the male has to walk through the fire to reach her. When she sees him emerging from the flames, well, I guess it’s such a beautiful sight that it does whatever it needs to.”

Al’s words trailed off and he rolled over on his side with a sigh. “Instinct is a wonderful thing. I seemed to know just what I was supposed to do. We flew for awhile before she finally landed and set that blaze, and I knew I was supposed to circle the hill until she did. Then, when it was dark and all the stars were out, I landed in the woods and walked through the fire.
“I got her cornered on the top of that hill. My mind wasn’t thinking of anything but sex, and it felt like we were maybe going to fight. But instead of fighting or flying away, she just lowered her head and I grabbed the back of her neck with my teeth. It sounds bad, but it was more like kissing than anything. Her wing fins spread out and rattled, and then my wing fins spread out too, all by themselves, and they shook and shook and made a marvelous sound like rain. It was an intoxicating noise, like a peacock shaking its tail, and my brain just exploded. I kind of lunged up and somehow I got myself into her. I really don’t remember how it happened, but she made a strange call when I did, and then…

“It was so wonderful, Ed, I really can’t describe it! We made love surrounded by fire!”

“Al,” Edward said honestly, “That’s amazing. I’ve never heard anything like it. What a story you have to tell your kids and grandkids!”

“What ones?” said Al, rolling again to sit up on his haunches. "Human or dragon?"

Edward blinked.

“Ed?”

“Yeah.” He was still scratching his head.

“So am I officially a man now? Or does this even count?”

“Walking through fire to make love to a dragon? Oh, it counts all right—a thousand times over! Congratulations, brother!” Edward smiled.

Their voices had raised slightly; Edward’s ‘congratulations’ echoed hollowly in this dank, damp place. Tucker was still watching them, the dim light reflecting from his glasses. Beside them, Winry stirred, opening her eyes.

“Al!” she said, when she saw him there. “You came!”

“Winry,” Alphonse said, leaning to nuzzle her very gently. “I’m sorry I made you wait.”

She struggled to sit up as Edward helped her. “Are you going to carry us out of here?”

“I’d like to,” said Al. “But we can’t go yet.”

“Why not?”

“I found out some things while you two were asleep. I have something to do here, just like Shin Daiwa says.”

Edward pushed aside his knowledge of the cult leader’s death. “What is it, Al? What do you have to do?”

Alphonse shook his head, left to right.

“Can we help?” said Winry.

“No,” he answered softly. “The truth is, neither of you can really help me right now.”

“How long is it going to take?” said Edward, a strange foreboding coming over him.

“Not too long.” Al gestured aside with his snout. “Ed. You and I have to ask Tucker about this.”
“No you don’t,” said Winry, catching the exchange instantly. “You want to discuss it without me.”

Edward’s mouth twisted. “That’s not true!”

“It is true. You never discuss anything important with me!”

Edward was going to retort when he caught himself; though this was her standard complaint, Winry was in no condition for an argument.

“Winry,” said Al gently, almost in a whisper. “You’re not the only one here with a problem. Ed and I just need to talk this over by ourselves. It’s our style. Besides, we don’t want you scared by what we have to say. It’s bad for you. OK?”

She looked at him, a little surprised by his blunt statements, and said nothing more.

They left her sitting by herself with Edward’s heavy coat over her hunched-up shoulders. Al led his brother down to the edge of the pool and stood for a moment gazing thoughtfully into it before he shook himself and looked up. “Edward,” he said. “The baby—it’s a vampire.”

“A vampire?”

“Mm-hm. I enhanced my spiritual sight by making more dopamine in my brain. I can see it very clearly now. It used to be human, and it wants to be human again so bad it’s drinking her blood.”

“That’s why she’s so anemic?”

Al nodded slowly.

“Tucker said he knew this soul, and that it’s been waiting a long time in the bardo.”

“He said that?”

They glanced back in Winry’s direction. She was sitting disconsolately, staring at the ground.

“Do you suppose it’s Nina?” Edward said in a hushed voice.

Alphonse shook his head emphatically, once. “Not a chance. She’d never come back to him.” He moved a little closer to his brother. “Ed. This caldera is the temple of the Dragon God. It’s a nexus.”

“Yes.”

“Roy told me what it says in The Sons of Light. In the old days, the dragon alchemists would make their sacrifices here.”

“Sounds bloody.” Ed’s eyes flicked involuntarily to the long, sinuous wreckage of Tucker’s cage.

“Not really. The sacrifice was for a dragon to become human. To lose his dragon powers for the greater good.”

Edward gasped out loud. “Al!—”

“—Right! --But I have to figure out where Winry fits in this equation, Ed. I can’t squander this opportunity on myself when she needs help! The Sons of Light says something will happen which benefits all!”
“Damn. Sounds like Roy was right about the time alchemy. Now I wish I had read that piece of crap-- someone from the future wrote it.”

Long silence.

“What are you going to do?”

“About Winry? What is there to do?”

“Are you saying we have to abort it?!”

Alphonse hesitated. Then he lowered his head. “That would be the obvious solution, but it doesn’t seem right. I’ll try to get my head together on this, but meanwhile you should probably get ready to do it anyway.”

“But Al—!” Edward was at a loss, glancing from the dragon to the girl. “Even if she’d let me try, I don’t know how!”

Abortions were rare in Amestris because alchemy had made them so, providing ways to control fertility for both males and females so that there were virtually no ‘accidents.’ Consequently, the art of abortion was an arcane one at best, and even the finest alchemists knew little about it. Edward had read what literature there was on the subject, but he had little confidence that he could perform the task without killing Winry.

“Then you may have to improvise. Now let’s get back to Winry while I figure this out,” Al said quietly.

* * *

“She’s asleep,” Edward whispered. Morning had come while they had conferred at the pool; pink ribbon clouds flew like banners in a golden sky, and the first rays of the sun illuminated the caldera with stark light and shadow.

Alphonse knelt wordlessly down next to her, leaning over her to keep the cold mountain mists from her, and began to quietly scratch out alchemical arrays and equations on the worn rock.

Edward leaned to see. “That’s an odd baseline,” he observed.

Al didn’t look up. “It’s a dragon baseline,” he said. “I can tell how it should be. But dragon math is complicated, Ed. I can’t make it jibe.”

“Try putting your variable there.” Ed pointed.

“Won’t work. Body mass goes there, then spirit weight; here’s the total potential energy for the transmutations, but see? It doesn’t equal what I put into it. Something’s wrong.”

“Al?”

“Hm.”

“This makes no sense to me at all. I don’t have any idea what you’re doing, and I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“Don’t ask—yet. If I can’t get this to work any better than it does right now…” Alphonse continued
to speak as he worked. “Ed, please remember one thing: I’ve been there. I’ve seen things you haven’t. I know things you don’t. It’s natural that this won’t make much sense to you.”

Edward watched as his brother drew another series of baselines, each slightly different, then used theoretical alchemy to fashion an array that would calculate itself. It was a brilliant thought, but just as his pulse was quickening with excitement, Al swore quietly and erased it with a swipe of his scaly wrist. He looked away, his ruff rising slightly before slowly flattening again, and heaved a snort of frustration.

Edward thought it wise to change the subject. “Al? Are you gonna talk to Winry, or am I?”

Now Alphonse did glance at him. “Don’t worry, Ed. I will. Could you please help me make another model?”

* * *

The sun had fully risen before Winry woke again. She was worse, her rapid, thready heartbeat betraying the enormous stress her body was under. Al ceased his calculations immediately, raising his head with a soft snort. “Winry.”

She looked up at him.

Al’s eyes went dark, as though clouds were covering the bright inner light of him. “I see Tucker’s mark on you,” he whispered. “It’s like soot. Like Heinrich’s handprint when he hit Ed.”

