### Lest We Forget

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#### Summary

He dreamt of lights, and bright smiles, and the deep soft laughter, and the feeling of thrill in the face of all those happy years he had been planning to spend with the man he loved more than anything in this world.

But it was not meant to be. Five years, they had had just five years together after that before everything shattered in front of their eyes.

...winter, it was always winter here, wasn’t it?
Takes place 13-16 years after parts 1 and 2 (1930-1933 yy.).
(Ed is 31-34, Roy is 45-48).

PLEASE, READ TAGS! LOTS OF TRIGGER WARNINGS.

ON HIATUS forever (I'm very sorry. I really am...)

Notes

Let me traditionally mention, that I intended this to be a very short oneshot, but it got out of hand. As usual. I need to change my name to this already xD

So, this monster (any fic which is longer than 20k is a monster for me, so buckle up, I'm aiming for about 70k here) takes place 13-16 years after parts 1 (Beneath the stains of time) and 2 (On broken wings I'm falling) (1930-1933 yy.). Which means Ed here is 31-34 and Roy is 45-48.

Quick recap of parts 1-2:

1929 is the year when the war with Drachma started. Edward went to Drachma a year after. And another year from that, 15.07.1931, Roy was murdered by a drachman assassin. Edward received a telegram about that next month. In two years, in the end of 1933 he finished the time-crossing array and appears in Roy’s house in 1917 to tell him about the war and give him the notes he hopes will help Roy to prevent the war. After this Edward disappears in the array, paying the ultimate price for this alchemy. Next day Roy meets “his” Ed and tells him about this. They decide to work together to change their future.

Enjoy!

PS. As usual, gigantic thanks to the most awesome beta in the whole fucking universe - Himeneka, who not only fishes out all my fuck ups with articles but discusses all my crazy ideas and helps me chose the right way of delivering some of them ^_^

PPS. Epigraphs are taken from Fate/Zero anime.

See the end of the work for more notes
November 1930

There’s no hope on the battlefield. It has nothing but unspeakable despair. Just a crime we call victory, paid for by the pain of the defeated. Yet humanity has never recognized this truth. And the reason for that is, in every era, a dazzling hero has blinded people with their legends and prevented them from seeing the evil of bloodshed. The true nature of humanity has not advanced a step beyond the Stone Age.

Drachma, Amestrian military camp

The smell of gunpowder in the air almost covered the smell of blood, but with every gunshot reaching Edward’s ears also came a realisation that it brought more deaths to this godforsaken frozen land.

The war was cold and ugly. Not that Edward expected something else when he arrived there earlier this year.

The war had lasted for a year already then and neither side had made any significant progress.

Edward had been given a regiment of two thousand people to command the reconnaissance for division which was following within a few days behind them, and he was not happy about it. The soldiers stationed on this side of the border were already exhausted when he arrived, and Edward couldn’t blame them. Every day here the maddening cold of the drachman winter was piercing his skin with freezing needles even through the thick layer of the winter military uniform, making him fight for every breath, sharp and hurting in his throat.

Every day was full of gunshots, screams and smell of blood. They’d been trying to push the drachman army further from the border, but last month they received news from Briggs that several Drachman units had managed to make their way to the border and Edward had to send there a small battalion.

He had been trying to stay away from the direct fights, busying himself mostly with the planning of campaigns and providing some rear support with the help of his alchemy.

He was sitting in his tent, trying to come up with a solid plan for tomorrow’s attack on a Drachman outpost, when the flap of his tent opened, letting in a cold air, and a young man almost ran inside. He stopped abruptly, turning to Edward and giving him a quick salute. He was breathing hard, as if he had been running. Edward didn’t know this soldier. He straightened up from where he had been bending over the map on the table before him and gave the man’s uniform a quick glance.
“Second Lieutenant, what’s the meaning of this?”

The young man saluted again, now breathing a little more evenly.

“Second Lieutenant Reece, Brigadier General, sir! I apologise, sir! We intercepted drachman radio chatter, they are planning to attack the camp tonight!”

“What? When?”

“It was hard to interpret, sir, it seemed that they had some disagreement within their command. I think the earliest they were talking about is oh two hundred, sir.”

And as soon as the young man said the last word, an explosion coming from the west side of the camp shook the ground under their feet.

Edward was out of the tent within a second, drawing in a deep breath which proved a mistake, as the air was full of smoke. He bent over, coughing. Screams filled the air, along with the unmistakable smell of burning flesh, and as much as the mere thought of it twisted Edward’s stomach, there was no way to ignore the fact that humans couldn’t burn so fast that the smell of it appeared within a second after the explosion.

And then he felt it - the trace of recently used alchemy was coming from the same side where the explosion got off.

Another explosion, closer this time, hit Edward’s ears and he scowled. The feeling of the alchemy now was unmistakable. He rushed in the direction where the explosions were coming from, maneuvering himself between the soldiers, who were running in what seemed to be a complete lack of any order, but Edward knew they were following the exact procedure in case of an attack on the camp.

He stopped when there were several intact tents between him and the place of the second explosion. That part of the camp before him was completely destroyed, the thick black smoke forced him to cover his nose and mouth with his sleeve, not that it would help much though. There was no fire, just smoke and the nauseous smell of burning flesh.

The alchemy here felt incredibly strong.

“Sir! Brigadier General, sir!” came a voice behind him.

Edward turned around and saw Lieutenant Colonel Voss running towards him.

“Voss. Where is your battalion?”

The man stopped in front of Edward, breathing heavily. He ran his hand through his short brown hair and winced.

“Somewhere behind this mess,” he gestured at the wreckage in front of them. “It is not as big as it looks like. There are several rows of intact tents behind the area of the second explosion. The first one though was at the west border of the camp. A third of my men was stationed there,” he finished in a tight voice.

Fuck.

“Shit, I’m sorry. Did anyone see the attackers?”
“No, sir. And that is weird. There were no gunshots either.”

Could it be just one alchemist then? But he had to get inside the camp somehow and draw the arrays - sure someone would’ve noticed.

“Tell your people to stay away. Find Davies and Hailey and say I ordered not to get close to the site.”

“Sir, I suggest we surround the area in the case the attackers are still in the camp. I’ve sent a few of my people further to the west to see if they can find any signs of what we are facing.”

“They will not find anything.”

“What makes you think that, sir?”

The smoke started to thin and Ed removed his arm from where it was pressing to his nose.

“It’s an alchemist’s work, Voss. There has been no shooting so far, you said it yourself. If there were drachmans nearby, they would’ve attacked already using the explosions as a distraction.”

“But drachmans don’t have alchemists, don’t they?”

“Well, they didn’t until now, apparently,” Edward frowned.

Could it be that this alchemist, whoever he was, was acting on his own will? Reece earlier mentioned that there was some sort of disagreement in drachman’s command. Regardless, it didn’t mean that these two explosions were the only threat now.

“My order still stands, Voss. If it is an alchemist, it is better if there are fewer people around...” The Lieutenant Colonel opened his mouth to object, but Edward raised his hand to stop him. “I will need some support though. Send someone with a good aim in my direction. I’ll go find our unexpected guest,” he finished bitterly.

“Sir,” Voss saluted him and rushed away.

Edward could see the man didn’t approve of his idea of going after the enemy basically alone, but Edward knew he would follow the orders - for the months Edward had been here, he not even once demonstrated the three battalion commanders, who at first were quite sceptical about him, that he arrived here not to be pulling rank and sitting on his ass in his tent. As he expected, there also were several people among the lower ranks who were not happy with his presence in the camp just due to their general discontent of him being married to the Führer while being a man, but it was something Edward had gotten used to a long time ago. But when the numbers of casualties decreased significantly since Edward started planning the battles, the morale in the camp had raised as much as it was possible considering the circumstances and horrible weather conditions.

Right now the question was how this alchemist managed to get inside the camp and drew the array without anyone noticing. Before coming up with crazy theories, Edward had to consider the most obvious ones, as usually they were correct. And the most simple answer, as unsettling as it was, was an inside job, and aside from him there was only one other alchemist in the camp.

It’d been about fifteen minutes since the second explosion, when the sound of another wrecked the air. East side now. About ten minutes of fast walking separated the place where Edward stood to where the thick black smoke was now rising. If the alchemist was alone he had apparently not been in much of a hurry.
Edward dashed in the direction of the smoke, abandoned empty tents flitting on the side of his vision, faint tickling of alchemy along his nerves increasing as he was getting closer.

A flicker of blue caught his eye, and he stopped abruptly, turning his head to where he noticed the movement. A man in a blue uniform was crouching near one of the tents about thirty meters from Edward. He had a short knife in his hand, which he now was using for what seemed to be drawing an array on cold hard soil. Edward recognized the short dark grey ponytail and messy beard of Major Kidwell - the alchemist who, after his more than thirty years of service not only hadn’t been promoted once, but several times was on the verge of a termination of his contract, and, as Edward suspected, was sent here as the most effective method to not be in the way, when all Central, let alone Edward, was on edge because of several assassination attempts on the Führer and in light of the threats from Aerugo and Creta to join the war on Drachma’s side.

Technically, it was Edward who suggested (“Ordered,” Roy always corrected him) to send Kidwell somewhere away from Central. After the first attempted murder, Edward took it into his hands to reorganise the security in the Führer’s mansion and in the Central Command. He reviewed the personal files of all alchemists and all military officers who had access to the mansion and who were in the circle of higher ups who could have a grudge against Roy or simply enough ambitions to take his Führership.

Major Kidwell’s file was one of those which went straight to the pile which Edward mentally dubbed “I don’t like your face, so you should go” - there were no obvious inconsistencies in the files there, otherwise Intelligence would’ve known, but Edward was fishing for tiny details which felt off. And there were quite a lot such details in the Kidwell’s file, besides it was obvious that he was at the very least one of the most useless alchemists Edward had ever known, and at the most had an incredible amount of jealousy towards everyone who had made better in their lives.

But what the Major was doing here now was very far from what Edward defined as “useless alchemy”. He knew he didn’t miss anything in Kidwell’s file, and yet there he was, murdering his men in untold numbers., and if anything, that was partially Edward’s fault.

He scowled, feeling an unpleasant spike of guilt in his chest. Kidwell hadn’t noticed him yet, and he was still scrabbling at the ground with his knife. Edward could’ve attacked him from this distance, or destroyed the array he was drawing, but first of all, before he confronted the man or saw the array, there was no definite evidence that he was the one behind this explosions. And secondly, if it was him, Edward needed to know what array the man used.

So he rushed towards the alchemist, trying not to make too much noise. When there were just a few meters left between them, Kidwell suddenly raised his head and looked at Edward. His eyes widened with surprise and horror, he made a move to stand up, but his foot caught in the edge of his winter coat and he stumbled, falling back on his ass.

The reaction was more than enough to prove Edward’s suspicions. He felt anger surging in his chest. Kidwell hadn’t noticed him yet, and he could’ve attacked him from this distance, or destroyed the array he was drawing, but first of all, before he confronted the man or saw the array, there was no definite evidence that he was the one behind this explosions. And secondly, if it was him, Edward needed to know what array the man used.

Edward bent over, clenched his fist around the collar of Kidwell’s coat and yanked him up, bringing their faces closer together.

“B-b-brigadier General, I…”

“I. I…” Kidwell grabbed the hand holding him by the collar, and Edward could hear his feet rustling on the ground behind him.

“Start talking,” Edward shook him once.

He could see by the little movements of the man’s face, that he tried to collect his panicking thoughts. His eyes were still full of fear, when he glowered and looked right into Edward’s eyes, apparently deciding that offense was the best defence. Which was a poor choice when it came to dealing with a seething Edward.

“Fuck you! You piece of shit, got into Mustang’s pants and now you think you are a big deal! I served this country long before you came into the picture and started messing all things up! I will not recognise your authority, you brat!” Kidwell was screaming, tightening his grip on Edward’s arm, trying to tear it off of him.

“So you decided to blew up the camp because you don’t recognize my authority?!” Edward growled in the man’s face.

“I haven’t even been promoted once! They are always sending me to the shittiest places! And now here! Fuck you! Fuck them! Fuck this country! Drachma offered me twice more than I get from Amestris!”

Edward jolted his hand up, bringing the shaking man on his feet, let go of his collar, hauled off and struck the man a blow in his jaw with his flesh fist, regretting that he couldn’t use his right arm for that, as it might result in a broken jaw, which would complicate the following questioning.

“Fuck!” Edward shouted, when Kidwell fell on the ground.

“Um… Sir?” an uncertain voice said behind him.

Edward looked up at the young man standing at the side, a gun in his hand, puzzled expression on his face.

“Corporal Haley, sir. Lieutenant Colonel Voss sent me to find you, he said you needed assistance,” he looked down on the unconscious Kidwell. “He is not drachman…” there was a question in his voice, but Edward didn’t have a clear answer yet.

“This man is responsible for the explosions. I’ll need to question him later. But for the time being, do you happen to have a flare or something?”

“Ah, yes, sir,” the corporal reached into his pocket. “The Lieutenant Colonel instructed me to use it if we need assistance.”

“Go ahead, corporal, I am not particularly happy about the idea of dragging this pile of shit across the camp,” Edward said, glancing down at Kidwell, before stepping over him to take a better look at the array the man had been drawing.

He heard the sound of a launching flare behind him, when he crouched beside the array. It was not finished, but the details Edward saw were enough to recognise the alkahestry circle for long distance transmutation. All it was lacking were just a couple of lines and markers to activate the transmutation. How the fucker managed to obtain the knowledge of Xing Dragon pulse was another question altogether, but the mere thought that Drachma had an alchemist within Amestrian ranks with such knowledge, was more than unsettling. Where was one, could be more. Edward would need to
contact his people in Central as soon as possible and maybe make them double the security around Roy.

Hurried steps drew his attention, he stood up and turned around to see Voss and several of his men rushing towards him.

“You all right, sir?” Voss talked when he stopped near Edward. Then he noticed the unconscious body under Edward’s feet and raised a brow in surprise. “He is not drachman…”

“Why does everyone today take it as their responsibility to state the obvious?”

“Sir?…” Voss tore his eyes from Kidwell to look at Edward with confusion.

“Ah, forget it,” Edward sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. “It’s Major Kidwell. He is the alchemist responsible for the explosions. He served in Central before. I assume it was my orders which resulted in him ending up in this camp.” Edward looked up at Voss and seeing the still lingering question on the man’s features, added: “Security reasons. There were several assassination attempts on the Führer. I didn’t suspect Kidwell in anything, but there was something off about him,” he looked over to where the smoke from the last explosion started to thin, and frowned. “Guess I fucked up anyway.”

There was a moment of silence before Voss answered.

“If I may, sir, I am sure you did the best you could. And imagine the level of destruction this man could’ve done if he stayed in Central.”

That was true, and yet Edward couldn’t stop thinking of all the men who died today because he disregarded the threat Kidwell could be, which also made him wonder how many of those he considered trustworthy and were now stationed in Central, could in fact also work for Drachma.

Maybe he should’ve stayed there. Roy didn’t want him to leave.

Edward pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration, feeling the beginning of a headache behind his eyes.

“I’ll need to question him. Tell your men to drag him from here. And where the hell are Davies and Hailey? I need you three in my tent in one hour - there is still the possibility of an attack on the camp later tonight.”

“Sir,” Voss saluted and went to give orders to his people.

By this time the smoke from the explosions had dissipated completely, but the taste of it was still thick in Edward’s lungs and on the back of his tongue. The cold Drachman sun has already crossed the horizon, making the world look gray. It would be pitch dark in just half an hour, and the day just barely made into it’s second half. Neverending nights, freezing cold and white and gray during those short hours when the sun was above the horizon to be able to see the bleak Drachma landscape.

Despite the darkness, there were still several hours until the day came to an end. It will be a long night. The rest of the day was going to be even longer.

The war was cold, ugly, and there was no end to it.

Amestris, Central Military Command
Ed’s morning starts at the hell-early-hour when it’s still pitch dark outside, but it is nothing unusual these days. Even waking up lying face down on the table in his office unfortunately is not unusual either, as well as the throbbing pain in his neck. He will have to apologise to Roy when he sees him, that he didn’t make it back to the mansion. Again. Though Ed is not entirely sure that Roy himself didn’t spend the whole night in his own office getting ready for today’s meeting with the delegation from Drachma - Amestris managed to negotiate a non-aggression pact with them a couple of years back, but they have been constantly bitching about some Amestrian policies which they particularly dislike, which, if anyone asked Ed, are none of their goddamn business.

Right now they chose to find offensive the presence of a military compound, i.e. Briggs, right near their border. The delegation arrived more than a month ago and they’ve been a pain in Ed’s ass since then, as he, as the head of Investigation and Intelligence, has also been responsible for security measures in the Central Command.

The corridors of Central are empty at such an early hour when Ed is dragging himself towards the mess hall in hope, that there is already some food there for breakfast, though he knows it is too early for that, but maybe he can find some leftovers from yesterday. And coffee. Lots of coffee. He needs to caffeinate himself up to the eyelids if he wants to stay lucid today and make it till the evening. And maybe if the negotiations go well, he and Roy will finally be able to make it to the mansion this night, where their big and comfy bed has been waiting for them. Ed closes his eyes for a moment, treating himself to the thought of how magnificent it will be to finally tear off these horrible uniforms from both of them, fall down on the bed in a tangled mess of limbs and… sleep. Yeah. Sleep will be nice.

“Daydreaming, Colonel?” Ed hears a cheerful voice and opens his eyes to see a smiling middle aged man with short brown hair and hazel eyes, which he squints just a little, making you guess whether he is silently laughing or inspecting you closely. Ed has known the man for long enough to know that it is both.

“Hey, Voss.”

“Elric,” the man nods and falls into step beside Ed.

“Saw you in a dream tonight.”

“Oh, should I be flattered?” Voss is one of the very few people, most of whom being Mustang’s former team, with whom Ed and Roy chose to share the information they got from Ed’s future self. Voss was a captain in North city back when they first met seven years ago and has been a valuable ally and a friend since then.

“You were two ranks lower than me. That was nice. I must say I liked you better when you were following my orders, instead of the other way around.”

“Haha, in your dreams, Colonel.”

“Oh, you think you’re funny, that’s sweet.”

“Calling your superior officer “sweet” is the first step to insubordination.”

“We are in different departments, Mark, so suck it.”

“I still can technically order you, Edward, and isn’t it the Führer’s job?”
“Oh-oh, speaking about first steps to insubordination.”

“Oh, Mustang likes me, and I happen to be best friends with his husband, so I think I am quite secure,” Mark laughed openly making Ed smile in answer. “What are the plans for today, by the way?”

“The meeting with the drachmans,” before Ed has coffee, he is not going to even try to hide the annoyance from his voice when it comes to this.

“Again? Isn’t it like the third already for the last month?”

“Don’t fucking remind me. These people sure like talking a lot.”

They finally reach the mess hall only to discover that it is still closed.

“Fuck, it can’t be earlier than five,” Ed practically whines and looks at Mark who is wearing an expression of utter betrayal on his face. “Can it?”

“No idea, I actually haven’t slept yet, thought it should be morning already.”

Ed sighs, and leans on the closed doors.

“Actually, do me a favor, and double the security around the Führer’s office and the conference room.”

“It’s already doubled. You want me to double the double?” Mark squints more and tilts his lips in a grin.

“Save it for when I’ve had my coffee, Voss,” Ed frowns in answer.

“What are you afraid of? They’ve been here for a month already.”

“Can’t say. Just a bad feeling.”

“Intelligence trademarked paranoia, huh? Well, we wouldn’t be here without it.” We sure wouldn’t.

“Ok, will do.”

“Thanks, Mark,” Ed straightens up. “See you later.”

Voss nods and starts walking back the way they came from.

Ed weighs his options. Hawkeye always has some food in her office. Ed suspects she started storing snacks specially for Ed after that one night three years ago when after the assassination attempt on Roy when he just came into office, Ed, overwrought with constant stress, worry and lack of sleep, broke into the mess hall in the middle of the night, devoured an impressive amount of food in the kitchen there and fell asleep in the corner hugging a loaf of bread, scaring the cook who stumbled upon him in the early morning.

Ed doubts Hawkeye is already at her workplace, but he has a key to her office, and perhaps he can go there first and find some snacks and try to get at least a part of them intact to Roy.

He fishes his watch out of his pocket and groans at the hands - it’s only a quarter past four. Well, they have several hours until the negotiation starts.

Ed sighs and starts walking in the direction of Intelligence.
“Give me your coffee and I’ll give you the rest of the snacks I stole from Hawkeye,” Ed declares pushing the door to Roy’s office with his hip, holding to the said snacks in his hands as if they were the most important things for him at the moment (which actually might be partially true).

Roy is sitting on the couch, looking as if he just woke up a minute ago, his hair is sticking to the sides, and the Führer of Amestris shouldn’t look that adorable, but Ed is happy that he does.

Roy opens one eye on Ed when he enters.

“You brought me food. I have the most perfect husband.”

“I didn’t bring you food. I brought food to trade it for your coffee,” Ed says, hopping down on the couch near Roy and letting the snacks spread out on his lap, part of them falling on the floor. He leans back and reaches to run his left hand through Roy’s short hair - Ed will never admit this out loud, but he loves Roy’s bed head the most. “You have a new grey hair.”

Roy groans and drops his face in his palms.

“Get it out.”

“I like it. And you are being dramatic.”

Roy sighs and snatches a chocolate bar from Ed’s lap.

“Help yourself to the coffee machine, Ed. As you can see I haven’t gotten to this part of the day yet.”

Ed brushes the snacks from his lap, stands up and walks towards the table where he spotted Roy’s mug - the man could use some coffee too. An open folder catches his attention, and he freezes in his tracks when he sees a name on top of the file: Derek Kidwell.

He turns around, feeling that he is not that sleepy anymore, and taps his metal finger on the folder.

“What the hell is this?”

Roy looks up at him slowly, fighting to open his second eye.

“That? The drachmans sent me this file yesterday. They want to have their representative here. I haven’t had the time to check it yet.”

Ed takes the file from the table and shakes it in front of him.

“Are you shitting me, Roy?”

“What?”

“He is from the list!”

“The list?” Roy rises up to his feet and walks to Ed. There is a puzzled expression on his face, which makes Ed frown.

“The list, Roy, for fuck’s sake. Are you still half-asleep or do you really not remember?”

“I have my Head of Intelligence for that, don’t I?” he half smiles, takes the file from Ed’s hands and gives it a brief look. “All right, I think I recognise the name now. But, good lord, Ed, it’s been almost
ten years now, should I really remember all those names?”

“Well, I do!”

“Exactly my point, my dear,” Roy smiles fondly.

“You should’ve let me know as soon as you got it, Roy.”

“I was meaning to, but got buried under other paperwork,” Roy rounds the table and lowers himself in the chair, putting the file in front of him. “Why exactly are you so worried, Ed?”

Ed leans with his hip on the table and crosses his arms.

“Today was one of those.”

“Oh,” Roy looks up at Ed and the remains of sleep are gone from his features. Ed misses the times when telling Roy about these dreams didn’t make the man tense and look at him with such a worried expression.

Ed started seeing these dreams about three years after he and Roy got married.

The first time he saw one was the moment Roy proposed to that other Edward - apparently in their previous version of reality this happened years later than in the current one. "I can't believe you engraved our names on it!” was the last thing Ed said before waking up in the middle of the night, and apparently he said it out loud, because Roy shifted beside him, pulling him closer, and mumbled sleepily in the crook of his neck "I wouldn't dare, babe," before drifting back to sleep.

After that he started seeing such dreams regularly. They didn’t occur often, perhaps one every couple of months on average, but they were easily recognisable from all the other dreams he had by their lucidity and consistency, and after the third occasion he told Roy about it.

The ring was their first guess - it was the only object from that other reality that Ed wore, which also bore a very personal connection to both this Ed and that Edward. Experimentally, Ed started taking it off and leaving it on the nightstand before going to sleep. But after some time he was thrown into a memory of heated sex on the office table, which was too lucid in this familiar way to consider it just a normal wet dream, and he woke up to see a very surprised but pleased expression on Roy’s face, who told Ed he was practically moaning Roy’s name on repeat for the last dozen of minutes and “it was like heaven’s music for my ears. I couldn’t bring myself to wake you up from such a pleasant dream, my love.”

If that was not the ring, then it was either the notes, which they wouldn’t even think to get rid of, or a side effect of the time-crossing alchemy. And perhaps, after thorough research Ed could’ve come up with an idea to undo this, but first of all Roy was very sensitive to even hearing the words “time crossing array” and “Ed” in the same sentence, and when Ed raised the question, it was the only time in their relationship, when he fully experienced on himself the full force of Roy’s commanding voice. And he could see, that despite Roy never questioning Ed’s actions and worshiping him to the point when it sometimes became embarrassing, he would fight Ed on this one to death.

And secondly, Ed wasn’t really that eager to get rid of these dreams. He loved them. It was a possibility for him to spend some extra time with Roy, even though they were both not exactly themselves in these dreams. But he still welcomed the opportunity, as their days now were so busy, that sometimes they saw each other just for an hour during the day. But most of all this was a unique opportunity to see the life of that Edward who Roy met all those years ago. And on top of it, the time was closing to the date marked in Edward’s notes as the first day of the war with Drachma, and even
though they took all the possible measures to prevent this war from happening, their future was still as undetermined as any future was, and these dreams (memories? visions from the parallel reality?) could be a great help providing Ed with some details which perhaps were missing from the notes they obtained.

But he knew that when 1930 came, he would have to face the other kind of dreams. And he dreaded the moment when the pleasant dreams would shift to the nightmares of war.

The first memory, which marked the beginning of the four long years he will have to be facing the horrors from what could’ve been their own reality, was a broken look in Roy’s eyes, when Edward showed him the telegram from Briggs, which said that Hawkeye was KIA.

Ed quite literally dragged Roy to Hawkeye’s office the next day with an instruction to tell her how much he loves and values her, which made Hawkeye just slightly tilt her brow in surprise.

After that for several months Ed hasn’t seen any other memories like that, only to discover himself tonight quite literally in the middle of the war with Drachma.

“I assume you saw Kidwell there? What did he do?” Roy asks, carefully studying Ed’s face.

“The fucker blew up a half of the military camp because apparently Drachma offered him a bigger paycheck.”

“I see,” Roy reaches his hand to brush his knuckles on Ed’s hip. “You alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Ed shifts closer, unfolding his arms, and takes Roy’s hand in his, intertwining their fingers. “Was nothing really bad.” He swallows down “But now I, too, know how human flesh smells like when it’s burning”. He can swear he still feels the rough edges of this smell in his lungs - to this moment Ed has already learnt that trying to convince his brain that what he saw was not technically happening to him, has proved completely ineffective considering the level of lucidity of such “dreams” He actually feel all that, as it is happening to him, another reality or not - the downside of these dreams is that his reptilian brain doesn’t understand the concept of possible parallel realities, even though deep inside Ed hopes that the one he has been seeing for the last five years had already ceased to exist since he and Roy started shifting their own future to prevent all that from happening. “He also is one of those - he said it’s too much for his dignity to follow the orders of the Führer’s fucktoy.”

“Edward!”

“What? He said that.”

“Did he?”

“Well, not in those exact words, but it was highly implied.”

“Shouldn’t you be past it already?”

“It is hard when at night, instead of getting some rest, I have to face aggressive homophobes.”

“It was just once, Ed. And don’t talk about resting, when you obviously fell asleep on your table again.”

“How do you say?”

“There are a few ink spots on your cheek,” Roy smiles playfully.
“What?! But I ran into Voss earlier today and he didn’t say a thing! That asshole!”

“Well, you know how he is,” Roy chuckles.

“And you too could’ve said something, Roy.”

“I’m sorry, Ed,” he is fully laughing now. “Please, don’t mope, love.”

Ed pulls his hand from Roy’s and starts rubbing his cheek.

“I’m not moping.”

“Of course, you’re not, dear,” Roy stops laughing and now is looking at Ed with this adoration in his eyes, which even now after the almost thirteen years they’ve been together, makes Ed blush a little.

“All right, jokes aside, old man,” Ed stretches to grab Kidwell’s file from the table. “First, I’m taking this for now. Second,” he sighs, “Roy, under no circumstances let them plant a spy here.”

“He is not necessarily a spy, Ed.”

Ed looks at Roy intensely, as if the man just sprouted a second head, and it was as stupid as the first one.

That was the thing about all this - it’s been thirteen years since it was too real for Roy, as he was the one who faced broken by war Edward from their future. And when he was telling Ed about this back then, the young man couldn't see what made Roy hurting so much - for him it was just what the man told him, the notes written with a staggering handwriting and this look in Roy’s eyes when he was looking at Ed as if he saw a ghost. But with the years passing for Roy it shifted to just a faint memory, whereas for Ed, thanks to the dreams he keeps having, it became his own another reality in all the meanings of the word. When Roy was doing something reckless just not realising the whole weight of his actions, Ed knew exactly the real value of everything they’ve done and been doing. Today their roles were somewhat reversed from where they were thirteen years ago, and Ed couldn’t really blame Roy for sometimes not taking it as seriously as necessary.

“Let me be the judge of that. And I want to be present during the negotiations.”

Roy runs his hand through his hair and leans back in the chair.

“All right, Ed,” he looks so tired. They all are tired, but as long as they can see even the slightest possibility of a rising conflict between Amestris and Drachma, they can’t afford to relax.

Ed nods and walks away from the office, the folder with Kidwell’s file in his hand.