“Heinrich?”

“Never mind.” Al blinked, drawing a slow, careful breath. When he spoke again, his voice held a quiet urgency. “Do you know why he did this to you?”

She shook her head. “No.” She could not meet his eyes. “I—I’m sorry, Al.”

“What for? Winry, are you still blaming yourself?”

“We struck a deal, Al. This, in exchange for him powering my Gate and helping find you.” She laughed once, humorlessly. “In the end I didn’t even need him. Now I’ve ruined everything.”

“No you haven’t. This isn’t your fault. But there’s something you should know. Are you ready? It’s really bad news.”

She drew a deep breath. Then she nodded.

Al lowered his voice further. “All right. That thing inside you is something from the Void. A human who previously died a long time ago in a state of intense fear.”

She nodded emphatically, her hair loose around her face. “I know.”

“It wants to be human again, but it doesn’t want to wait. It’s sucking your blood. That’s why you’re so sick.”

“I know what you’re going to say, Al, but please—don’t ask me to do something I can’t.”

“I understand,” he said gently. “If it was me, I couldn’t do it either. It might be an innocent being, Winry. It might not realize how badly it’s hurting you.”
“It just wants to be born. I can do that much for it… can’t I?”

Al pushed his muzzle gently toward her in a clumsy attempt to soften his next words. “No, Winry. You just won’t live.”

* * *

Edward held Winry tightly to him, his mind and emotions reeling. Winry would not be consoled, and her soft wailing made an eerie counterpart to Tucker, who was howling in his cage. Ed rocked her quietly against his shoulder, feeling the darkness residing like a black hole at the center of her. The weak shaking of her limbs told him they had to do something soon.

From time to time he forced himself to glance at Alphonse, who was again deep in thought; but at last the dragon stirred, leaning over them. “Winry,” he said. “It’s going to be all right.”

“What do you know?!” she cried bitterly.

“I know a lot, now that I’ve touched time,” he said. “For one thing, I know you’re going to make it through this somehow, and that we’re all going back home to Resembool. I’ve seen it.”

Edward blinked. He couldn’t tell if Alphonse really had learned something, or if his brother was only trying to comfort her. Al continued: “And I’ll become a human again and you and I will get married right away.”

She was silent for long moments. Then, in a very small, quavering voice: “Really, Al? Do you really mean that?”

“Of course I mean it! We’re even going to rebuild our old house, aren’t we, Ed?”

“That’s right,” Edward said confidently. “Al and I talked about it a lot when we were in the Earth world. All we wanted to do was get back home again and live with you in Resembool.”

She blinked in surprise, lured briefly out of her grief by his unusual candor. “But-- Edward. This doesn’t sound like you at all. You used to be so bored whenever you came home.”

“I’ve had enough excitement,” Edward said firmly. “I just want some rest for a change.”

“You can design our new house,” Alphonse put in. “And then, when we have kids—“

He stopped, mortified, as her face crumpled. She turned back to Edward’s shoulder without another word.

“I’m going to talk to Tucker,” Al said after a long moment. “I’d rather kill him, but he’s got some explaining to do.” Ed nodded, smoothing Winry’s hair, murmuring to her softly as his brother turned away. Then, after a long moment, he glanced in the other direction, and his eyes widened. Abruptly he let go of Winry; she slid to the ground with a gasp and a gentle thump as he sprang to his feet.

“Al!” he shouted. “Al, NO!”

But he was too late. Alphonse shook his mane as he finished his array; he stepped back, activating it, and Tucker’s cage of bones melted away. The Sewing Life alchemist was free.
The Temple of the Dragon God

Chapter Summary

The final confrontation between the Elric brothers and Shou Tucker, in the ancient temple of the dragons.

“Trust in Good.” --Alphonse

“AL!” Edward couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He stood watching helplessly as his brother unlocked the retention array; Tucker got to his feet, looking more than a little shocked as Al destroyed the hair rope binding his hands.

“Hold on, Winry. Something’s gotten into my brother,” Ed said grimly.

He crossed the caldera at a run, clapping his hands together in preparation for alchemy; Tucker stumbled backward, clearly terrified. Alphonse held up his foreclaws. “Ed! Wait!”

Edward skidded to a stop. “Al, what are you doing?!”

“I think I understand what’s going on,” Alphonse said. “With him and with me. I know it’s hard, Ed, but we’ve got to let him finish his array.”

“But why?”

“I can build on it.”

“But you can’t trust him, Al! This is Winry’s life!”

Alphonse glanced to the chimera alchemist. “If he tries to trick us now, it’ll be the last thing he ever does. He knows that. Don’t you, Tucker?”

Tucker nodded, cringing, and stayed where he was, not daring to speak in the fierce face of the young dragon.

“Besides,” Al said, “I left your rebound array intact. He can’t do alchemy—just show us how.” He looked back at his brother. “Ed. You still don’t know what the equations I’m trying to solve are for?”

“No, but somehow I have the feeling I’m not going to like it,” Edward said miserably.

“When I was dead I saw where the Gate really goes. I saw the in-between place where Dad is, and I know how to get there. This nexus leads straight to it. In that place, we can alter everything about ourselves. It’s how the dragon masters of the ancient past changed their shapes and took human form.”
Alphonse was furthering his explanation when Tucker suddenly pointed, and he looked up with a start as a procession of people entered the caldera. “What--?”

It was a small crowd, led by the remnant of the dragon cult; Ed recognized them instantly. There were eighteen of them, with one more, a boy, leading the way as they marched slowly, all in step, into the caldera, bearing a body wrapped in a tapestry on their shoulders. Behind them came Roy Mustang, Riza Hawkeye and a detachment of soldiers, and with them, Edward saw, were Johnny Windwalker, Siegfried, Sciezka, and Den, whom they'd found along the way. The sun, streaming in over the narrow lip of the opening far above, caught them at an angle and outlined them all with bright light, their long dark shadows streaming across the crater floor.

Something in Edward relaxed abruptly at the sight; he sighed, and realized only then that his knees were almost buckling from weakness. But Alphonse had a different reaction. As the Dragon Cult reached the pool, they lay their bundle on the ground and unwrapped it with no ceremony. It was the body of Daiwa.

“Shin Daiwa! Oh, no!” Forgetting Tucker and his equations, Al leaped to land in their midst, crouching to push at the lifeless body with his nose.

Recovering himself, Edward glanced quickly to Tucker, who remained where he was, wringing his hands uselessly. Then he glanced across the pool toward Winry. Sciezka, leading Den, was already rushing with Siegfried and Windwalker to her side.

Ed turned back to his brother as one of the acolytes said quietly, “Our master was killed in the mountains east of Resembool.”

“I was angry with him the last time we talked,” Al gasped tearfully. “Oh, Daiwa!”

“Edward. I knew we’d find you.” Roy Mustang’s voice almost startled Ed, as did the hand clapping down solidly on his shoulder.

“What’s going on? Al said you’d beaten the Restorationists.”

“As Riza said, they were amateurs.” Mustang looked both rakish and satisfied as he grinned briefly at him; Edward smiled back, but his eyes betrayed him.

“Hey! Guys, have you forgotten something?” It was Johnny Windwalker, kneeling by Winry’s side. She was lying unconscious on the caldera floor; Den licked her face as Sciezka wrapped her more warmly in Ed’s jacket, while Siegfried, his hand on her pulse, shook his head solemnly.

Alphonse raised his head suddenly; everyone except his brother took an involuntary step backward. “—Winry?” he cried painfully.

“If you don’t do something pretty drastic in a few minutes’ time…” Windwalker said warningly; Al started as if stung.