This is going to be a long day…

Chapter End Notes

So, as you may have noticed, if not in the direct speech:

Edward and Past Tense - for the previous version of reality where the war happened;
Ed and Present Tense - for the current reality, where they've managed to prevent the war (or have they?).

---------------------------------------------------------------
July 15, 1931

Chapter Summary

15.07.1931 is the date when in the previous version of reality Roy was assassinated.

Chapter Notes

Have some fluff with your angst, because shit is gonna go a bit south after this one.

Recap (8 months ago):

Edward caught a rogue alchemist Kidwell, who tried to blow up the Amestrian camp. Ed finds out that Kidwell now works for Drachma after he was kicked out from the Amestrian military.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

July 15, 1931

*People cannot change the past. All we can do is to accept our own actions.*

*If you still wish to be burdened by your sins, let it show in your future actions. It is your choice how to perceive something that has already happened.*

Drachma, South-Eastern mountain pass

“We will all die here, if we stay, sir!” Lieutenant Colonel Hailey hit the map lying on the rock they used as a table, and then folded his arms on his chest.

“I know that! We are not going to stay here, Hailey,” Edward objected. “Listen, if we don’t slow their advance down here, they’ll take Briggs before the reinforcements from Central arrives.”

“Our orders are clear, Hailey,” Voss said quietly looking at the map before him.

“These are suicidal orders! I am not losing more of my men!”

They had been deep inside Drachman territory when last month they received the news that Drachman army broke through the western border and was now closing in to West city. Aerugo joined the war a few months ago and had been pressing on the southern border since then.

Edward had lost a third of his men by that point, when last week he received a message from Major General Bergman who returned to Briggs with the remains of his division, with an order to probe the disposition of a Drachman legion which had been moving towards Briggs.
Edward with his regiment crossed the mountain passage and now they set a temporary camp near it. It was the closest way to the northern Amestris border and they expected the Drachman legion to use it as well.

“We are not going to lose anyone here, Hailey,” Edward brushed his hair away from his face and straightened up, wincing at the sharp pain in his ports.

“We could’ve made an avalanche and blocked the passage, if we still had some explosives left,” Voss spoke again, bending over the map. “They’d have to march to another one west from here - would win us a couple of weeks.”

“We have an alchemist, we don’t need explosives for that,” Edward crouched and pressed his forehead to a cold rock surface - a headache had been tormenting him for the last few days now.

“They undoubtedly sent a reconnaissance team ahead - if we blow up this passage now, the Drachmans will head to the western one too early and all we’d achieve with this will be just a few days delay instead of two weeks.”

“Then we’ll wait until their scouts reach the passage,” Edward pushed himself up on his elbows to look at the map. “Move the camp farther from the mountains, so it is not easily seen, and a small unit can go through here,” he moved his finger on the map, “and as soon as I see the enemy unit, I’ll create an avalanche behind them.”

“This might work,” Hailey unfolded his arms and looked at the map again.

Voss frowned, but didn’t say anything.

“Alright, that settles it then,” Edward rose to his feet, folding the map and putting it in his coat’s pocket. “Hailey, tell your people we are moving in one hour.” Hailey saluted and walked away. Edward turned to face his other battalion commander. “You too, Voss.”

“May I speak freely, sir?”

“Go ahead.”

The man scratched his stubble and sighed.

“You know, that this is risky, letting them past you before blowing up the mountain?” he asked.

“We haven’t been doing anything but “risky” for the last year, Voss. What exactly do you mean?”

“There is a limit to the distance your alchemy works, isn’t it? How far from the spot should you be to make this avalanche?”

“Fifty, maybe seventy meters. Why?”

“We don’t know how large their reconnaissance team is, you will be too close to them. They might notice you from even farther, and we can’t attack them in this passage before it is blocked - there is no guarantee that they will even go all the way through it,” Voss was looking at him with a question in his hazel eyes, apparently waiting for Edward to make the necessary conclusion from his words.

“You want me to drop the avalanche on their heads, that’s what you are implying, Voss?”

“I believe it would prove more effective, yes,” the man answered and went silent, watching Edward’s face carefully.
Edward rubbed his tired eyes and looked down. So far he had been managing to not engage in direct fights himself, but he knew it would end someday. And he realised, that he had been a hypocrite in this - not killing people with his own hands didn’t mean he wasn’t personally responsible for the deaths of the hundreds of Drachmans the men from his regiment killed during the last year, not to mention those under his command who died carrying out his orders.

He looked up and met Voss’s gaze.

“In that case I’ll go there alone,” hazel eyes widened, but Edward spoke again before Voss could voice his objections. “There are not many places in this passage where you can hide a full team, and you know that. But it will be more difficult to spot just one person.”

“What if there are more of them than we think?”

“I am not defenseless, Mark,” Edward said, putting his hand on the man’s shoulder.

“I am not telling the Führer I let his husband die and did nothing, Edward.”

“Oh, of course not, Mark,” Edward squeezed his shoulder before letting go. “For that you’ll need to make it to Central first, how optimistic of you.”

Voss chuckled and Edward smiled bitterly.

~~~

The wind up there was merciless, but it was a good observation spot from where Edward could see a big part of the passage, and it should be safer for him here than below, when he will do the transmutation.

He was crouching behind a boulder on the ledge of the mountain about a hundred meters above the ground. The rock surface under his feet was narrow, but enough to fit him.

There was still a risk that the enemy scouts would also try to take a higher ground, but there were not too many ledges on the mountain side inside the passage, and Edward had to rely on the hope that he would notice them before they notice him.

It was getting darker every minute, but thanks to the snow and ice covering the mountains, Edward was able to see a movement on the ground below.

The enemy soldier was alone, moving slowly, pressing himself as close to the rock walls as possible. Edward tore his gaze from the scout to search the walls, both across from him and the one he was sitting on as far as he could see. From what he could tell from this distance there was no one else in the passage, and it made him frown in confusion - it couldn’t be right, there should be others somewhere.

Edward stood up slowly and brought his palms together. He waited for a particularly strong gust and pressed his hands on the rock behind him, squinting through the waves of prickling snow hitting his face. He began carefully transmuting the surface, trying not to cause any single stone, disturbed by his interference, to fall down, the blizzard hiding the blue sparks of his alchemy. He stopped when there was an about fifty meters long ledge in front of him leading in the direction from where the scout came.

Crouching, he started moving forward, stopping occasionally to check the ground below him and trying to ignore the pain in his ports. He had to repeat the transmutation several times before he saw them - a small squad of what Edward counted as six soldiers was standing right near the northern
He cursed, dropped to his knees and leaned on the mountain wall weighing his options. He didn’t notice if the first scout had a radio, but it would make sense, so if he dropped an avalanche on the heads of the enemy unit now, there was a high possibility that the remaining soldier would still be able to contact the main forces.

Shit, he should’ve taken someone with him, or at least put a small unit of his own near the southern exit from the passage.

Edward pushed himself up and started making his way back, the wind now blowing in his back, less helping and more trying to push him from the ledge. Half the way back, he pressed his palms on the mountain again, creating a narrow staircase down to the ground. He reached to his boot before going down, and took a small throwing knife from it - he had a gun and his alchemy, but if the scout noticed him from the distance and tried to shoot him, using his own gun would alert the Drachmans and alchemy would take more time than to throw a knife.

On the ground, he crossed the passage, reached the opposite wall, and started walking south, every moment expecting to see the back of the Drachman scout. He would knock him out and tie him up - capturing an enemy scout could definitely prove useful - and then return to deal with the rest of the unit.

Suddenly he felt himself be thrown into the wall, sharp rocks painfully hitting his back, the knife falling from his grip. The scout he had been looking for collided with him with his full force, and now was hauling off, and Edward noticed a knife in his hand a flicker of a moment too late. He dodged but the blade still got him, cutting his coat and the flesh of his left shoulder. He gasped and tried to hit the scout with his right hand, but the distance was too close. The scout dropped a few steps backs, still holding a knife in front of him and Edward started at the look in the eyes on the haggard face - almost delirious, they didn’t even seem like eyes a human can have. He shouted some words Edward didn’t understand, and a feral grin twisted his features. Edward had barely enough time to clap and transmute a blade out of his automail, when the enemy soldier threw himself at him, aiming the knife at his throat. Edward dove under his arm, acting on instinct, and thrusted his automail blade in the enemy’s stomach, not feeling any resistance as it went through the thick layers of winter uniform - winter, it was always winter here, wasn’t it? - ripping through the cloth, skin and muscle.

They fell in the snow, and Edward winced as his injured shoulder hit the ground. Sharp, shallow breaths near his right ear made him raise his head. The scout’s eyes were full of hatred and Edward looked away. He sit on his knees, and pulled the blade from the man’s stomach. The scout moaned and slowly brought his hand to cover the deep wound. A thin trickle of blood was running from his parted lips, the snow under him stained red with the blood from his stomach.

He was whispering something in his language, words Edward didn’t know.

Edward pushed himself on his feet, transmuted the automail back and started making his way back to where he saw the Drachmans.

He stopped as soon as he noticed them, clapped his hands and planted his palms on the nearest mountain wall, sending a wave of vibration to where the scouts were standing. The mountain shook under his hands, and the deafening clatter of falling rocks covered the sound of the blizzard. He tore his hands from the rock when the whole passage in front of him was blocked with a wall of rocks, and stared for a moment at the bloody print his right hand left on the icy surface.

His left arm started to feel numb from the cold making its way through the cut in his sleeve to the entrance to the passage.
wound. He put his hand in the pocket of his coat and headed back, snow had almost covered his bloody steps by then. He passed the corpse of the Drachman scout without giving it a second glance.

In twenty minutes he was out of the passage, he would reach the camp in an hour or so, if the wind kept blowing in his back. And in a couple of weeks they should already be in Briggs, and then he could finally take a hot shower, and sleep in a real bed, and contact Roy.

Roy… He hadn’t heard his voice for longer than a year and it felt like ten. Drachman cold, dull scenery, long nights and constant stress were messing up with his sense of time. He will whine to him about that and how cold Drachma was even now, when summer just made it into its second half. He will bitch about his automail ports which had not been letting him sleep normally all this time. He will tell him that he had been missing him more with every passing day.

He will ask him, when he could return.

He will tell him, that during some nights, when the cold was particularly merciless and the air was filled with the sound of gunshots and screaming and the smell of gunpowder and blood, only the thought that he will see him again was keeping him grounded.

Just a couple of weeks.

_I miss you so much, Roy…_

~~~

After a bit less than one hour of wandering in the night, a few dark figures appeared in front of Edward and a familiar voice asked from behind them:

“Brigadier General, sir?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Voss, the hell are you doing here?” Edward’s voice sounded too husky even for his own ears. He walked past soldiers, one of whom he recognised being Voss’s best sniper. He nodded to him absentmindedly, the young man saluting in response.

“You were taking a bit longer than I expected, sir,” Voss answered as if it was enough to explain why he was a good kilometer from the camp with several of his best soldiers in tail.

Edward didn’t stop in his track, wishing to get to the camp as soon as possible, and Voss fell in step beside him, signaling his men to follow.

“A rescue party, huh?” Edward mumbled under his breath. “I think I told you, I can take care of myself, Voss.”

“Of course sir, forgive me the insubordination.”

Edward glanced to the side, catching the questioning look on Voss’s face. He sighed, looked back at the path ahead and said:

“Ask.”

“I assume the plan worked?”

“They were standing near the northern exit. It is blocked now.”

“You have a wound.”
“Just a scratch.”

“Doesn’t look like a scratch from a rock.”

“It is not.”

They fell silent, and for the rest of the way to the camp only the howling of the blizzard was filling the quiet.

Lieutenant Colonel Hailey was on him as soon as he knew that Edward returned to the camp, bombarding him with questions. Voss disappeared somewhere along with his men and Edward used it as an excuse to avoid talking with Hailey now, telling the man he would brief them both first thing in the morning.

He found his tent and dove inside. His shoulder needed to be taken care of, and he probably would have to do some stitches. There was a field doctor in his regiment but they both had a mutual dislike for one another which actually suited them both right.

He found his medical tools and carefully freed his left arm from the sleeves of his uniform and shirt, holding back a groan at the sharp pain the movement caused.

The wound had stopped bleeding some time during his walk, and he was about to sterilize it, when the flip of the tent opened and Voss walked inside, stopping right after the threshold.

Edward looked up at him and stretched his right hand palm up.

“Give me your lighter.”

Voss crossed his hands behind his back and answered:

“I don’t have it.”

“Aren’t you a smoker?” Edward asked not lowering his hand yet.

“I quit half a year ago.”

“Hm,” Edward chew his lower lip. “I guess, I didn’t notice.”

“Ran out of cigarettes.”

“Hm.”

Edward dropped his arm, and looked at the deep cut on his shoulder. It was starting to bleed again - he must have re-opened the cut when he took off his shirt.

“I need a lighter.”

“I bet Doctor Kern has one.”

Edward gave him a sullen look, Voss sighed and reached to the inner pocket of his uniform.

“Do you want to talk about this cut?” He asked, throwing Edward his lighter.

Edward caught it, lit it up and took a needle from his tools.

“They sent one scout ahead. He had a knife,” Edward made the first stitch grinding his teeth and for
once thanking the cold for partially taking care of the sensitivity.

“Is it his blood?”

Edward stopped and glanced at his automail hand as if for the first time noticing a thick layer of dried blood covering it.

He blinked, resuming his work on the wound.

“Yes.”

The silence followed, disrupted only by Edward’s cursing on the needle piercing through his skin. He didn’t have to look back to where Voss was standing to know that he in fact was still in his place - Edward knew the man for more than a year already, enough to learn that his main talent was to know the precise moment when to speak or act, falling silent or disappearing when he felt that Edward didn’t need his input, and appearing as soon as the need arose. It was what positively distinguished him from Lieutenant Colonel Hailey, not only on a personal level, but as a commander and strategist as well - when they got ambushed a few months ago, Voss not only managed to preserve almost all of his battalion, but successfully took command over the rest of their third battalion, which commander had been killed. The man had definitely deserved a promotion a long time ago. Edward will need to raise the question when they got back to Briggs.

“Was it your first?” Voss asked, when Edward finished stitching his wound and began applying a bandage.

“Warrant Officer Monson should have the approximate numbers of the Drachmans we’ve killed since last April. And the exact numbers of the soldiers we’ve lost in the process. Should be a couple of thousands by now in total. Tell him to add another seven, if you are going to talk to him,” Edward answered drily, without looking up.

“You didn’t kill all those people.”

“Sure I did,” Edward said, putting his clothes back on. “I gave the orders, I am responsible.”

The flip of the tent opened and a soldier peeked in, putting a bucket with snow inside the tent. Voss thanked him and the soldier left. Voss picked up the bucket, went to where Edward was sitting on his cot and put the bucket beside him.

“This is war, Edward, this is not how it works,” he said sitting down on a small trunk with supplies.

Edward clapped his hands and touched the snow in the bucket, melting and warming it.

“Are you going to give me a pep talk, Mark?” he asked.

“Have I ever?”

Edward sighed and raised his head to look at the man in front of him.

“Say what you wanna say and get the fuck out, Mark. I just spent several hours freezing my ass on the ice rock, I am not in the mood.”

For a few moments Voss was just looking at Edward with searching eyes without saying anything.

“You know I’m here if you want to talk,” he said, standing up.

Edward just nodded in response.
“Will that be all, sir?” Voss straightened up shifting back from the role of a friend to the one of a subordinate.

“Briefing tomorrow at oh five hundred, Lieutenant Colonel.”

“Yes, sir,” Voss answered and left the tent.

Edward sat there for a moment looking blankly at his right hand in his lap. He needed to wash away the blood. It was already dry, but warm water would do the trick.

He reached to a duffle bag under the cot, and searched for a waste cloth.

He was grateful to Voss for offering his support, but the man was wrong. Ever since Edward arrived there, he felt a responsibility for not only the deaths of soldiers from his regiment, but also for the Drachmans they took with them. All those deaths were on him. Whether he was far or close, whether he was the one holding the weapon, or just the one giving the order - it didn’t matter.

He soaked the cloth in water and started cleaning his automail with it. The bloody crust was giving away easily and soon Ed was staring at the water in the bucket merging with a dirty rust color of washed out blood.

He’d never killed anyone before like that. Yes, all those people died because of his orders, but never like that. It should matter, right? He knew it should.

The memory of that soldier’s eyes was fresh in his mind. He looked at his lap to see his left hand trembling a little. It must be cold. He must be tired.

He moved the bucket away and lied down on his cot. He raised his now clean automail hand before him and looked at it absentmindedly. It was covered with scratches and there were a couple of dents here and there. Winry won’t be happy. He wondered when he would be able to see her again.

He lowered his arm, laying it along his side. It was so easy, to thrust the blade in this soldier’s stomach. Just one move and he took his life.

_Just one move and he dropped tons of rocks on the heads of the other six._

It didn’t matter. More than once did his mere word cause the deaths of hundreds of both Drachman and Amestrian soldiers.

There was no difference and he was way beyond the point of no return for that.

He turned on his side and brought his flesh hand closer to his face. A golden ring was a small flicker of something precious and beautiful in this ugly cold world.

He closed his eyes and there was the feral grin and delirious eyes of the dead man in front of him. He tried to banish it but it didn’t work.

He would ask Roy how he’d been dealing with the faces of the men he’d killed which visited his conscious in the dark of nights.

But for now it hardly...

_Amestris, Central City_

...matters.
When Ed wakes up, it is still early - the first light of the early summer sun is just starting to peek through the loosely shut curtains. He raises his automail hand in front of him and stares at it for a few moments. A faint light from the window gleams on the polished plates. It is when he notices Roy standing near the window, arms folded on his chest, staring into nothing. Ed lowers his hand and sits in the bed.

“Roy?” he asks, his voice hoarse from sleep.

Roy turns his head and looks at him, smiling warmly.

“Good morning, love. Did I wake you?”

“No, it’s fine. Why are you up already?”

“Couldn’t sleep.”

Ed rises from the bed and walks to Roy, the heavy steps of his left foot muffled by a thick rug. He grabs Roy’s arm, lifts it up and dives under it, circling his arms around his husband’s torso. Roy flinches slightly when the cool metal of Ed’s automail brushes over his bare back, but enfolds his arms around Ed’s shoulders, pressing him closer.

“Today is the day,” Edward says, nuzzling in the crook of Roy’s neck and breathing his scent in.

“Yes,” Roy says simply and runs his hand along Ed’s hair, which now reaches the small of his back, gently working his fingers through the tangles.

Ed closes his eyes and lets himself drown in the warmth and comfort of Roy’s scent and his hands around him.

“That kind of dream again?” Roy asks, pressing a gentle kiss on Ed’s temple.

“Mm?” is all Ed can manage, because Roy’s hand is now massaging the back of his head, and Ed is definitely not purring. Absolutely not. It would be weird, because he is human, and it is physically impossible.

“You are sniffing me,” Roy answers as if it explains his previous question.

“Am not.”

“Face it, dear, you are not really the cuddly type,” Roy says and presses his face in Ed’s hair.

“You’re the one who is sniffing me!” Ed objects and tries to pull back from the embrace, but Roy is holding him tight.

“Can’t help it - you smell too good,” the man answers and Ed hears a smile in his voice.

“Eww, Roy! I smell of last night’s sex and sweat,” Ed says grumpily burying his face in the crook of Roy’s neck again.

“Exactly.”

“You are disgusting,” Ed squeezes Roy in his arms and the man probably already has an imprint of the automail on his back, but he doesn’t say anything and keeps brushing Ed’s hair with his fingers.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” He asks quietly after a few moments.
“’bout what?” Ed answers lazily, he is almost drifting back to sleep where he stands.

“About the dream.”

“Oh,” Ed forces himself to open his eyes and turns his head to be able to see the side of Roy’s face. “He— he didn’t know. About today. Well, yet.” He doesn’t add how terrifying it was being in contact with that Edward’s feelings, sensing his fatigue and that little warm light of hope of seeing his husband again soon or at least hearing from him, which was nearly the only thing that kept him going at that moment, and yet knowing that his hopes were not destined to come true.

“He said, he’d received the telegram when he returned to Briggs. I suppose he was not there yet in your dream?”

“No, but he was heading there. Should take another two or three weeks, I guess…” All sleepiness is gone now and Ed stares blankly before him.

Roy shifts and puts his hands on Ed’s hips, pushing him slightly back to look at his face.

“Perhaps you won’t see it,” he says quietly, raising his hand to brush off some blond strands from Ed’s face. His touch is so soft it is barely registering, and there is worry in his dark eyes.

Ed catches Roy’s hand in his and leans to the touch.

“Yeah, maybe I won’t,” he answers though he knows he will hardly be that lucky. Next month. Whatever feelings he will face, he knows he will wake up to the world where Roy is alive. It’ll be fine…

“There was also something else. In the dream I mean,” he adds, turning around in Roy’s arms and leaning with his back at his chest.

“Tell me,” Roy says, nuzzling the top of Ed’s head.

“He had to kill a man. In a close fight,” Ed swallows, the memories too fresh in his mind. “Stabbed him with the automail blade.”

Roy tightens his arms around Ed but says nothing.

“And you know, I never… I never killed someone. I mean I did, but these were… And not like that, you know.”

“I know.”

“But when I was there, was him, I didn’t feel anything. He just did that, because he had to, he really did, and then walked away. But I think he just closed it deep inside of him, because I felt that he didn’t want to do this, that he convinced himself that he is responsible for so many deaths already, that it didn’t matter if he killed them with his own hands or not.”

“But it matters to you.”

Of course it matters.

“I think it also mattered to him, but he just couldn’t face it. Maybe it’s for the better though,” he sighs and closes his eyes. “It’s so fucked up, Roy. All of that, there.”

“It didn’t happen, Ed. It is different now.”
“Yeah, it is...” he answers and falls silent. Yes, they’ve changed their lives. But it doesn’t mean that all of that didn’t happen. In some way - it did. And Ed’s dreams and the notes in Roy’s safe in his office are the proof of it. And it still has been happening for Ed during some nights. So alien, and yet not, they hurt him more than he thought was possible, but every time when he wakes up after them, he tries to smile, grateful for what they’ve managed to preserve thanks to the sacrifice his past self made. And if anything, he decides to consider these dreams his equivalent exchange. Though, there is nothing equivalent in all the pain and misery that other Edward had to go through and these little glimpses in his life Ed has been thrown into. And he’s certainly not going to mope over things which they worked so hard to prevent from happening.

“So… It’s Sunday,” he says, turning around to look at Roy.

“It is.”

“And we have a day off.”

“We do.”

“What were you saying about how I smell and shit?”

“That I love it?”

“I think it’s a bit stale,” Ed says tugging Roy towards the bed. “Gotta refresh it. You know, so you can sniff me as much as you like or whatever else weird shit you wanna do.”

“As always, my dear, you have the most wonderful ideas,” Roy smiles and follows Ed to the bed.

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Afterward they are lying in a tangled mess of limbs, catching their breaths, Roy’s fingers are tracing patterns on Ed’s damp with sweat stomach, and Roy is watching him with a wide grin and a completely besotted look in his eyes. And not the first time, Ed wonders how after almost fourteen years of being together they’ve managed to keep this sparkle in their relationship from fading.


“Do I?”

“Yeah, when you’re looking at me like that.”

“And how exactly am I looking at you?”

“Oh hell no, Roy, you will not make me say all this mushy crap!”

“You want me to say it?”

“Fuck no.” Please do. “You know I hate it.” He doesn’t. And Roy is perfectly aware of that. But these are their roles in this and they both enjoy playing them.

Roy rises up on his elbows on each side of Ed’s head, and starts planting soft kisses along Ed’s jaw, his nose, his eyelids, along with all sorts of compliments, and Ed tries to pretend that the faint blush on his cheeks and the slightly hastened heartbeat is due to him being extremely annoyed by this.

Because for the Führer of Amestris, a man in his late forties, being all that lovesick and sappy is absolutely inappropriate and disgusting.
Ed wouldn’t change it for anything.

“You are always so clingy after sex, Roy. Get off me,” Ed grumbles but makes no attempt to move.

“It’s because I love you. And I just did,” Roy laughs, soft and deep, nuzzling Ed’s collarbone.

“That’s not how you say it, you idiot. You always think you’re so funny, but let me tell you: you’re not,” Ed answers trying not to smile - the bastard will hear it and Ed won’t see the end of more stupid jokes.

Roy looks up and opens his mouth to answer, but he is interrupted by the sound of a phone call. He sighs, stands up from the bed and slips on a bathrobe.

“Be right back,” he says before leaving the room.

Ed gets out of the bed and goes to take a shower. When he is finished and walks in the bedroom, Roy is back in the room, sitting on the edge of their bed.

“Who was it?” Ed asks, stopping in front of him and trying to dry his long hair with a towel.

“Your brother,” Roy answers, standing up and taking the towel from Ed’s hands, gesturing him to turn around.

“Oh really,” Ed closes his eyes, letting Roy gently massage the towel into his skull. His hair ends are dripping water on the carpet but Ed is not going to say anything about Roy’s dubious knowledge in the field of drying hair much longer than his own. “What did he say? Should I call him back?”

“Apparently, he and Winry are coming to Central today. Did you know that?”

“Mmm,” Ed lets out a sound that can distantly resemble pretty much anything, letting Roy to decide on whatever answer he expects from Ed.

“They left the kids with Pinako. He asked if you could meet them at the station later today,” Roy throws Ed’s hair over his shoulder and gives him the towel back. The next moment Ed feels Roy’s hands on his neck and strong fingers start working tight knots in the muscles there. If it’s going to last any longer, Ed will become a puddle on the floor.

“Mm… I guess I should then…” Ed mumbles lazily. “If you don’t mind?” Initially they planned to spend this day together cuddling in bed, as it is not often now when they have a full day just for themselves.

“I won’t pretend that I am not fairly upset that I won’t get to bathe you in worship for as much as I want today, but it is your brother, and as unexpected as this visit is, I know you haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Barf, Roy!” Ed forces himself to open his eyes and turns around to face his husband, trying to make a scowl on his face look genuine, but the tilt of his lips curving them in a smile betrays him. “But you’re the best.”

“I know,” Roy smiles and kisses the tip of Ed’s nose.

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When Ed arrives at Central station and parks the car, Al and Winry are already waiting for him. He waves at them from the car window and when they come closer, gets out of the car to engage in a
series of tight hugs and happy laughs. Winry pecks him on the cheek and throws a barrage of questions about his automail’s well-being at him almost immediately.

When they are finally sitting in the car and Ed starts driving, Al turns to him and asks:

“So, does he suspect anything?”

“Not a single thing,” Ed answers, grinning widely.

“You sure? He can be quite deceptive.”

“Hey, I’d be able to tell,” Ed says cockily, and Winry makes a sarcastic “Phh” from the back seat and Ed shows her his tongue in the back view mirror. “I would!”

“Sure, Ed,” she chuckles. “Anyway, if he doesn’t suspect anything yet, he certainly will when Mrs. Hughes calls him,” she leans forward between two front seats. “That was a stupid idea from the start.”

“It’s not!” Ed shouts at the same time with Al’s “Winry! You promised you wouldn’t!”

“Yeah, yeah, ok,” she sighs and leans back in her seat.

When they arrive at Gracia’s house, there are already two familiar cars parked on the side of the street. Ed pulls over and parks beside them.

Their arrival must’ve been heard from the house, because when they get out of the car, two men, one tall and blond, and another much shorter with brown hair, exit the house and walk towards them.

“Colonel Elric,” says the shorter one, looking at Ed with his trademark laughing-inspecting expression in the hazel eyes.

“Brigadier-General Voss,” Ed answers, trying to hold a smile from his voice but failing.

“Seeing these two greet each other creeps me out every single time,” Havoc says after exchanging greetings with Al and Winry, and fishes out his cigarettes.

“Why is that?” Winry asks.

“Well, it’s not like the boss calls other officers by their ranks too often. And as if this wasn’t enough, he managed to make this whole protocol into a joke,” he lights up his cigarette and breathes out a small cloud of smoke. “I can’t believe you encouraged him,” he tells Voss and the man just smirks, and pulls his own cigarettes out of his pocket.

“Encouraging my brother’s idiotic behavior is the worst thing you can do for humanity,” Al says, dodges Ed’s right fist and takes a few steps away, tugging Winry along. “Anyway, you can stay here poison yourself, and we’ll go greet Mrs. Hughes,” he finishes and the two of them leave.

“I will need to take a picture with all of you blonds when Riza arrives. I feel so exclusive,” Voss says absentmindedly, drawing a chuckle out of Havoc.

“Do it now, because Hawkeye arrives with Roy and you will no longer be exclusive,” Ed says.

“That’s a competition I don’t mind having,” Voss laughs.

“So, boss, does he suspect anything?” Havoc asks.
Ed leans back on his parked car, folding his arms, and tells Havoc the same he told Al.

“Mrs. Hughes gave him a call right before you arrived,” Havoc says, dropping the cigarette stub and pressing his boot in it.

“What did she tell him?”

“No idea, but she said it worked. So I suppose he’ll be here pretty soon. Wanna go inside or wait here?”

“Nah, if I stay it’ll be no fun. Go ahead, I have something to discuss with Voss. Shouldn’t take long."

“Sure, boss.”

Ed turns to Voss, who is looking at him with one brow slightly tilted in question, and waits until Havoc disappears in the house.

“What is it, Edward?”

“Mark, you’ve killed people, haven’t you?” Ed asks straight ahead.

The laughing sparkles leave Voss’s half-lidded eyes. He looks at Ed for a moment, finishing his cigarette and breathing out the last cloud of smoke.

“You know I did.”