“All right, Tucker,” Edward said, his face and voice hardening. “If you’re gonna redeem yourself, it better be right now. And you’re gonna explain everything as you go. Got it?”

The monster nodded; turning quickly to his half-finished array, he began to draw.

* * *
“This is not good.” Siegfried was still shaking his head. “She’s too far gone.”

“Don’t underestimate the power of alchemy,” Windwalker replied. He was pacing impatiently around them on his long legs, glancing now and then at the sky. “Particularly dragon alchemy. They were a highly advanced race long before humans ever colonized Amestris.”

Sciezka crouched low over the body of her friend. It was hard to not cry, seeing her pale features unresponsive, feeling her cold brow. “I can’t help but think I wasn’t good enough,” she moaned. “I didn’t do enough. And she entrusted me with her life. Oh, Winry. Please don’t die!”

* * *

The Sewing Life alchemist mumbled as he worked over his array; Edward could barely make out some of his words.

“I had a brother,” Tucker said. His eyes were intense, focused on his work; the madness had gone, replaced by an even more ominous sanity. “His name was Shiro. He was a year younger than me. We were very much like you Elrics, always together.”

“I don’t care about your brother,” Edward snapped, but Tucker continued as if he had not heard.

“When he was seven, he contracted an illness. He was never the same afterward—sickly and weak. Our parents said the sickness had affected his heart. Over time, it became apparent he would not live much longer.” He glanced up; without his glasses, his eyes were red and squinted. “Do you see it now, Alphonse?”

Al bent over the heart of the array; Edward held back, alchemy at the ready.

“No!” Al said after a moment, taking a step backward. “That’s not right.” His voice quavered.

“What is it, Al?” Ed said. “Is he trying to pull something?”

—No. But this equation isn’t correct either.”

“It is perfectly correct,” Tucker whispered.

Ed glanced back at Roy Mustang and the general nodded—he had their backs. Edward stepped closer, leaning into the circle. After a long moment, he looked up at Al. “I don’t get it.”

“Ed, this is dragon alchemy. Dragon alchemy is about the principles of life—it doesn’t just use equivalent exchange, it uses all the principles of life as parts of the array. That’s what this baseline equation is all about. I got a different answer than Tucker’s, but this is still wrong. Tucker’s says—”

“That’s right,” Tucker interjected. “It’s all about death. The mass is not equal because the amount of energy expended in the transmutation does not include the spirit-weight.”

“It’s true,” said Al, “That there’s no way even for me to determine the exact spirit-weight. But if you put it here instead, as a variable—”

—No!” Tucker hissed.

“That’s impossible!” said Al. “It can’t be—It can’t be all about death!”

Edward put a steadying hand on the dragon’s haunches as Tucker replied firmly: “This is reality. It is
all about death, Alphonse. You should know this by now as a Spirit Alchemist.”

“Ed! Al!” Sciezka’s distant cry interrupted them; Alphonse whipped his head around, tail lashing. “Bring her here!” he bellowed; Siegfried and Windwalker hastened to lift Winry’s unconscious form.

“I can see her spirit,” Al said taughtly. “She’s just hanging by a thread.”

“Al,” Edward said. “If you two can’t get that equation right…”

Al’s eyes widened in shock. “You two. Ed. That might be it. Tucker and I—we each solved only half of the equation.” As Winry’s body was laid at his feet, he looked back to where Tucker crouched on his array.

“I know what’s wrong with you,” Al said. “You’re afraid, aren’t you?” His tone was not accusatory; it was factual. Ed blinked, looking from one to the other as his brother continued: “But it’s not really death that you’re afraid of. It’s life itself. You’re afraid of it, you want to control it. That’s why you’re the Sewing Life Alchemist…”

“And you’re a spirit alchemist,” Edward whispered, “…Because you’re afraid of death?”

Hunched over his work, Tucker spoke in an intense, monotonous whisper. “There’s a horror to it all, and we all feel it. She feels it, you two feel it. I, especially, feel it. It’s there. It’s real. It can’t be ignored.”

“Don’t talk to us about horror,” Edward said. “I saw my mother die, then get turned into a hideous monster by my own hand. I saw my brother lose his entire body and endure a living hell. I’ve seen my father—such as he was—eaten alive. To say nothing about my own limbs being lost. So don’t pretend you’ve had it worse than us!”

“Don’t pretend I haven’t,” Tucker hissed angrily. “I’ve lived nightmares you can’t even begin to imagine.”

“Tucker,” Alphonse said suddenly. “What did you do to your little brother? What could possibly be worse than what you did with Nina?”

For several moments the Sewing Life alchemist struggled visibly within himself; he studied the array under his fingertips with a frightening intensity. Edward resisted his own impatience; there was a reason Al was asking these things even as Winry lay dying.

At last Tucker began to speak again, faintly, in a running murmur, as he drew the long equation along the baseline of the array. “My interest had always been in what makes life operate—the mysteries of its mechanisms. Our parents had a large farm, and I began to experiment secretly on the animals.”

He didn’t need to say anything more about this to make Edward and Alphonse glance at each other with shudders of revulsion; but he continued, almost oblivious to their reactions. “All the animals became afraid of me, but I didn’t care. When Shiro saw me kill them, he cried and ran away; but I didn’t listen. For months I worked, perfecting my basic alchemical technique on pigs, cows, and cats, until I could remove and alter the heart of an animal I had just killed, and then restore it to its previous condition.

“Oh the morning of Shiro’s eight birthday I came into his room. It was still dark. He was asleep, but he woke up after I opened his chest with my alchemy. I told him to not be afraid.”

“But you’d never worked on a human before,” Edward whispered. Horror was creeping over him;
his bad knee almost buckled. Tucker was silent for a painfully long moment.

“His human DNA would have not allowed my calf technique to work, but at the time I didn’t realize this. I was only a child, I thought I was going to be the hero of the day. I reached into his chest as he lay there, astonished and staring at me, but I couldn’t force the damage to heal. His heart burst and he died thinking I’d murdered him.”

Edward staggered a little, feeling sick. This was much too close to some of his own worst nightmares. Alphonse, glancing sideways at him, said matter-of-factly: “I knew it had to be something like that.”

“We’re out of time,” Windwalker said suddenly.

“Leave her in the circle and get out,” Alphonse said. “You too, Siggy. Tucker, you’ve only got this half right, and now I know why. Let me draw the rest.” He reached with his foreclaws to hastily scrape at the bare rock. “It has to be a parallel transmutation. It really is all about death—and life.”

Edward stared at him, his mouth going suddenly dry. “A parallel transmutation? Are you crazy? That’s never been done! Al, you’ll kill yourself!”

“No. I won’t. With the presence of Winry’s baby as a catalyst, the energy of my dragon body is strong enough to do it. Ed,” Alphonse continued, glancing back at him as he continued quickly drawing the second circle. He was trembling a little, his scales pulled tight as though he were cold. “I can do this thing and live. I swear it. A human never could, but this body can.”

From the sidelines, under Roy Mustang’s watchful eye, Tucker interjected: “That baby is my brother! First you interfered with my bringing back Nina, now you want to interfere with my little brother too?”

“No, Tucker,” Alphonse said, not taking his eyes from Edward’s. Standing over Winry, he said softly, “Ed, I have to do this. There’s just no other way.”

Edward looked at him. His mouth was dry. Al could die here in such a way that there would be no traces left even of his spirit, shredded to its ghostly elemental particles. But there was no telling his brother not to— Winry needed it done. Anything less would be selfish and cowardly, and he would not subject Alphonse, and himself, to a lifetime of bitterness and shame.

“All right,” he said, and felt a sudden breath of wind across his face, as though the mountain itself had sighed in relief at his choice. “Good luck, little brother. No matter what happens, remember I love you.”