Ed shifts his weight to his automail leg and looks at his feet thinking of the best way to ask his next question, without it sounding too off and without mentioning the dream he had today - he and Roy decided not to tell their friends that Ed gets to glimpse into that reality they’ve been trying to change all these years, considering the whole experience too personal to involve more people into it.

Clearly Ed’s silence is stretching for too long. He catches a movement with a corner of his eyes when Voss steps to the car to stand beside Ed.

“Have you?” Ed hears a question and raises his head. Voss is leaning back on his elbows on the car cowl looking at something in the distance.

“I…” He has, hasn’t he? Yes, it technically wasn’t him and he didn’t make this decision, but the feeling of it is as his, as that other Edward’s. While it was not his own hand thrusting the blade into that soldier stomach, it felt real for him. His own brain believes that it happened, and he has to fight a wave of nausea when he thinks about it.

He looks up again and this time Voss is watching him closely.

“Why do you want to talk with me about it, Edward?” he asks.

“I don’t want to make Roy worried. He already has enough on his hands to deal with,” Ed answers honestly.

Voss is studying his face and Ed knows he uses this pauses in the conversation to determine whether he is allowed to be more curious or he has to work with whatever he is being given. The man has never been the talkative type, preferring to observe rather than waste his time on empty talks. He tends to weigh his every word, always leaving the impression that he knows and understands way more than he allows himself to give voice to. It makes him entirely different from Ed, who has no
filter on what his brain sends to his vocal cords, but it is why Ed values Voss. This, and the rare and sudden joke said with a completely serious face.

Voss looks away then, pulls another cigarette from his pocket and lights it up.

“They say, it is like with the first lover. We never forget the face of the first person we had sex with, and we never forget the face of the first person whose life we took. I wish I could tell you otherwise, but I’m afraid it is true.”

“What about those who command armies in a war? They kill hundreds and thousands by their orders alone. They don’t have to draw a weapon to kill.”

“It is different. The one who gives the order in a war can not be solely responsible for all the deaths on the battlefield.”

“Who then? The soldiers?”

“Soldiers? No. They just follow orders.”

“Who is responsible then?”

Voss finishes his cigarette and once again turns to Ed.

“No one. Everyone. It is not that simple when it is a war, Edward. The higher you get the lesser the people under you seem to you. Eventually they become just a number. And it is how a commander should see it - a number. An asset to use, a tool, if you wish. Those who are not able to do this don’t win wars. Ask Roy, I bet he can tell you plenty about it. Once you start seeing your army or the enemy army as a group of individuals instead of one simple number, you get to see an endless crowd of faces, even larger than the number was, because every one of them has a family and loved ones behind them. And a human brain can’t carry such a burden, Edward. Nobody can remember the thousands of faces of the people they killed and stay sane.”

“People are not tools, Mark. Like you said, they all have families and loved ones, and their own lives.”

“If they are not, then do you think each of them should be personally responsible for those they killed following the order?” Voss asks, watching him closely.

Ed scowls. There are still nights when Roy wakes up covered in sweat and gasping for air, after a nightmare with the faces of all those he killed in Ishval following orders. He blames himself. Still. Ed patiently explains to him every time, that it is not the weapon which kills, but the hand holding it, and Roy was nothing but a human weapon back then. It helps. And it helps because Ed believes in that himself. If anything, he can understand why his own past self felt that he was fully responsible for all those deaths.

“No,” he answers simply looking at the ground at his feet, lost in thoughts.

Does that mean that his other self also should not feel responsible for those seven Drachmans he killed, even though it was his own order he was following?

He didn’t feel guilty then. Ed doesn’t feel guilty now either. Disgusted, nauseous at the memory of the face of the Drachman soldier, distorted with hatred, and the feeling of his automail blade ripping through the flesh - yes. Guilty - no. And that is what is bugging him. Because he knows he should. He knows that even if his other self didn’t feel the difference between killing just one with his own hands or killing hundreds with just his word, being blinded by the belief that he was responsible
either way, Ed here and now realises that sometimes one life is worth more than a thousand.

It is, when it is a life you personally take. It is, when it is the life of a person you love. It should, because that was what makes them humans. One life is always worth more. One life of a person you love is worth more than the thousand of people you don’t even know the faces of.

Voss talks about the importance of seeing soldiers as a number. But even in that case the lesser number can be more important than the larger one, if you have to sacrifice the few in order to save many. It is impossible to save everyone. One man can’t be responsible for such a thing.

There is a hand on his shoulder and Ed looks up in the hazel eyes watching him with a flicker of concern in their depths.

“All you’ve been doing these last several years,” Voss says, “all we’ve been doing,” he tilts his head in the direction of the house where Roy’s former team is waiting, now separated between different departments and even cities, just Hawkeye and Havoc being under Ed’s command, “all this serves the sole purpose that no one, and especially you and Roy, would ever have to give such orders, Edward. Those orders, those deaths, they didn’t happen, all thanks to you. You can’t let something eat at you that you personally didn’t do. But we all are grateful for what you and Roy are doing.”

Ed studies Voss’s face for another moment and then smiles and taps the man on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Mark,” he straightens up. “Let’s go inside though, I don’t want to spoil Roy the surprise by standing here in plain sight.”

They enter the house and Ed is instantly met with a tight hug by Mrs. Hughes. He hugs her back and smiles widely.

“Mrs. Hughes, so good to see you!”

“You should visit more often, Edward,” she gently brushes a few blond strands from his face and smoothes out the collar of his shirt, and Ed is nothing but melting under such motherly attention. He loves coming here, and throughout the years Mrs. Hughes has if not replaced his mother, then come really close to it. “Elicia is coming next month for a few days. She would be happy to see you. She is bringing Daniel along, you should finally meet him.”

“How is he treating her? Tell him, she has an older brother who will kick his ass if he upsets her.”

“You are overprotective, brother,” Al walks to them and puts a hand on Ed’s shoulder.

“I am protective, Al. If anything, I’ll look at how you will act in a few years when your Rita is old enough to start seeing boys.”

“I won’t… I…” Al trails off and his eyes widen. “Can we not talk about it? She is only ten, Ed!”

“Oh, Alphonse, kids grow up so fast,” Mrs. Hughes says softly, and Ed starts laughing when Al makes a strangled sound and flees to the living room. “By the way, Edward, have you and Roy thought about an adoption?” she asks.

Ed chokes on his laugh and, mumbling something remotely sounding like “we are so busy”, which is in fact the truth, follows after Al. He can swear he hears Voss chuckling quietly behind his back. As good as having a mother can be, it sure has some downsides once in a while.

“Heymans!” Ed shouts joyfully, noticing a big red haired man talking with Al. “I thought you said you wouldn’t make it?”
Heymans Breda steps to Ed and they exchange handshakes.

“I thought I wouldn’t. I had to promise Sylvia we’ll visit her mom next week, so she let me go. The woman lives near Semoy, Ed! It’s freezing up there!” he sighs. “But, I didn’t come alone,” he adds smiling mischievously.

“Huh?”

Breda takes Ed by a shoulder and turns him around to show him a big crate with beer bottles standing in the corner. Ed laughs and taps the man on the shoulder.

“Heymans, you are my best friend!”

Two indignant “Hey!” ring out simultaneously from behind them and Ed turns around to look at the two of his friends who look way too scandalized for that to be in any way realistic.

“Did you bring booze?” he asks them, pointing his metal finger at each of them.

“I brought myself and my toolbox to check your automail, Ed,” Winry says grimly at the same time with Voss’s “The man has a point”, which earns him a gloomy glare from Winry and a chuckle from Breda.

“My automail is just fine,” Ed says pressing his right arm to his chest protectively. All these years and he is still a bit terrified by his childhood friend.

“He is lying,” Voss says, making a tactical retreat to stand behind Falman, who is observing the scene before him with a little contemplative smile.

Ed sends Voss a malevolent glare and mouths “Traitor”, and then returns his attention to Winry.

“Am not.”

Winry folds her arms across her chest, frowns and glances at Voss.

“I think his elbow joint gets jammed sometimes, judging by how he pretends that holding his arm bent is just more convenient for him.”

“We are not friends anymore, Mark,” Ed says dramatically.

“Anyway, you should ask Roy.”

“Oh, I will,” Winry says looking back at Ed and her eyes don’t promise him anything good.

Ed sighs and turns to Al who is wearing a very amused expression on his face.

“I am surrounded by enemies, Al. How did that happen?”

“Don’t be dramatic, brother. One might think at your age you’d have learned the importance of taking care of yourself.”

Ed presses his palm to his chest and closes his eyes.

“Right in the heart, Al.”

Al laughs softly and Winry walks to them to sit on the couch.
“Mustang is a horrible influence on you, Ed,” she says, chuckling.

“Speaking of whom,” Havoc enters the room and drops himself in the armchair stretching his long legs under the coffee table. “His car just pulled over. Mrs. Hughes went to meet him and Hawkeye on the porch.”

Ed brushes the hair from his face, suddenly feeling a bit nervous. A warm hand catches his and squeeze gently. Ed looks at his brother and Al smiles.

“It is a good idea, don’t worry, brother. I am sure he will be happy.”

“Thanks, Al,” Ed answers quietly, and steps closer to the door leading to the corridor.

He can hear the door opening, the soft voice of Mrs. Hughes and the deeper one of Roy, answering her something. Three pairs of steps coming closer and the door opens and Mrs. Hughes steps in, glancing at Ed and winking. She walks to the couch and sits near Winry. Roy enters the room and stops abruptly taking in the view before him. Hawkeye is standing behind him and if Ed hadn’t known her for so long, he’d have missed the slight tightening in the corners of her eyes which is Hawkeye’s version of a pleased smile.

Roy looks bewildered for a whole three seconds, which Ed considers a very good result, before he collects himself and pulls on his usual unreadable expression. He looks at Ed, his brow twisted a bit in question, and then back to the others.

“It is an intervention, isn’t it?” he asks in a small voice.

“Have you done something worthy of an intervention, Roy?” Mrs. Hughes asks smiling softly.

Roy squares his shoulders and looks at Ed, who is fighting back a laugh.

“I will deny everything,” Roy says.

There is no point in dragging this out any longer. This will be weird just for a few moments, Ed reassures himself. Al agreed this was a good idea, and even Hawkeye supported it.

“Happy Birthday, Roy,” he says, and smiles.

“You are well aware that my birthday is not today, Ed,” Roy answers, tilting his head in confusion.

“I believe you now have two, sir,” Hawkeye says calmly. Roy glances at her and Ed can see his eyes widening in sudden realisation.

Roy looks back at Ed, and Ed steps closer to him and enfolds Roy’s neck in his arms, placing a soft kiss on the man’s cheek.

“Happy Birthday,” he repeats quietly. I’m so happy you are here.

Roy is looking at him so brightly and intensively, as if he can’t quite contain all the emotions filling him now, as if there is so much he wants to say, but has to hold back.

“Ed…” he whispers, and how can just one syllable hold so much meaning and so many promises? “Thank you.”

Ed grins happily and releases his hold on Roy.

“You’re welcome.”
He steps to the side, watching Roy greet his friends, shaking hands with Havoc and Voss who he gets to see quite regularly, tapping Falman, Breda and Fuery on the shoulders, gallantly kissing Winry’s hand, and embracing a laughing Al in a tight hug. He asks Breda, who he hasn’t seen the longest, about his family, and laughs deeply and happily when the man tells him something funny about his kid.

Ed looks at Hawkeye who is also watching the scene unfolding before them, and her lips are curled in a small soft smile.

“It is good to see him like that. So relaxed and carefree,” she says.

“It is,” Ed answers, and his thoughts wander to a much less pleasant place, but one he knows he can’t and has no right to ignore. It is important to remember to what they owe this opportunity to spend a day among their friends; who they all owe their lives to. And come to think of it, there is no price too high to pay for what they’ve managed to accomplish thanks to it. Edward paid with his life, but at the same time he is still here, alive, as well as Roy and all their friends. And it makes Ed wonder if it is even fair, if they even deserve all this being basically given to them, without them paying anything for it. There is nothing equivalent in this exchange, the price paid by someone who doesn’t even exist in this reality. But what they can do is to accept this with gratitude, enjoy every moment of it and do everything in their power to not let anything like what he is seeing in these glimpses of his other reality happen again.

He tears himself from his spot, grabs Hawkeye’s hand and walks to the small crowd of the people he loves more than anything in this life.

Chapter End Notes

The time skips between chapters will vary from a few days to several months, so pay attention to the dates in chapter title and recaps before each chapter.

Pls let me know, what you think, all comments are really appreciated.
Chapter Summary

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, her voice now sounding less rough.
No...
“He was a good man,” she added before turning around and leaving the room.
No!
“NO!”

Chapter Notes

Recap (a month ago):
Edward had to kill a man in a close fight.
Ed and Co gather together to celebrate the day when Roy wasn’t murdered unlike his self from their previous version of reality (this sounds so broken, but it'll do as a reminder for what happened, I suppose :D).

Also, huge thanks to my incredible beta Himeneka who helped to phrase most Armstrong's lines and some Roy's in this chapter (she just plain wrote them for me, ok, cause my English is like a 5th grade level, I can't do smart lines like that xD).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

August 22, 1931

Amestris, Fort Briggs

It took them a whole month instead of two weeks as Edward had hoped to reach Briggs. They had stumbled across another Drachman reconnaissance unit and a little batallion right after. Weather had also not been making it easier, and when they were finally standing near Briggs’s wall, they all were worn out, exhausted and out of supplies.

Inside they were met by very distressed looking Briggs soldiers, one of them making his way to where Edward was standing watching his remaining men get rid of their winter coats - it was not too warm inside Briggs, but still it was better than the neverending freezing cold outside.

“Um, Brigadier-General Elric,” the soldier, a young man just maybe slightly younger than Edward, saluted. “We— ah, we expected you earlier, sir.” He swallowed, looking uneasy.

Edward was too tired to give it much thought, besides they were in the middle of war - he couldn’t remember when was the last time he saw someone looking relaxed and happy.
“There were complications,” he answered, gesturing to one of his men to come up. “Get me Warrant Officer Monson,” he told him, and then returned his attention to the soldier before him. “Intercepted one Drachman unit, beat another. You know, the usual,” he said dryly.

From the corner of his eye he noticed Monson standing a few steps away, waiting for Edward to finish his conversation. Edward signaled the man to come closer.

“I want all my men to be fed and issued with a place to sleep. Warrant Officer Monson here will provide you with the information about the current size and structure of the regiment,” he looked at Monson and the man nodded, mumbling a quiet “yessir”. “Now, get me to someone of a higher rank, will you. Is General Armstrong here?” he asked, but as the soldier before him opened his mouth to answer, he was interrupted by the familiar voice of Briggs’ leader.

“Elric!”

“General Armstrong,” Edward nodded to the woman as she stopped in front of him. The soldier Edward had been talking to and Monson saluted and excused themselves. “It is nice to finally be inside four walls.”

“We’re glad you’ve made it. We’ve been expecting you at least a month ago,” she said and looked around. “You returned with many,” she looked back at Edward, watching him with an expression which bugged Edward in a way he couldn't yet place. “I thought you’d lose more.”

“We lost many,” he answered dryly. “What is the situation now?”

“I will call up a briefing tomorrow morning, we’ll discuss details there. Now, follow me, I’ll show you your room and give you the short version,” she locked her hands behind her back, turned around and started walking towards the elevators.

“Thank you,” Edward answered, falling in step beside her.

She was silent until they were riding up.

“Is there anything you want to know particularly?” she asked without looking at him.

“When are you awaiting reinforcement from Central?” Edward asked, slightly surprised by her question, but too exhausted to actually care.

“There will be no reinforcement.”

“The hell does that mean?”

The elevator came to stop, they walked out of it and proceeded along the narrow corridor.

“Half of the West and South area are occupied, we are pinned down from three sides. The main Amestris forces are trying not to let Aerugo and Creta armies any farther. There will be no reinforcement, Elric. We are on our own.”

A shiver ran down his spine and he felt his heart skipping a beat. How fast the situation shifted from merely bad to catastrophic… What did they do wrong, how did they allow this to happen? Ed scowled, thinking how horrible Roy must feel about this. The man surely blamed himself. Edward will contact him as soon as possible.

Armstrong stopped in front of one of many doors, opened it and gestured Edward to come inside.
“There is something else you need to know,” she said as soon as she closed the door behind her. “We received the news just a couple of weeks ago, but you were out of contact for much longer. I didn’t…” She trailed off, for a moment averting her eyes. She looked like she was not completely sure of what to say next. Edward frowned - it was unsettling to see this woman hesitate.

She regained her composure the next moment and looked back at Edward. She reached into her pocket, took a folded envelope from it and passed it to him.

He hesitated for a moment, trying to get a hint from her eyes, what it was about. But her expression was blank and only a frown between her brows indicated her distress.

He took the envelope, but she didn’t let go.

“Open it when I leave,” she said, finally releasing the envelope from her grip.

His throat was suddenly dry and he had to try twice before he managed to force the words out of his mouth.

“What is this?”

“I am sorry, Edward.”

“What are you sorry for?” he swallowed around the lump in his throat. “What is it, Armstrong?!)

She was holding his intense gaze, but he was surprised at how uncomfortable she looked.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, her voice now sounding less rough.

No…

“He was a good man,” she added before turning around and leaving the room.

No!

“NO!”

His fingers were trembling when he opened the envelope and took a lone paper from it. It was a telegram.

Pieces of words “...regret to inf...”, “...hrer Mustang...”, “...assassination...” warmed his vision and he had to blink twice to focus his eyes on the text, regretting it instantly when the meaning of the words hit him.

His heart sank and the empty envelope fell down from his weak fingers. His knees were shaking and he had to step back to the bed to sit down.

He was staring blankly before him, almost surprised that he didn’t feel anything at that moment, like an empty doll, bereft of the ability to feel, the only sensation he was able to experience was cold raising up from his limbs to cumulate in the middle of his chest.

And as he was sitting there clenching his fingers around the small piece of paper, he was grateful for the numbness filling him.

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He didn’t remember how he managed to get rid of his clothes, take a shower and end up under the
blankets on the real bed he had been yearning to sleep in for so long, but wasn’t even able to fully appreciate now.

He didn’t remember where he put the telegram yesterday but he couldn’t care less.

He hardly noticed how he put on his uniform this morning to go to the briefing with General Armstrong. He was walking along the corridors of Briggs, not paying much attention to the soldiers he was passing saluting him. Apparently at some point Voss found him and followed, because now they were standing together in the elevator taking them to another level.

“Edward?” It was the first time since Edward had known Voss that the man was addressing him by his name without any preliminary exchange of the usual formal greetings. This caught Edward’s attention and he turned his head to look at the man beside him.

Voss studied his face for a moment, frowning at something he saw there.

“I can’t even begin to imagine how you feel right now,” he said eventually, locking his hazel eyes on Edward’s. “But you are not alone. Know that,” he finished as the elevator stopped.

Edward nodded silently and went ahead, Voss’s steps quiet behind him.

In the room where the briefing was being held they entered last, General Armstrong, Major General Bergman, Lieutenant Colonel Hailey and a Colonel whose name Edward didn’t know, were already waiting for them.

After an exchange of greetings they sat at the table, Edward registering absentmindedly Voss lowering himself in the chair on Edward’s left.

Through the fog in his head and distant tinkling in his ears, Edward tried to focus on the conversation. Bergman asked him something, he heard his voice and saw him looking at him, but the meaning of his question slipped from Edward’s attention.

A hand squeezed his forearm briefly and let go instantly. Edward blinked, glancing to his left, but Voss wasn’t looking at him. Edward turned to Bergman and cleared his throat.

“Could you repeat your question?” his voice still sounding too husky for his own liking.

“I asked about the main results of your operations. We need as much information on the Drachmans disposition on the north, especially considering that this might be our last line of defense, given the actions of Creta and Aerugo for the last few months.”

Right, he needed to report what he spent his last year doing.

Edward nodded, trying to focus on the world around him, and started talking, reporting the information they gathered during their time in Drachma. His voice was the voice of a stranger to him, sounding cold and distant, and he was almost surprised at how disconnected his mind was from his own body at that moment.

People around the table were listening to him carefully without interrupting.

He noticed absentmindedly, that Bergman had lost more hair since Edward last saw him several months ago, and now the man was almost bald. He was raising his hand to his head sometimes, as if he wanted to run his fingers through hair which was no longer there, and as if realising it in the last moment, was dropping it back on the table, sighing heavily.
After some time Edward found himself standing near the map on the wall, illustrating his report with marks and short notes on it. He was speculating now about the presumptive road the Drachman division could take to get to Briggs across the mountain pass he had blocked. He glanced at Armstrong, taking in the way her intertwined fingers laying in front of her on the table, were tense and pale, but she held her face, not showing the full scale of concern she had, except for her usual frown between her brows. It was interesting how similar and yet different she and Roy were with handling their emotions. Both having a perfect control over their features, wearing masks, Roy tended to resort to a completely blank face or, if the situation required him to be more cunning, to a careless dimwitted image, and Armstrong chose to keep her thoughts and emotions behind the thick cold exterior of intransigent leader.

“Elric?..” Armstrong spoke suddenly her brow raised in question, and Edward realised that he was standing silent and frozen in front of the map. He didn’t notice that he had stopped talking at some point.

“Um… Sorry,” he cleared his throat and went to sit on his chair again. He could feel Voss looking at him. “Basically, this is it in outline. I’ll have Warrant Officer Monson bring you written copies of the report,” he said looking at Major General Bergman. “What are our current order?”

“We don’t have any orders. We don’t even know what is happening in Central right now - the connection was cut off around a month ago, our calls are going into a void,” Armstrong explained.

“But you received the telegram,” Edward asked ignoring the sinking feeling in his stomach when he said that word. “Did you try sending yours?”

“We did, but got no response yet. For what it’s worth, Cretan or Aerugian army could be invading Central City right now and we would know nothing about it,” Bergman said, clenching his hands in fists on the table in front of him.

“Then what is our next course of actions?” Edward heard Voss asking quietly.

Bergman sighed and glanced at Armstrong. She had her arms folded across her chest and her eyes were fixed at the center of the table.

“We stay here and wait until we get any news,” she said finally, not looking at anyone in particular and it was obvious by the scowl on her face that she hardly was happy with that decision.

Edward slammed his left palm at the table and jumped on his feet.

“You just want to sit on your asses while the country is at war? I brought you the information about Drachmans dispositions on the north, we know the size and location of most of their units in this area! We have enough soldiers here to make a difference, we must push back!”

“I am not risking the lives of my men for something that might not bring any difference on the great scale, Elric!”

“I lost half of my men to bring you this information and you are not even going to use it?!”

“The situation has changed. We have no leadership at the moment, and even if someone has stepped in, we haven’t received any news. We can’t act on our own will without knowing what is happening in the rest of the country.”

A creaking sound drew Edward’s attention to where his automail hand was gripping the edge of the table too harshly. He made an effort to unclench his fingers, and lowered himself back in his chair.
“And according to the information the Brigadier-General has brought to our attention today, there is a big Drachman division marching here, which should reach the Fort in a couple of weeks,” said the Colonel, who had been silent till this moment. “It would be wise not to spread our forces until we deflect their attack.”

“This is my order as the highest ranking officer, Elric,” Armstrong said, looking at Edward. “Like it or not, we are staying here until the situation changes one way or another. Is that clear?”

Edward was clenching his jaw so hard his teeth started hurting. He stood up and fixed his eyes on Armstrong.

“Yes, Ma’am,” he answered quietly. “Will that be all?”

Armstrong frowned and studied his face for a moment, apparently not pleased with what she saw.

“Dismissed,” she said, and Edward was out of the door in a second.

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The wind up there was the strongest, and Edward raised up the collar of his coat to hide at least a part of his face from the grasp of the cold. He was standing on the wall of Briggs, looking at the endless white valley before him when a motion caught his attention and he looked to the side to see Voss walking to him. The man stopped as he saw Edward noticing him, and tilted his head hesitantly.

“Sir?”

Edward gave him a small nod and turned his head back, eyes fixed on something only he could see.

Voss came closer and stood near Edward, leaning on his elbows on the high railing.

“If I may ask, sir, what are you planning to do now?”

“You heard Armstrong’s order,” Edward answered dryly, squinting against the snow the wind was throwing at him.

“I’ve known you long enough to understand that if the order you were given is not to your liking, you will come up with another for yourself.”

“Are you asking me if I am going to disobey the direct order of a superior officer, Lieutenant Colonel?”

“Aren’t you?”

Edward straightened up and turned to Voss, putting his hands in pockets.

“You are talking about insubordination.”

Voss looked at him, meeting his gaze.

“I believe I am.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”
“Why do you want to know?”

Voss frowned and folded his arms on his chest.

“You don’t trust me.”

It didn’t sound like a question, more like a sudden realisation, and Edward thought he heard a flicker of surprise in the man’s voice. Voss was looking at him, waiting for the answer.

Edward closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“I do,” he said quietly.

“You won’t stay here, will you?” Voss’s voice changed, sounding softer, now more fit for a conversation between friends rather than one between superior and subordinate. “Will go to Central?”

“There is nothing for me in Central,” Edward answered, running his hand through his hair. It was almost reaching his hips now, even tied in a braid, and more than once during the last year he thought of cutting it, but Roy loved his hair so he kept it despite the inconvenience on the battlefield.

_I wonder if I’m going to look like Al with a short haircut…_

“What about your brother?”

“He lives near South City with his family.”

“They might be fine, Edward. Aerugonians are not Drachmans. You should try sending a telegram at least.”

“Yeah, I will.”

A sudden wave of dizziness made him stumble and he had to grab a railing to not fall. The wind threw a portion of snow at him, it got under his collar and he shivered at the melting cold on his skin. He was looking under his feet now, shifting his weight on his left automail leg, not fully trusting his body to keep its balance. An arm appeared in his field of view and a hand grasped his shoulder holding him upright. He looked up, his vision foggy.

Voss was clenching his jaw, lips just a thin line, a deep frown between his brows.

“I am so sorry, Edward.”

Edward nodded and took in a deep breath, a single tear ran down his face - a warm trail which froze instantly, and he pushed down the rest which threatened to break through.

He put his hand on the other man’s shoulder, mirroring him.

“I’m fine.”

Voss’s frown deepened but he didn’t say anything, letting go of Edward’s shoulder. Edward let his own hand drop to his side and walked pass Voss, heading toward the door leading inside.

Voss didn’t follow him and Edward was grateful. Besides, he couldn’t answer the man’s questions about his plans yet anyway.

He went to his room, closed the door behind him, and sunk down dropping his head on his bended
knees.

The floor was cold. There was a small fireplace in his room and he should probably light a fire there, but his limbs felt numb and he couldn’t make himself stand up. He raised his head and looked at his flesh hand. It was pale and the fingers were trembling.

*It is so cold here, why is it so cold?...*

He pushed himself from the floor with his automail hand, and plodded slowly to where his duffle bag was lying. He still had that lighter Voss gave him a month ago. He could use alchemy to start a fire, but he didn’t trust himself now to not burn the whole place - fire had always been Roy’s specialty, not his.

*Roy...*

He fell down on his knees near the bag and shoved his hand inside, searching for the lighter. He grasped it and pulled his hand out, the sleeve of his coat catching a few other objects on the way. A crumpled piece of paper fell down from the bag on the floor and he reached for it, not recalling putting it there in the first place.

It was that telegram. He must’ve shoved it in the bag yesterday. Without thinking he smoothed it out, staring at it blankly.

He read the words he knew he would never forget anyway, over, and over, and over again. His body was shaking violently and he was gasping for air but couldn’t tear his eyes from the small piece of paper before him, couldn’t stop reading the words which shattered his whole world.

His throat hurt, and every breath came in and out with broken glass stuck in his throat, cutting and hurting.

He heard someone screaming.

His shaking fingers groped the lighter and after the fourth attempt he managed to light it up.

He burnt the telegram.

The fire was beautiful. He always loved fire.

That night, when he stepped out of the bathroom and walked to his bed, there was an unfamiliar sensation of air moving on the back of his neck. He put his head on the pillow and winced at the too short hairs there prickling his skin.

He felt bare, empty and cold. He dragged his knees to his chest and closed his eyes.

He would never be warm again.

**Amestris, Fort Briggs**

Ed opens his eyes to the same ceiling he just closed them to a moment ago. He sits in the bed and registers absentmindedly that his back is damp with sweat and his hands are shaking.

He woke up, didn’t he?
He slowly turns his head to look at the other side of the bed. It is empty and Ed brushes his flesh hand along the cold sheets.

*So cold, why is it so cold?..*

He woke up, he did, he knows he did…

With some effort Ed untangles his legs from the comforter and rises on his feet. His knees almost bend under him, but he balances himself putting one hand on the wall, and he has to swallow the wave of nausea rising up from his clenched stomach.

Why is this the same room? Or do all rooms in Briggs look similar?

His eyes fix on the floor and for a moment he thinks he sees ash from a burned paper there. He blinks and the vision is gone.

Briggs, what is he doing in Briggs?

*They returned here yesterday, after a long year spent in Drachman cold, he lost more than half of his men, but at least —*

He makes several steps towards the bathroom, forcing his mind to focus and trying to ignore how his heart is beating so fast and so loud, that it feels like his whole body is trembling with this maddening pulsation.

No, they came to Briggs to meet with Drachma’s ambassador. Yes, he remembers it, so it must be true.

Is it? Because there are also other memories in his mind.

He is fully shaking when he finally makes it to the bathroom, his mind is blank and it’s hard to think.