“I could never forget that. I love you, too, Ed.”

His burden lightened, Alphonse turned away. Edward, by contrast, had never felt heavier, but he didn’t have time to think any more about it— Al was already activating the array, standing in the center of it over Winry’s body.

The wind increased and Edward understood for the first time that it had not been his imagination; the mountain itself was alive and participating, and with a startled shock he realized that his brother’s Shin religion, that of ‘spirits in nature,’ was not mere fancy. Al’s mane and the end of his tail and the ruff along his spine all whipped and blew in that wind; his back arched, and his hair and scales stood on end in the rippling light. Edward blinked and squinted against the breeze and the illumination. Al’s body was disintegrating before his eyes, the blue shock waves of his alchemy rippling outward as if a boulder had been dropped into a pool. Then Edward was knocked head over heels into a vast
He knew that he was at the Gate, but it was different now; he could glimpse reality beyond it, could still see the parallel array beside the Pool of Time, and everything both here and there was shot through with that golden light. It was Al’s light, he realized; reorienting himself, he quickly made his way toward it. He was moving across a plane of starry glass; there was no distance, no sense of far or near; but there were spirits swarming everywhere like moths around a flame, and as he approached he caught a glimpse of a shining figure in their midst. The spirits were flocking to it. As he drew closer he saw it was Alphonse, but no Alphonse he knew. Then they were all there—everyone he’d ever known who had passed on, and other faces he felt that he should, or would know someday— all ranged round Al in that bright place between the worlds. And Al was healing them.

“Winry,” Alphonse said tenderly. His voice was very soft, a resonant whisper that impacted Edward like a force of nature, bringing a flood of tears to his wide eyes as he watched. Al bent, lifting her in his arms. It was only then Ed realized his brother was no longer in the body of a dragon.

Winry opened her eyes. They were huge and shining. “Al…?” she replied brokenly. “But… I thought I was dead.”

“Hold onto me,” he whispered. “Hold tight. This will only hurt a little.”

She clung to him, her long pale form eclipsed by his radiance, and Edward saw his hand reach right through her, as though she were transparent to his touch. He heard her gasp. Then she was standing on her own, healthy and free, and Ed knew that she no longer bore her burden; but in his hands Alphonse held a tiny, half-formed child.

“Oh, Shiro,” he murmured. Edward saw tears on his cheeks. “I’m so sorry! It’s been so difficult for you for so long. Please let me try to save your body.”

The brilliant light around Alphonse grew brighter yet, and Ed briefly had to look away; when he dared to bring his weeping and dazzled eyes back to his brother, he saw him holding a full-size infant. There was a collective gasp.

“Tucker!” Al said.

The name fell flatly into the sudden silence. Faces glanced at faces. Then the sea of them parted and Tucker was revealed, cringing and sniveling in the glare of Alphonse’s light. For a brief, crazy moment Ed found himself wondering if Al was perhaps really some kind of god after all.

“It’s not the outer shape that makes a monster,” Al said. Edward became aware that this profoundly ancient soul, his ‘little’ brother whom he had thought he knew so well, was speaking to them all. “Though shape does have an influence on the soul, it’s the absence of love which made you the way you are. You know that, deep down.”

Tucker’s face contorted unreadably. As Edward stared wordlessly, Winry came to his side. Neither of them took their eyes from the strange scene unfolding before them, but their hands clasped tightly, flesh and steel.

“How can you say I have no love?” Tucker whispered, plainly shocked. “Everything I’ve ever done—every mistake I’ve ever made—was made for love!”
But Al shook his head. “You’ve fooled yourself. Nina wasn’t killed for love. Neither was your brother, or even your wife.” He nodded in the direction of the crowd and Edward saw a fair young woman standing there, with little Nina clinging to her legs. “Your mistakes were made because you had no love and no trust.”

“Trust in what?” said Tucker. “Mythology, like your Shin Fairies? Or the so-called Dragon God?”

Edward almost winced. What his brother really was would probably be debated for ages to come, but Tucker seemed painfully pathetic spitting those words while crouching under Alphonse’s light.

“No. It’s not necessary to have any gods at all, if you just trust in good.” Al turned toward Edward, and Ed gasped at the brilliance of his smile.

“Just like you, my agnostic brother there witnessed all the worst life has to offer. Yet instead of turning into a monster, he became an embodiment of love itself.”

Edward blushed hotly. He certainly didn’t feel like ‘love itself,’ but he could see why Alphonse, whom he cared for so deeply, might think of him that way. He drew a breath and stepped forward, still scarlet. “It’s because you were there with me, Al,” he said, loudly enough for the rest to hear. “You saw me through it all.”

“Maybe,” Al said, still smiling. “And maybe there are some wonderful powers inside you, too—powers of the highest order that you haven’t fully realized are there.” His attention went back to Tucker. “But you, Tucker—you’ve become the very thing you fear. I think I can help fix it, if you want,” he added earnestly. “Your little brother wants me to.”

There was a breathless pause. Tucker crouched low, dark against the stars. Then: “No! You’re lying! You wanted to kill me!”

“Part of me still does,” said Al. “But I’m not acting from that part.” As he spoke, the baby in his arms began to cry. “At least come see your brother,” he added, ducking his head to comfort the spirit-child. “Shiro still loves you.”


“He knows you didn’t mean it. Just like, when the accident happened, I never blamed Ed.”

Tucker’s hideous form moved closer, but Edward didn’t see what happened next. Alphonse glanced briefly in his direction and a strong hand clamped down on his shoulder. Ed looked away suddenly. It was his father—and his older brother.

Ed fell back in shock. Though he had known Hohenheim should be here among the spirits, he hadn’t seen him; but that William Elric, or rather his homunculus, should still be a part of him was something he had not forseen. Their faces were so similar that they were indistinguishable, blending one into the other to make a single face for both; but here in this realm, the two souls behind the mask were readily apparent even to Edward’s eyes.

“Hello again, son.” Hohenheim was the dominant personality.

Ed stared at them wordlessly for a long moment. Then he laughed softly, mirthlessly. “Well. If I ever needed proof that the spirit-realm isn’t some kind of heaven, this is it. What are you doing now, Dad? Just bringing my older brother’s homunculus along for the ride, or have you got something more nefarious in mind?”

“That is your real older brother.” Hohenheim nodded to Alphonse. “It must have been a shock to
discover just how old he truly is.”

“Nah. I’ve always known he was an adult in a kid’s body.”

“Just the opposite of yourself,” Envy interjected nastily from behind his father’s face.

“And what kind of older brother are you?” Edward retorted hotly. “You should have been trying to protect us, not kill us!” Feeling the magnitude of his own words, he burst suddenly into tears. “What kind of brother—eats his own father—and tries to murder his siblings?!”

Gasping and blinded, he dragged himself out of the light. He didn’t want to be a distraction, and he didn’t want anyone else to see his hurt and grief and betrayal. It seemed in a cruel way that Envy had been right, for he sat there among the stars like a lost child, rubbing his eyes and wailing.

“Edward.” Hohenheim was still there. Sobbing, Edward swung his steel arm, trying to bat the apparition away; Hohenheim grasped it suddenly, bearing him down hard. Ed’s tears caught in his throat.

“Edward, listen to me. I only wanted to thank you.”

“Thank—me? What for?”

“For freeing me from the body of the dragon,” said Hohenheim. “You told Al to kill me. Those were the kindest words you’ve ever said.”

Edward stared at him, remembering the battle at the Hinterschwaerze.

“Even now, as you see, I am not freed of Envy,” his father continued. “But at least I am free of his form, which was a constant torment.”

Edward was silent for long moments, head bowed, shadows rippling over him as though he were underwater. When he looked up again, his face was calm. “I guess I should have asked you this a long time ago, when we were together in Munich,” he said. “But I could never bring myself to. Why you did what you did… how you could kill all those people and still live with yourself through the centuries. But I think I see now. I thought you hated death, like my one true brother, Alphonse. But you’re not like Al at all.

“Siegfried was right. You’re not human.” Edward straightened, pulling his automail away from the other’s grip.

“No, Edward. You’re wrong. My evil was human evil. A few genetic alterations does not an alien make.”

“Genetic—alterations?”

Hohenheim nodded. “The Germans of Earth were not the only people interested in making a super-race. It was tried before, in Amestris, a very long time ago.”

“Are you trying to tell me I’m some kind of failed experiment?” Edward’s voice was faint.

“I am the failed experiment.” Hohenheim looked away. “Me, and my first son, William. The genes are unstable. It went awry in him too, and that is why he hates, even after death. You, on the other hand, have performed beyond what even the most ambitious of our creators could have ever expected. Strength, courage, loyalty to your comrades and your mission—“
“—No!” Edward screamed. “That wasn’t engineered! It couldn’t have been!” He turned. “Al! Tell him! Tell him I wasn’t programmed!”

But there was no reply, and the light that Edward sought seemed very far away.

Curled upon himself like a small, wounded animal, Ed drifted for a long time in the dark. Around him, the universe grew slowly colder and colder, and the stars grew faint.

* * *

He woke lying on his face on cold, rough rock. He couldn’t move. There was a wind, and a murmuring nearby; he couldn’t make it out. Then, in the next moment, he felt himself lifted up in strong arms. Roy Mustang’s voice came urgently to his ears. “Fullmetal. Edward!”

Ed lay still, not wanting to even open his eyes. The long-lost, familiar nearness of that beating heart soothed the vast and empty ache inside him. His pain went far beyond Hohenheim’s revelation; he knew that lives had ended.

After a moment he forced himself to full consciousness. “Roy,” he whispered, still not daring to look. “Tell me.”

“I can’t,” Mustang said quietly. “Only you will know what you’re looking at, Ed.” He sat Edward up slowly, supporting his back. Ed opened his eyes.

The small crowd had moved closer to the transmutation circles, pointing and staring. Reluctantly he followed their gaze, already knowing what he would see. Stretched across the large array was his brother’s dragon body, broken and lifeless; the wind gusted as Edward moaned, and a flurry of pinkish-white scales blew free, scattering across the caldera like the most delicate blossoms. The Dragon Cult scattered after them, running here and there, catching as many as they could, looking almost like children.

Edward tried to get to his feet and failed. He was weak, starving, and stricken. Roy helped him, lifting him up and steadying him until he got his balance.

“I see Winry,” Ed said in a quavering voice, as if making a report. “She’s OK. And Sciezka! Look at her! She’s like new!”

It was true. Sciezka was beaming, her human form restored and radiant as she and Winry bent over two tiny babies in the very center of the circle. They looked up as Edward came haltingly to them; Winry gave a little cry, moving at once to his side. “Edward!” she said. “Is Al--?”

“You look great, Winry!” he said. Turning unsteadily, he nodded at the infants. “Recognize them? One of them’s yours.”

“Ed. Please, sit down before you fall down.” She took his arm, guiding him to sit on the banks of the pool; Sciezka produced something from her knapsack, offering it to him. He stared dully, then realized it was food. It smelled delicious and he began to eat ravenously, but with a guilty heart. He shouldn’t have an appetite, he thought; he shouldn’t have an appetite at all.

“It’s Tucker, isn’t it?” Sciezka said after a moment. “The babies are Shou and Shiro Tucker.”

Edward nodded slowly, finishing the last of the corned beef. A little strength was coming back to him; he took a long swig from Sciezka’s water bottle before turning to face the two girls. “—Yeah.
Looks like the only way Al could fix Tucker was to take him right back to infancy. He gave him a whole new life to live, and his little brother too.” He looked down at his hands; they were wet with his own tears, and he blinked with surprise, too numb to even realize he was crying. “Sounds like Al, doesn’t it?” he said, with a little laugh.

“Yes,” Winry said in a small voice. “It does. He was always—he always thought of others before himself.” She began to weep, covering her face with her hands as Sciezka soothed her.

“Sciezka,” she said at length. “I’m sorry. I was so selfish. I never thought about what all of this might cost you.”

“That’s OK,” Sciezka said gently. “For me, this was the adventure of a lifetime. I’ll always treasure the memory of our journeys together, Winry.”

Blinking through his tears, Edward peered past Al’s rapidly disintegrating form. “Looks like he couldn’t revive Daiwa. The spirit must have been gone from his body for too long.”

They sat there together for awhile; Edward, Winry and Sciezka. After awhile Den wandered toward them, and Edward noted with startlement that the old dog’s automail had vanished. He had regained all four legs.

Siegfried trundled over next, and hugged all of them tightly, weeping a little and fussing over Edward’s exhausted condition. He had just fished a small bottle out of his pocket, pressing it on Ed—“Just a sip, just a sip—!” when Riza Hawkeye’s voice cut in sharply. “Edward. Something’s happening.”

As one, the foursome turned. For a moment Ed didn’t see anything amiss; Riza held both Tucker brothers, Mustang and his men were resting nearby, and the Dragon Cult was scattered throughout the caldera, still pursuing the blowing scales. Then Ed’s gaze came back to Al’s body. It was already halfway gone; the pearly skin was sinking down over the bones, the flesh was shrivelling up; but as he watched, the ribcage heaved, once, twice.

A strange horror came over him. He staggered up. His own torso felt incredibly heavy, the weariness of the endless days dragging him down, but he made it across the intervening space. “What the—!”

“Winry. Sciezka. Hold the babies.” Handing them off to the girls, Riza came quickly to Ed’s side just as the dragon’s body heaved again.

“Al, no!” Edward cried. “I think he’s trying to come back from the spirit world, Riza, but he can’t! The transmutation destroyed his body, but he doesn’t realize it! Al! Brother, no! You don’t know what it’ll do to you!”

—Stand back.” Hawkeye pushed him aside. Staggering backwards, he gasped as she unsheathed her ceremonial sword. “Riza! What are you doing?” He screamed it, just as she plunged her weapon into the dead dragon’s side and cut a gaping gash. Edward gave a cry of rage and flung himself on her, wrestling the sword from her grasp. It clattered to the rock at the same instant that he heard a soft thump. Behind them, Winry screamed as a body tumbled out of the dragon’s carcass.

It was Al—naked, human, barely breathing.

For the briefest of moments, everyone froze in place. The cultists, coming back now from their strange sport, their arms and robes overflowing with pearly scales, stood gaping at the scene. Mustang and his men were all on their feet; Havoc had dropped his cigarette.

Then Edward gave a little, childlike cry. He dropped to his knees as Riza pulled off her coat and
handed it to him. “Cover him quickly. He’s going to get cold.”

Edward did as she instructed, wrapping the coat over and under Al’s body, never taking his eyes from his brother’s unconscious face. There was something subtly different about it—something he couldn’t place until Winry, who had arrived at his side unnoticed, observed, “Ed. He looks older!”

“Oh, Winry,” Edward said. “He was suffocating in there. I wouldn’t have even had the sense to get him out.”

“I wouldn’t have either,” she said, glancing up at Riza Hawkeye, who still stood over them. “It’s a good thing you realized what was going on.”

“Call it intuition,” said Riza, smiling. “You two interpreted the body moving as an alchemical error; but I’m not an alchemist.”

“He’s waking up!” Ed said.

Alphonse opened his eyes. They were the same warm gray they’d always been, faintly reflecting the blue of the clear sky far above.