He is in Briggs for the meeting. There is no war. There is no war. There is no…

*Roy.*

His knees give up and he falls on the hard floor, hardly making it in time to grab the sit of the toilet and bend down before his body is twisted in a spasm and he throws up. There was nothing in his stomach and the gastric acid burns his throat and nose. His hair is falling from his shoulders hiding him from the world. Ed looks at it blankly through the haze of tears in his eyes - his hair is long. He’s thought of cutting it shorter, but he keeps it for his husband - Roy loves his hair.

There is the sound of a door opening and a rustle of steps.

“Ed?”

He raises his head and opens his mouth to answer, but his throat hurts and his heart is still beating fast making him gasp for air instead of breathing steadily. He leans on his automail hand, because his left one is shaking too much, and pushes himself from the ground.

The steps sound closer and Roy enters the bathroom as Ed finally manages to fully stand up, his flesh hand tight around the edge of the sink.

“Ed! What happened?” Roy rushes to his side and grabs his shoulders.

Ed blinks and feels a lone tear slowly making its way down his cheek. He opens his mouth again,
but no sound comes through. His breaths are coming short and shallow and there is a needling sensation in his fingers. He looks down and his knuckles on the sink are almost the same shade of white as the porcelain itself. Funny.

“Look at me, love, please, Ed, talk to me,” Roy’s voice is rough with worry, his hands are warm on Ed’s face.

Ed lets them tilt his head and he is now looking right into Roy’s dark eyes. He once thought they were black, but it couldn’t be, right? So he concluded they must be just a very dark shade of brown. But fourteen years ago they were standing almost like they are standing now, and that was when Ed saw that Roy’s eyes were dark blue. And back then they were also full of worry. Just like now. He doesn’t like making Roy worry.

Ed loves Roy’s eyes. He knows that even when the man is wearing a mask, his eyes are showing so much. Ed loves how Roy looks at him. Even right now there is this warm, fond undertone in a flicker of his eyes.

He looks lower and he sees Roy’s lip moving, forming words, but the sound of them doesn’t reach Ed’s ears. His head is buzzing and he can’t feel his left hand. He looks at it again and there is another hand in his field of vision, trying to tear his dead grip off from the sink as gently as possible.

Ed closes his eyes for a moment and tries to take a deep breath. The air catches in his throat, he coughs, feeling the tears now fully running down his face. His eyes fly open and he makes a last attempt to focus on the signals coming to his body from the outside, instead of an alien pain in his chest, which shouldn’t have a place in this world, because here is Roy standing in front of him, and Ed feels bad for making him worry.

“Ed, Ed, darling, please talk to me…”

“R-Roy…”

“Oh, thank god,” Roy is cupping Ed’s face with warm hands, trying to brush the tears from it, but it’s useless.

Ed gasps, his heart is beating so violently his chest hurts.

“Roy!” He sounds weak and desperate as he grabs the front of Roy’s jacket with both his hands and presses his face to the side of Roy’s neck, and the feeling of his pulse on Ed’s cheek causes another burst of tears running down his face to disappear eventually under Roy’s collar.

Ed hears Roy say something, and he feels his arms around him, and he doesn’t notice when his knees bend under him and he is tugging them both down on the hard cold floor.

His vision is blurry and his limbs are numb, he is not getting enough air in his lungs and he can’t remember when was the last time he cried like that, his chest and throat hurting, but he can’t stop. His brain is not getting enough oxygen and he can’t think, falling deeper and deeper in the suddenly opened wound inside him. The wound, which shouldn’t be there.

It is not the first time that the feelings from these dreams are overwhelming him, but till now he has been managing to control them, though it was hard sometimes to distinguish them from his own, to convince his mind that it wasn’t happening with him. But this time it is different. He feels as if his heart is ripped out from his chest and he is deprived of the very ability to breath.

He doesn’t know how long it lasts, but eventually he runs out of tears and he finds himself breathing calmer. He releases his dead grip on Roy’s jacket and just lies in the man’s arms, listening to his
heartbeat. It is a bit faster than usual and he wonders if he just caused his husband a few new gray hairs.

He closes his eyes and focuses on Roy’s voice.

“...and then you yelled at me that I didn’t even take it from you. I believe you called me bastard and used the word “fuck” so many times during those few minutes that you probably beat some world record. And then I—”

“The fuck you talkin’ ’bout,” Ed’s voice is hoarse and he coughs, wincing at the pain in his sore throat.

Roy trails off and his arms tighten around Ed.

“You are back with me,” he sounds relieved and tired, and Ed feels a spike of guilt for causing him such distress. “I was recalling how I proposed to you. Remember?” he says quietly, pressing his lips to Ed’s head.

“’t wasn’t—,” he coughs, “I did—,” it’s pointless, he should give his throat some time to recover if he wants to argue with Roy about who proposed to who first. It’s not fair.

Roy’s heart is beating at its normal pace now, but Ed doesn’t move from his spot, listening to the soothing “thum-thum-thum”. He will apologise to Roy for making him sit on the hard floor with Ed in his arms later. But now he needs it. He needs to feel the warmth radiating from Roy’s body, to hear his breathing and his heart beating.

It is so easy to forget that it is not the past he has been seeing in these dreams and not even the life of some other man, but it is the traces of his own possible reality that are reaching him here. And this glimpse into the reality where he could’ve lost Roy is petrifying.

Lost in his thoughts and exhausted by this whole experience, he doesn’t notice how the steady heaving of Roy’s chest is slowly making him drift to sleep.

“Do you think you can stand up, love?”

Roy’s voice brings him back to reality and Ed opens his eyes. He makes a sound distantly resembling a “yes”, not trusting his voice yet, and with Roy’s help rises up from the floor.

“’m fine,” he husks, grabbing the edge of the sink with both hands, and looks up in the mirror.

Roy’s reflection catches his eyes and Ed smiles weakly.

“I’m fine, Roy,” he says again, his voice is almost back to normal now. “Thank you.”

Roy runs his fingers through Ed’s hair and kisses the top of his head. Ed sees him closing his eyes when he murmurs “I love you”.

Ed catches Roy’s hand in his and squeezes briefly.

“Sorry for scaring you, it’s just...” he swallows. “It’s just he was in this room or similar when he got that telegram, you know... So I kinda freaked out a bit when I woke up. It’s ok now.”

“Ed, I know we talked about it, but if there is a way to—”

Ed turns around and puts his hands on Roy’s chest feeling the even beating of his heart under Ed’s left palm.
“No, Roy, I need to know all this. It’s...” he looks up at his husband. “I need to know what it cost him to give us this second chance.”

Because as much as these dreams are painful to live through, he thinks that they owe it to that Edward. Seeing the sacrifices he made and the importance of his choices - this is the least Ed can do - they can’t allow themselves to forget.

Roy is gently brushing Ed’s cheek with his fingers, his other hand tight on Ed’s hip.

“It’s hard to see you hurting like this. That Edward said it got worse than my worst memories of war. And I hate seeing it reflected in your eyes, my love. I can’t even imagine how it might be for you to experience it,” he plants a kiss on Ed’s forehead and, when Ed closes his eyes, gently kisses his eyelids. “It is getting worse, isn’t it?” Roy whispers with a tight voice. “And knowing there are still more than two years of it...” he doesn’t finish and his grip on Ed’s hip tightens.

“Well, at least the worst part is over,” Ed answers bitterly.

Roy lowers his head to press his forehead to Ed’s.

“Ed?” he asks, and his tone is much lighter now.

“Mm?”

“You smell like vomit,” Roy says quietly.

“Fuck you,” Ed punches him lightly on the shoulder and Roy laughs. “Now get the hell out here and go to bed, I’ll brush my teeth and be right there,” he says, pushing the laughing man out of the bathroom.

“I’ll be waiting for you, my love!” Roy shouts jokingly through the door when Ed slams it in his face.

“Sure you will.” Ed says trying to sound grumpy, but can’t hold a smile from his voice. He loves this man for this occasional silliness he lets out around those he trusts, which means that Ed usually gets at least a double dose of it, but he doesn’t mind.

Ed makes a sloppy ponytail and starts brushing his teeth, feeling the remains of the soul-crushing horror he’s experienced being slowly brushed away by the thought that when he walks out of the bathroom, Roy, alive and well, will be curled under the blankets in their bed, probably already asleep, despite his declaration a minute ago.

Ed finishes brushing his teeth, and leaves the bathroom. A weak light from the lamp on the bedside table is enough to see that Roy is indeed asleep, lying on his side breathing soundly. Ed slips under the blanket beside him and moves lower to tuck his head under Roy’s chin. That way he can press his nose in the dimple between Roy’s collarbones and inhale deeply to fill his lungs with Roy’s scent. He circles his left arm around Roy’s torso and closes his eyes.

“I love you,” he whispers softly and hears Roy mumble something sleepily while pulling his arm from where it was trapped between their bodies to put it on the small of Ed’s back and press him closer.

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The morning comes too early, but Ed hasn’t been able to sleep deeply anyway, yanking himself out of semi-unconscious state when his eyelids were getting too heavy, justifying to himself that he
would most certainly begin tossing and turning in his sleep and this would disturb Roy, but in fact he’s too scared to simply rip his eyes from watching Roy’s chest rising and falling steadily. There was nothing reasonable in depriving himself from these last few hours of much needed sleep but the sticky horror Ed felt in his dream was still too real, and he was trying to banish it by savoring the feeling of being wrapped in Roy’s arms, listening to his quiet breaths and enjoying the warmth radiating from his body.

He gets out of the bed about an hour before the alarm Roy set for himself. He quietly pulls on his clothes and, throwing a last glance on his sleeping husband, exits their room.

It is slightly after 5 a.m. and Briggs is beginning to wake up, corridors filling with soldiers, officers and other personnel stationed here, and Ed heads to a mess hall to grab whatever passes for breakfast here, to get hold of Hawkeye and the rest of their team afterwards to go through the details of the security precautions required for today’s meeting with the Drachmans.

Ed nods greetings to the Briggs soldiers lining up for their morning portion of nutrition and joins them in the queue, thinking how this is what his life has become - neverending meetings with Drachmans.

The relationships with Aerugo and Creta were both successfully secured a few years ago, but the one with Drachma has been exhaustingly getting back and forth. There has been no end to the negotiations, Drachma coming up with new demands every time, and Ed has long suspected, that seeing Amestris’s interest in signing up a long term treaty with them, Drachma has been using this to its own advantage, basically milking Amestris for getting better conditions for themselves.

Even with a guarantee that other countries would at the very least not interfere if an armed conflict between Amestris and Drachma arose, and at very best would partake at Amestris side, neither Roy nor Ed would want for any war to take place at all, and they have been doing whatever was in their power to not let that happen ever since Roy obtained the notes from their possible future fourteen years ago. But both of their patiences have been running thin, especially Roy’s as he was the one who had to personally negotiate with the other country during multiple occasions.

This time it is going to be different though, as this time Drachma is sending its Foreign Minister as the head of the delegation, who answers directly to their Emperor, and, as Ed has been able to find out, is authorised to make a number of decisions without the necessary approval from the Emperor. Ed tries to see it as a sign of the Drachmans being as fed up with the endless rounds of negotiations as he and Roy are, and perhaps today they will finally be able to reach an agreement. If Ed doesn’t have to see a single Drachman face ever in his life again, he will be absolutely fine with it.

There are just two people before Ed in the line when his vision catches a glimpse of blond hair and he turns his head at the same time as Jean Havoc gets hold of his arm and leans to whisper in his ear:

“We’ve got a problem, boss.”

Ed curses under his breath and leaves the line, following Havoc outside. Once out in the corridor, Havoc doesn’t stop and only speeds up.

“What is it?”

“Drachmans,” the man throws over his shoulder.

“No shit, Jean, wouldn’t guess it myself,” Ed grumbles falling in step with the man. “They should arrive in about three hours, what is it now?”
They reach the elevator and Havoc starts impatiently pushing the button.

“They arrived half an hour ago.”

“Why am I learning about it only now? Wait, I need to go wake Roy up, his alarm is in like half an hour or so.”

The elevator arrives and they walk in, Havoc repeating his nervous button pushing now from the other side.

“It’s fine, General Armstrong met them herself. They were heading to a living area when they ran onto Hawkeye.”

“And?”

“And I don’t know what exactly happened but one of Armstrong’s men found me and he said Hawkeye didn’t let the Drachmans in any farther.”

“The fuck is she doing?! There is a representative of their Council of Ministers in this delegation, we can’t just not let him in, this can fuck up the whole negotiation,” Ed growls.

The elevator stops on the ground level and they rush outside.

“I don’t know, boss. I thought you’d checked and cleared those guys already.”

“I have, and Hawkeye knows that.” Unless they’ve brought someone else along without informing us about the changes… “Where are they?” Ed asks as they round the corner.

Havoc silently points ahead of them but it is no longer necessary as Ed already sees a small group of Briggs soldiers stacked near one of the doors.

He eyes a furious looking General Armstrong, and Major Hawkeye who is holding her usual unimpressed face. They notice his approach and Armstrong strides towards him.

“Elric, do you have a good reason for delaying the official delegation? I was given to understand their access was already processed?”

“I’m sure I will soon, General. If I may talk to the Major…” Ed answers but he is interrupted by Armstrong.

“We both reviewed and authorised each member, right? What’s the fuss about? Your dear husband is the one who wanted these negotiations to proceed without a hitch, I’d hardly think he would approve of the unwarranted delay.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” he answers dryly, nods Havoc to follow him, and walks to where Hawkeye is standing, looking at him with a mild frown between her brows. “Let me guess: they tugged someone else along,” Ed asks her.

“Yes, sir,” she nods. “But I wouldn’t have gone to such measures in normal circumstances.”

“Who is it?” Ed asks grimly. He is still drained from the dream he had, and the fucking Drachmans making him miss his breakfast and now deal with some new shit they pulled again just moved them even higher in the list of his least favorite people.

Havoc whistles quietly and mumbles:

“What persistent fellows…”

“Fuck,” Ed breathes out and pinches the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes for a moment. “All right,” he looks up at Havoc, “Jean, get Bunnell and Lawton and go wake Roy up. Tell him what is going on but don’t let him out of the room, until I deal with this.”

“Sure, boss,” Havoc nods and rushes away.

Ed looks at Armstrong:

“I'll go talk with our guests. You wanna be present?”

She doesn’t answer but comes closer.

Ed walks to the door and sighs.

“Here goes nothing,” he whispers under his breath and enters the room, Armstrong and Hawkeye in tow.