“Hey brother,” Edward said softly. “When are you going to quit giving me heart attacks anyway? Are you making this into some kind of sport?”

Gasping a little, Al struggled to sit up, looking at them all in turn. “Ed. —Winry,” he breathed.

“Yes,” she said, bending close to support him. “Don’t you remember? You healed me and Sciezka too. And Den.”

“Mm.” Al swallowed, blinking hard. “Yeah. I do remember. And—the Tucker brothers?”

“They’re OK,” Edward said. “You gave them a whole new lease on life, Al.”

Alphonse nodded. He seemed to be coming to himself slowly, as though he were still waking up; Edward surmised it was the shock of suddenly transitioning to a human body. “You had us really going there,” Ed added. “We thought you were dead.”

Al looked at him, really focusing on him for the first time. Then his eyes suddenly welled over. Cursing, he pulled himself away from his astonished brother. “Oh, damn. Damn, I don’t believe this. How could I—!” He slammed his balled fist into the rock.

“Hey! Hey, hey, calm down!” Edward, thoroughly confused, grabbed his arm. Al’s knuckles were bloodied. “What’s going on? What did you do?”

Al quickly sobered, glancing at his brother’s steel limbs. “It’s what I didn’t do,” he said, his lip trembling. “Ed, I was running out of energy. Winry, Sciezka, Tucker and his little brother… They were all going to meet horrible fates if I didn’t help them. There just wasn’t enough energy left over for me to fix you. I’m sorry, oh, I’m so sorry!” He burst out crying.

“I don’t care about that,” Edward said.

“But restoring your body was my dream. And now I’ve had the chance and blown it.”

“You already did, Al. Remember? When I made my sacrifice for you, it was with all four limbs intact. You restored them when you resurrected me. I lost them again when I went through the Gate
into the Earth world. It wasn’t meant to be.”

“But—!”

“Al. Put it to rest. I’m perfectly happy as I am.” Ed put a hand on his shoulder. “The important thing is that you knew your priorities. You did right by everyone, brother. Including me—!” He caught his breath, swaying suddenly.

Al’s eyes went huge. “Brother!” But Winry, anticipating, was already there to help catch the valiant little alchemist as he toppled. Together they lay him gently down as their friends and Mustang’s soldiers crowded anxiously around.

“He’s suffering from extreme exhaustion. He needs to rest.” She glanced up at Alphonse. “He won’t be able to walk down the mountain.”

“Don’t worry!” Al said, with a frown of determination. “My body’s strong now. I can carry him.”

“We’ll all take a turn,” Roy Mustang said, from behind them.

“Just don’t stick me with Armstrong.”

All eyes turned once more to Edward. He was awake again, looking very pale and drawn, but with a wry and gentle humor in his tired eyes.

“Edward!” Mustang said. “This isn’t ordinary exhaustion. You’re suffering from severe drain. Were you using alchemical drugs?”

“Mm-hm.” Ed swallowed dryly. “Sciezka, do you have any more of that water?”

“Of course!” She knelt, helping to give him a long drink. He drained the canteen to the dregs, then lay back again, smiling a little as Al and Winry pillowed his head. “Yeah,” he said dreamily. “Too much alchemy on too little rest.”

“And too little food and water,” Winry scolded. “You’ve lost far too much weight, Edward!”

“What was I gonna do?” Ed said. “All I had was cakes made out of breadgrass, and that gets so old, I’d just rather not eat at all.”

“He’s right,” Alphonse said. “Breadgrass does get old.”

“Don’t defend him, Al!” Winry said. “When we get home, Granny and I are going to do some serious cooking, and you have to make sure he eats three good meals a day!”

“Don’t worry. I will.” Al smiled, reaching to stroke his brother’s hair out of his eyes; Edward feebly returned his caresses, his hand trembling with weakness. Winry bit her lip. Ed was dangerously depleted—dehydrated, undernourished and utterly exhausted; but that was not all which bothered her. Once again she had the feeling of being locked out of a private world that she would never fully comprehend; the profound love and understanding that had passed in a moment between the two brothers was beyond anything she knew.

Then Alphonse turned to her. “Hey, Winry,” he said gently. “You OK?”

She nodded. “Thanks to you.”

“Good.” His look was so tender that her heart melted at once, and the lingering touch of unconscious resentment in her vanished like the fog preceding a brilliant day. She leaned a little toward him, and
he bent over Ed’s prone form to take her face in both hands and kiss her gently.

It was the first time he’d ever kissed her, at least in the waking world, and it was different than what she had imagined; in her dreams Al’s kisses had been much more innocent. They parted gasping and inspired, eyes bright.

“Maybe one of the soldiers has some rations,” Al said, after a moment’s recovery. “Something Ed can eat easily, like soup. And you should have something to eat, too. I restored your body pretty well, I think, but it’s still been through a lot.”

As Winry beckoned Havoc closer to inquire about food, Alphonse bent to speak in Edward’s ear. “Brother? Are we still in agreement?”


“For as long as you want.”

* * *

Edward lay quietly, his golden eyes huge and shining while his wasted body cried for rest in every bone and muscle, and his head ached too. But every time he closed his eyes he was seeing something that made no sense; he saw the two islands of his old nightmares in the Earth world, the sky lighting up above them. “I thought I was over that kind of thing. I hope I’m not going to get one of those migraines,” he said to himself.

Havoc returned shortly with several tinned meals; beef stew, heated by Roy’s talent with flame. Winry and Al helped Ed sit up and he devoured it ravenously, in great gulps, washing it down with another half canteen of water and several swigs of Siegfried’s whiskey as they ate more quietly, sitting beside him. “Ah,” he sighed, propping his back against Alphonse’s sturdy frame and belching. “That’s better.”

“Now don’t lay down again too soon,” Winry cautioned.

“Yes, Mother.”

“She really is a mother now,” Al said gently.

“You know,” said Winry, “It’s very strange, but I don’t feel like one at all. It’s like my child isn’t mine.” She nodded at Hawkeye, who once again had taken up both infants in her arms.

“I didn’t want to bring this up yet,” Al said. “But maybe the Tucker brothers need another home than ours.”

Winry glanced at him, startled. “Do you feel that way too?”

“Yes,” he said. “Tucker might still retain vestigial memories of his bad experiences with us. I couldn’t wipe them all without wiping out his self. If he’s to ever completely forget them and grow up to be a normal person, he shouldn’t be exposed to us at all. And you probably shouldn’t be exposed to him, either. You’d be reminded of what happened to you every day. But that’s just my opinion, Winry. It’s Shiro who’s your child.”

“I wouldn’t want to part them,” said Winry thoughtfully.
“I can guarantee one thing,” Alphonse said. “With the proper training and discipline, they’re going to both grow up to be first rate alchemists. Let’s just hope that this time they take the right path.”

They sat for awhile silently watching the movement around them. Edward noted sleepily that all of them—even Sciezka—were now keeping a respectful distance, in an attempt to give them some quiet and privacy. Siegfried glanced frequently in their direction; Ed waved listlessly once, with two fingers, and he brightened immediately, returning a thumbs-up. Meanwhile, Roy Mustang was deep in conversation with the members of the Dragon Cult. They were all ranged now around the body of their leader, sitting and standing in various states of disarray.

Ed felt vaguely that there was some task yet to be completed, but he was too exhausted to even think. Over the next half hour he slid closer and closer to the ground, until he finally lay stretched out full length, his head resting comfortably in his brother’s lap. Al murmured soothing words; at a great distance, he was aware of Winry draping a heavy coat over him to keep out the chill. Then, as he was just at the edge of a deep and welcome sleep, he seemed to hear someone performing spoken alchemy.

He opened one eye. Spoken alchemy—the ‘drawing’ of an array by means of verbal description, chant and sound—was a highly unusual practice, and, exhausted as he was, his curiosity was piqued. “Who is that, Al?”

“It’s the little kid who came with the Dragon Cult. He’s setting up some kind of array over the Pool of Time.”

“A kid’s doing that?” Edward struggled to sit up, but his body would not obey him. He sank back again gasping, feeling as though a great weight lay upon his chest. Dimly he caught a glimpse of Alphonse’s worried face before he faded out.

* * *

Edward dreamed a deep green emerald dream; it seemed he was once again beneath the Pool of Time, caught in its mysterious currents, but he was alone; Winry and Alphonse were nowhere in sight. Looking down as he had before to the darkness beneath his feet, he realized that he was falling into it, and he screamed and screamed.

He was standing at the Gate. “No,” he said, backing away from it. “Not again. I can’t go back. I’d rather die.”

“That’s what you’re trying to do,” said his father’s voice. “You’re trying to die.”

“Then let me. I saw them again. I know they’re safe. I’ll die in their arms. That’s the best ending.”

“Is it?”

“Why won’t you leave me alone?”

Hohenheim appeared beside him as a golden dragon. “The Sacrifice is never left alone,” he said cryptically. “It’s always picked at, always prodded, always driven with spears until it casts itself upon the rocks and its task is finally done.”

“Just shut up! What would you know about sacrifice, you murderer? And don’t give me that crap about Envy eating you alive!”
“That was a sacrifice—my sacrifice, our sacrifice. You had to be sent home, you were disturbing the fabric of the world. Edward, it’s important that you see this.” Hohenheim shook his golden, flaming head and the Gate opened before them with its thousand thousand eyes, but it did not draw them in. Instead it formed a window in time, and Edward stared, paralyzed and horrified, at images beyond his wildest imaginings. They flicked by quickly, yet each one burned itself into him—the battles, weapons and casualties of war.

He saw Winnifred carrying her cats in a wicker box aboard a great ship, and he knew she was leaving the country of her birth forever and that she would never see her parents again. He saw the ghost of John Sampson hovering over her like the proverbial guardian angel, and knew that this disembodied spirit would be the best friend she would ever have.

He saw the war break out, the great guns and giant machines of destruction let loose across land and sea and sky. The magnitude of it was beyond anything he could imagine; but he knew it was real, and no trick of his father’s, and he saw its effects upon the gray streets of Munich and upon Russell and his friends in Berlin. He saw the camps; there were Roma there, crouching dirty-faced behind iron bars with Jews and Sinti and ‘antisocials,’ and there were more—hundreds of thousands more. Russell was there now—he caught only a glimpse—and then he knew that this young man would survive the war, but never make it out of prison alive. When the violence ended and all others were set free, the ‘antisocials’ would be passed by, spat upon and left to die by all the nations of the world, and little Fletcher, growing up far away in foreign lands, would never learn what had happened to his brother.

Edward tried to shut his eyes and discovered that he couldn’t. “Damn you!” he screamed into the dark. “Why are you showing me this perverted crap? Because I might have prevented it? —Or been one of its victims?”

“Because you couldn’t have prevented it,” said Hohenheim. “Alphonse was right. It takes more than one person to make a war. It takes the complicity of millions.”

Edward saw the islands from his visions, and he knew what would happen next: the skies lit with the glare of the nuclear blasts.

“As you know, Huskisson sold the plans for his bomb before you caught up with him. Rightly or wrongly, it is he who stopped the war.”

Hohenheim stepped forward into the range of his paralyzed vision. “In the Earth world, the future is now. I’ve already gained the energy I need to live again.”

Edward reeled; but even in his shock, he knew it to be true. The Gate was nothing if not mercilessly dispassionate.

Everything vanished. Edward stood in a blank white haze. Tears ran down his cheeks. It was the worst pain he had ever felt—worse than losing his limbs, worse than death, worse than losing Al.

“I hate you. I hate you! …WHY?!”

The mist cleared a little and he saw his father in human form—tall, stern, lonely. “You call me a mass murderer—and I am. I’ve terrorized and killed hundreds of thousands of people down the centuries, so that I might survive. For millennia, even in Amestris, the same people I killed worshipped me as a god. But the Universe doesn’t care, Edward, so what does any of it matter?”

“It matters to me-- even if it only matters to me! Even if the universe really doesn’t care!”
“So, at heart, you weren’t agnostic after all.”

“Just shut up!” Ed turned away. He would rather die than be in Hohenheim’s presence another moment.

“Ed. Edward.”

Edward looked up again on his way out, blinking away his tears. Heiderich was there, his large eyes dark, reflecting his concern; but there was something different about him. Ed wanted to run to him, to take comfort and refuge in him, but instead he stood still in the depths of himself, wary. “Alfons? Brother--? …Which one are you?”

“Ed, I’m not speaking for him, but he has a point. Somewhere inside, you still worship him too. You secretly fear him. You fear his very love of you.’

“I don’t want to be loved by him! You never understood that, Al!”

“Everyone wants their father to love them, whether they know it or not.”

“I’m trying to die, damn it! What difference does it make?!”

Al smiled sadly. “There was a time, Ed, back when we were small, that I was afraid of you, too. You could be crazy, do crazy things, and sometimes I was afraid of you.” He paused, letting it sink in.

“Alphonse…” Ed had never imagined such words coming from his brother. A great feeling of cold came over him, over his heart and limbs, and it seemed that everything he had ever said or done his whole life long had been a failure. He felt himself fading as he stood there—fading right out of the world.

“No! Wait!” Something had happened. Another Alphonse was there—his Alphonse—Edward thought he saw him swinging a blazing sword, left and right, cutting through the murk. “Edward! It’s a trick!”

The figure of Heiderich snarled and dropped suddenly down on all fours, and in the next instant Ed found himself staring into the gaping jaws of Envy. Edward uttered an inarticulate scream of betrayal, but Alphonse had already grabbed him, yanking him out of the monster’s path. “Ed! Look!”

A flight of dragons winged by overhead, arrowing down on the monster, their numbers swerving like a flock of birds, perfectly synchronized. Self-organized. Al pulled hard on his arm. “Come on.”

Edward ran beside his brother over a flat gray plain. In the distance, like a mirage, the Pool of Time glimmered. “I don’t understand,” he panted. “Why should he care what I think? Does it make a difference?”

“It makes a huge difference. Even a god can’t survive if no one believes in him.”

“This is insane. Nothing makes sense.”

Al glanced sideways at him as they ran. “Then we have to make our own sense. Right?”

Breathless, Edward became aware once more of his own heart beating. “Al? Were you ever afraid of me?”

“I was never afraid of you.” Al grinned as they reached the pool. “I always knew I could thrash you
The Dragon Cult stood round the heart of the pool—all forty-six of them this time, including Shin Daiwa. Alphonse led his stunned brother straight to him. “Sorry we’re in such a rush, Shin, but Ed’s on his way back. Can you help us?”

“Of course we can,” Daiwa beamed with pride; Al gave him a hug and said something to him softly. Then he turned to Edward. “Brother? You’ve gone pretty far out of your body this time, so coming back’s going to really hurt.”

“I don’t mind,” Edward said. “I want to come back.”

“OK. That’s what I had to know. Take my hand and don’t let go.”

Together they leaped into the water, feet first—

—but even though he did not let go, Ed surfaced alone on the other side, thrashing and gasping. Glancing wildly around, he saw no sign of Al, but they were there, just as they had promised, coming up all round him. They had the heads of dragons, each one rearing proudly above the glimmering silver surface of the water like the prows of ancient ships. Converging on him, they nudged him to the shore.

* * *

He woke a little, aware that he was sobbing breathlessly. He couldn’t see. He could barely breathe. “Al—?” he moaned faintly. “It hurts a lot.”

“It’ll be OK, Ed. I promise.” Alphonse, at a great distance, sounded like he knew exactly what he was talking about. Edward fell silent; he felt himself being lifted and loaded onto someone’s back, and heard Havoc’s voice. “—But he’s so light! My backpack in Basic Training was heavier!”

As Havoc carried him away, Edward managed to briefly open his eyes. It was only later, however, that he realized what he had seen—eighteen dragons, plus one young female, bidding farewell to Alphonse.

* * *

When he opened his eyes again, he found himself laying in the back of a military transport truck. A warm blanket covered him, and a soft pillow was tucked under his head. Medics fussed over him as he glanced from side to side and saw Winry at his left hand and Alphonse at his right.

“You gave us quite a scare, Edward,” Winry said sternly.


“I can’t believe you used trimagophane!” she said.

“It was the only way I could keep up with Tucker. If I were you I’d stop moralizing, Winry. It just saved your life.”

“It almost took yours,” Alphonse said.
Edward turned to him. “And you look like a wreck!”

It was an understatement. They had arranged another cot for Al beside his own; he was sitting upon it, his feet on the floor, but his face was haggard with exhaustion.

“What did you expect? I’m just glad the dragons were there to help me save you. I couldn’t have done it by myself, Ed.”

“The dragons?” Edward said. “I wasn’t dreaming? There were dragons?”

Al nodded slowly. “Turns out Shin Daiwa and his cult were really the dragons themselves. The Transformation I went through was part of a two-thousand-year cycle that’s gone on for millennia. Johnny Windwalker will tell you all about it.”

“They tried to make Al Prince of Dragons,” Winry said, looking at the floor.

“Tried?” Ed smiled tiredly. “He is their Prince. I know he must have told you.”

“Winry’s pretty upset about that,” Al said. “She wants us to get married right away so I don’t come up with any more excuses.” He winked.

Edward sighed deeply and closed his eyes. “Sounds like we might finally get to live a normal life after all,” he said, right before he drifted off again.
Epilogue: The Cross and the Key

Chapter Summary

Ed and Al make good on a promise they had made to each other in the Earth world.

Chapter Notes

Well, this is it-- the story's finally finished. Thank you all very much for your kindness, and for your patience with my verbosity! :)

“I don’t feel any different now, Al,” Edward said, staring with a concentrated frown at the Flamel cross dangling before him. “I don’t feel myself in the metal.”

Al smiled. “Of course you can’t feel it. There’s no difference between you and what’s in the cross. But if we trade pendants—” He reached for the cross, and Edward accepted the Orichalcum key with a low cry of amazement.

It wasn’t the real key, of course—that had been left in the Thule Gate, back on the mountain in the Earth world—but once they had finally gotten back home to Resembool and everything had been sorted out, Alphonse had fashioned a facsimile. Ed weighed it in his palm, and his senses reeled; it seemed he held Alphonse there—the very echo of his brother’s self.

Al had not forgotten their talk at Winnifred’s house about exchanging fragments of their spirits, but Edward had been utterly astonished at the manifestation of his wish. Al’s alchemic performance had seemed effortless. Like Ed, he no longer needed a transmutation circle, but unlike him, he didn’t even need to think about what he was doing any more. It were as though he had merely wished the spirit transfer, and it had happened. Gasping a little, Edward clutched the living artifact in his hand and realized he was shaking.

“Al. Oh, Al, I could never do that. Not in a million years could I perform alchemy like that! You’ve outgrown me, little brother.”

“I’ll never outgrow you, Ed.” Alphonse pressed the Orichalcum cross to his heart before bowing his head to drape the silver cord around his neck. “And we’ll never be parted again. No matter what.”

They hugged each other tight. Feeling Al’s strong arms around him, Edward could not help but wonder. Despite his seemingly endless string of lovers, they really belonged only to each other. What would happen now that Winry had become part of them as well?

“She’s always been part of us,” Al said reassuringly, and Edward realized with a start that his brother was reading his mind. “Al?” he stuttered, stepping back. “Is this more of your spirit alchemy?”
Alphonse looked kindly at him. It was the most beautiful expression Edward had ever seen, and his heart melted in its warmth. “Just some fraternal alchemy,” Al said, with great sincerity. “It’s going to be OK, Ed. Things will work out just fine.”

His voice held familiar echoes. Edward’s eyes widened; then he smiled. “I know what you gained on the other side now!” he exclaimed softly. “I know the part of yourself that was lost.”

“Yes,” said Al. “I didn’t really know how to say it before, but Alfons Heiderich was part of me all along. All of our doubles in all the other worlds are really just parts of ourselves. We exist on many different levels at once, Ed. Our spirits are like light in a prism, spread over all spectrums simultaneously. Someday, we’ll all be one again. I just decided to be one right now, and concentrate my light here.” The look of wisdom in Alphonse’s eye had only been made more profound by his experience; but Ed felt the love in him and knew without question that this powerful personality was truly still his brother.

“Well, I don’t really understand, of course, because I haven’t learned what you did. But as long as we’re happy, that’s what matters,” Edward said gently.

Edward stood at sunset on a remote hill on Old Man Mackey’s farm, his foot resting on a great shard of rock crystal, holding a letter in his hand. Facing away from the fading light, he drew a deep breath and, reading from the paper, began to speak softly, as if to himself.

“Dear Rose:

“I hope you are doing well back in the Earth world. Sometimes I still find myself missing the kindness of your smile. I want you to know that Al and I escaped safely back to our world, and we’re doing very well. Al is completely healed of his consumption, just like I said. I also need you to know that I wasn’t able to keep my promise.

“I know you meant well when you gave me your Bible book, because there's not a cruel bone in your body. And in the hard times to come in the Earth world, I’m sure you’ll give great comfort to those who need it most. But it’s time to lay old fears to rest. It’s time to not be afraid of ourselves or the ones we love, to not fear the ones we can’t love, and especially to not fear love itself, or any of those other wonderful things that hold the possibility of making us more than we are—especially science and knowledge. When Science, Wisdom and Love are married to each other, that is the Golden Age—no matter the time or place.

“Al tells me that this book, which still rules your world today, was written by ancient nomadic tribes. They did the best they could for the times they lived in, but many of their teachings are no longer valid in our world. You might think that’s easy for me to say because I’m an agnostic, but it’s not. I’ve seen enough pain to not want to cause any, and I do not speak lightly.

“Your Earth world is wracked by war, and like the wars in my own world, even though they are largely fought over state interests, most of them are aided and abetted by inflexible beliefs which enable the opposing parties to pit the people against each other. People become inflexible when they are afraid, and the doctrines in your book are well designed to play upon those fears. Doubtless some of your ancient leaders intended this, and modern governments, even my own, will not hesitate to use it as a tool to further their own nefarious ends at the expense of the general population. I’ve seen it before, and believe me—it never ends well.
“So, Rose, I have to do what I’m doing. My country is already fighting itself. It doesn’t need any more division, and it doesn’t need a new cult.

“I won’t destroy your book, because no book should ever be destroyed. There are surely some valuable things in it. Instead, I’m sealing it in rock crystal for ten thousand years. Maybe someday, in a better age, some other alchemist will stumble upon it and use it as it should be used—as an artifact to gain clearer knowledge of an earlier time, and our earlier selves. Because I do believe that the peoples of our two worlds are one—I am of the Earth world too, even though it nearly killed my brother and me, and you, though you would deny it, have roots deep in ours.

“Thank you for all your kindness, Rose. Thank you, and goodbye.”

Edward raised the paper over his head and let the wind blow it away.

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