Three Drachmans are sitting on the chairs around a small table and four others are standing near the far wall. Ed throws a quick glance at each of them, making sure that at least those seven are exactly who they’ve been expecting today. The three sitting men are the Foreign Minister and two ministers from the State Council, Ed hasn’t seen them before except in photo. Three of the standing men Ed has met as they are the security guards who usually accompanied Drachma representatives when they came to Central for a few of the previous rounds of negotiations. The fourth on the other hand, is an Amestrian man whose face Ed had wished he could never see again. Derek Kidwell, the former State Alchemist, fired from his position almost ten years ago, and since then apparently holding a grudge towards Amestris in general and Ed in particular, as Ed was the one whose final word stripped Kidwell of his position. Last year he arrived in Central as a part of the Drachman delegation, and it was when Ed learnt that the man offered the northern country his services as an alchemist pretty much the same year as he was kicked out of the military. The Drachmans tried to negotiate to have him as their representative in Central, but it was absolutely unacceptable, and after some diplomatic persuasion from Roy and not so diplomatic borderline-threats from Ed, they managed to talk the Drachmans out of it, without damaging the already very unstable peace relationship between the two countries.

Ed doesn’t know what made Drachma send this man again, but he knows for sure that he doesn’t want him anywhere near Roy - he still remembers the dream he had at the end of the last year, when Kidwell blew up an Amestrian military camp. Considering all this in Ed’s eyes Kidwell has been a traitor to the country and a potential danger to the Führer’s life.

Ed walks farther in the room and stops in front of the sitting men.

“Mr. Stürmer, Mr. Orlov and Mr. Solsky I presume,” he nods to the Drachmans, summoning all his patience and those little diplomatic skills he’s reluctantly acquired over the years working as a Head of Intelligence and watching Roy. He hates this, it makes him feel stupid. “Colonel Edward Elric, Head of Intelligence. I am responsible for the security during the negotiation process.”

Foreign Minister Stürmer, a big bearded man in his fifties, looks at Ed from head to toe, fixes his eyes somewhere in the middle of Ed’s forehead and answers, slowly dragging each word as if it is too much of a burden for him to talk with someone like Ed:

“We are aware of who you are, Colonel. One may think the Führer would chose someone who is
able to do his job in time for a position like that. But apparently his motive was to keep his husband in tow,” he practically spits the word “husband” scowling with disgust. This is another reason Ed hates dealing with Drachmans - they all are just a bunch of homophobes. “We didn’t come all this way to sit and wait until you do your homework, young man. We need a clearance in ten minutes or there will be no negotiation.”

Ed works his jaw, grinding his teeth.

“I apologise for the delay,” he answers dryly trying not to spill something highly offensive from the rich amount of curses now flooding his brain. How the fuck does Roy do it? If not for Kidwell again, Ed would never come even close to these assholes, let alone talk with them. “I did do my homework, as you put it. However we haven’t been warned that you decided to bring one more man along.”

Another Drachman, minister Orlov, gaunt, with deep dark shadows under his small eyes, glances at Kidwell and then looks at Ed, but doesn’t stop there, his eyes are jumping unfocused around the room.

“We’ve heard there was a problem with Derek when we sent him to Central City last year, but I can assure you, Mr. Elric, he will not cause any problems. He’s proved his loyalty to Drachma over the years,” he says tiredly, his voice barely above a whisper. “We assumed that taking an alchemist as a security measure when we are going in a place full of alchemists is only logical,” he suddenly stops his nervous glancing and looks at Ed. “Surely you wouldn’t mind.”

I would fucking mind!

“Derek Kidwell was fired from the Amestrian military for security reasons,” Ed explains patiently, throwing a look at the man in question, who is standing behind Minister Solski and looking at Ed grimly. “We can under no circumstances accept his presence neither at the negotiations nor in the Fort while the Führer is here.”

“I believe the latter is for General Armstrong to decide, as she is the leader of Fort Briggs as far as I know, and the highest ranking officer here, Colonel Elric,” Stürmer says, looking at Armstrong.

“The highest ranking officer here is the Führer, as he currently graces us with his presence. Furthermore, I do not appreciate being used against someone I have reasons to highly respect,” Armstrong answers coldly.

“Well, if you want to bother your Führer with such small matter as letting one of our personal guards into your Fort, knock yourself out, but we’re not going to wait here any longer,” the third minister, Solsky, says, standing up from his chair.

“Wait, Dmitri,” Stürmer says, laying a hand on Solsky’s arm and pulling him back on his chair. “That should be entertaining. I would very much love to see as they drag their Führer in this insignificant affair, making him apologize for their own incompetence.”

Ed’s patience has already run thin, his blood is pulsing loudly in his ears and only his concern for Roy’s well-being is keeping him in check. By Hawkeye’s subtle frown, he assumes she doesn’t appreciate their attitude any better.

“When it comes to a matter of security, I have full authority to make decisions without consulting the Führer,” Ed answers slowly, carefully choosing every word, and biting down the “fuck you”.

Stürmer folds his arms on his chest and smiles, though it doesn’t reach his eyes that look at Ed coldly, trying to drill a hole in his skull.
“We don’t recognise your authority,” he says simply, voice low and grim.

Kidwell is fully smirking behind their backs, and it takes Ed all his will to not beat the shit out of him here and now.

There is nothing he can do now that Stürmer said that. If Ed keeps insisting there is no guarantee that the Drachmans will not simply leave the place entirely, taking this incident as a reason enough to cut all ties with Amestris, and all the careful work Roy has done patiently talking Drachma into a more friendly relationship during what seems to be millions other negotiations for the last few years, will be in vain.

Ed storms out of the room, not smashing the door behind him only because he notices Hawkeye following him. She looks at him with worry but doesn’t say anything yet. Ed steps to the opposite wall and hits it with his automail hand in frustration.

“Stop damaging my walls, Elric,” he hears Armstrong’s voice behind him. He turns around to see her closing the door to the room with the Drachmans behind her, and walks to her.

“Put your best men here, and don’t let anyone in or out until I or Roy say otherwise,” he hisses.

“I don’t like being ordered in my own Fort, as you should know, Elric,” she lets out with gritted teeth.

“What, you too need the Führer to personally tell you that?!” he throws at her, annoyed, rushing away not waiting for the answer.

Hawkeye catches up with him near the elevator.

“Edward, what are you going to do?”

“First, talk to Roy of course,” he answers. “We’ll decide from there. If anything I don’t want that fucker near Roy at all, but I’m not sure we have such an option,” he sighs and leans on the elevator wall, feeling a bit dizzy from the recent stress, lack of sleep and a growing hunger. “Those fuckers.”

They reach his and Roy’s room in silence, Ed nods to the two men of the security team they arrived with from Central, and enters the room, violently slamming the door in the wall, not able to contain his anger anymore.

“They fuckers!” he repeats again, now louder.

The sound of the door colliding with the wall and his shout bring the attention of the two men to Ed, Havoc jumping a little, and Roy just turning his head to look at Ed, more used to his husband’s expressiveness.

“Havoc kept me updated. Kidwell again, right? And judging by your entrance I assume you haven’t been able to persuade them peacefully,” Roy says.

“No, and I have no idea how you do it all the time without wanting to break their necks!” Ed starts pacing impatiently back and forth.

Roy chuckles and sighs and Ed thinks that perhaps if Roy is able to hold his calm better than Ed it doesn’t necessarily mean he doesn’t want to beat the shit out of some Drachmans too. Or burn them to crisps, more like.

“Let me guess: they just came with him without warning, you refused to allow his presence, and now
they insist he comes with them or they go with him?"

“Basically. But mostly they want you to personally tell them that he is not welcome here. Also don’t be surprised if they demand for you to ‘apologise for my incompetence’,” Ed’s voice rises in pitch on the last words and he makes quotation marks with his fingers.

“Wow, that Drachman guy sure sounds disgusting,” Havoc mumbles under his breath making Ed hiss at him in frustration.

“Did you tell them that you have full authority to make such decisions without my approval?” Roy asks, and Ed stops abruptly in his pacing and stares at him.

“No, I fucking didn’t, Roy. I was just standing there listening to all the bullshit they were telling and nodding my head like a good boy. Of course I fucking told them that, Roy! But apparently they think you put me on this position only because I am your husband. Oh, you should’ve seen the face of that asshole when he said ‘husband’!” Ed stomps past Havoc who is currently trying to merge with the wall looking extremely uncomfortable, and falls down on the couch. “But you know what, you are not going to tell them anything, at least as long as Kidwell is with them - I am not letting you go near that man.”

Roy eyes him for a moment and then turns to Havoc.

“I need to talk to Ed.”

“Sure, Chief,” Havoc breathes out with relief and hurries out of the room.

Roy walks to where Ed is sitting and kneels down in front of him, putting his hands on the sides of Ed’s thighs.

“Listen, Ed. It is of the utmost importance that these peace talks keep going as smoothly as possible. They already made a diplomatic concession by being the ones to come to our own fortification, and because of that, you know this place is secure. There are armed guards pretty much everywhere and we know the Fort inside out. It would be a serious breach of protocol to make a big deal of what they perceive as a minor slight, when they already made the effort of coming all the way, invited as guests.”

“Are you kidding? There is no such thing as a 100% secure place, Roy, pretty much anything can happen, I’ve no idea what to expect from that man.”

“You know I’m no slouch myself at fighting, Ed - and I know all about dirty moves.”

“Your alchemy is useless against a sudden bullet, Roy.”

“Look, I know that, but Kidwell is an alchemist more than a soldier, and moreover a poor excuse for either, you said it yourself, remember? You’re overreacting. I understand–”

“No, you don’t!” Ed shouts jumping on his feet. “You don’t fucking understand, Roy! And oh my fucking god I hope you will never do!” he presses his palm to his chest, as if trying to convince his madly beating heart to slow down. The familiar sticky feeling he woke up with this morning is starting to creep in him again. ‘Great, now I’m gonna be having anxiety attacks every time there is a tiny possibility of Roy being hurt, which is fucking always.’ “Don’t you think you also had a proper security back then… back there … Whatever! I’m sure as fuck you had it even better than now, considering! And yet it didn’t fucking help as we know!” Ed lets out a borderline hysterical chuckle and slams his hand over his mouth when he hears the sound he made. Fuck!
He sits on the edge of the bed and lowers his hand from his mouth when it starts shaking.

What the hell is happening with me?!

Roy steps to him kneeling near him again, cups his face with one hand, and takes Ed’s shaking hand in another.

“I’m sorry, I am so sorry, love,” he squeezes Ed’s hand and plants a kiss on his forehead. “You are right, I don’t understand, and I am sorry you had to experience this. But we’ve come this far, we’ve changed so much, we can’t lose whatever diplomatic goodwill we earned these past few years over our apparently irrational fear of a disgraced alchemist”.

“I know. Just the fucking timing of all this, Roy,” Ed says weakly, slowly coming down from his outburst.

Roy studies his face for a few moments and then lifts Ed’s hand to his lips and presses a kiss on the knuckles.

“I promise you, Ed, I will do everything in my power, so you never fear to lose me.”

‘I always fear to lose you,’ Ed thinks, but Roy is looking at him so seriously, and Ed understands what the man means. Today’s dream scared them both, it made their constant fear that something can happen to either of them too real.

It is not that often when Ed just wants to forget about everything and spend the whole day snuggling with Roy in a bed, enjoying the attention the man gives him and not pretending that he hates him being mushy. And it is so rare when they both can allow themselves that. And today is just not the day for that.

He draws in a slow breath making sure his pulse is back to normal, though the faint traces of anxiety are still lingering on the verge of his conscious threatening to rise up in full force again given a reason, but he can’t do anything about it now.

“All right, Roy, go do your diplomatic mumbo-jumbo and I’ll busy myself with covering your ass, as usual,” he says grumpily, trying to cover the worry in his voice with annoyance.

Roy caresses his knuckles over Ed’s cheek and leans to capture Ed’s lips in a gentle kiss.

“I love you,” he says in the little space between them before pulling back and rising on his feet.

He leaves, carefully closing the door behind him.

Ed is wondering if there is any chance he will actually have time to eat today. He stands up and walks out of the room, Hawkeye is waiting for him outside. Hardly an hour has passed since he started his day and he already thinks that this is one of the longest days he’s ever had.
Chapter End Notes

I appreciate all the kudos and i wish you leave more comments but hey whatever, thx for subbing to this story, let's see it to the end then much luv
Chapter Summary

There is nothing permanent, as life never is. But it was so easy to forget this, when his own life became so tightly bound with another, something he had never considered was possible fourteen years ago, but he fell so fast and so deep that he even missed that moment when I became we, and it felt so right that he almost wanted to believe that it would last forever. Ed has always thought himself mature enough not to let feelings interfere with his reason and judgement, let alone love of all things, but even with an almost constant worry on the verge of his conscious, because he just can’t not worry at all, his life is so full of moments of such intoxicating happiness and bliss that he could almost forget that beyond their little bubble the time is still passing. And that there are too many circumstances which can end this in a matter of seconds.

Chapter Notes

I lied! Omg it's been almost a month since the last update and I am so sorry, guys! This fic is hard to write, but I hope the length of this chapter can compensate somehow for such a long wait.
This chapter is action mixed with feels. I plan on more angst for the following chapters. Cause I'm bad in writing action, that is.

Recap (4 days ago):
Edward arrived in Briggs with the rest of his soldiers only to receive a telegram about Roy's death.
Ed is with Roy in Briggs for the negotiations with the Drachman ministers, who happen to bring Kidwell along with them, and Ed is pissed.
A reminder: Kidwell is a former State Alchemist, whose name was in The List. Ed basically made him get fired several years ago. Previous mention of him I believe was in chapter 1 (you can read a recap in ch 2 if you don't remember what ch 1 was about).

WARNING! There is a rather detailed description of a murder with mentions of blood and violence (duh) near the end of the part 1 (alt!Edward's one). If you think you'd rather avoid it, stop reading after Edward enters the cell (you'll see what I mean when you get there) and scroll right to the second part (present!Ed). Leave me a comment, I'll answer you what happened in that little piece you skipped without gory details. There are also some mild mentions of blood in the part 2, but they are not that disturbing, and I honestly don't know how to explain you how you can avoid them. You'll see it coming for sure, it's like a few lines, nothing major.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The world as it is, the human nature as always, it is impossible to eliminate battles.

In the end, killing is necessarily evil.

If so, it is best to end them in the maximum efficiency and at the least cost, least time.

If you want to slander that as foul and demean that as nasty, then do as you wish.

Justice can not save the world.

Amestris, Fort Briggs

He sent telegrams to the remaining three people he thought he knew the locations of. At least he hoped so, as well as that they were alive and well.

In the telegram to Rebecca Catalina sent to South City, he asked her to see if she could check on the whereabouts of Al, Winry and their kids. There was no guarantee the telegram would even reach her, considering that a huge part of the south area of Amestris was now occupied by Aerugo.

Last time he’d heard from Falman and Fuery they were in Central, so he sent telegrams to them there. However the thought that if they were in Central perhaps he would have received the news about Roy’s death from one of them instead of someone whose name he’d never seen before, had been bugging him a bit.

With nothing but a slight annoyance at the thought, he noted that that there was a great chance that his telegrams would not reach their destinations. He didn’t feel anything at all.

It’d been almost four days since his arrival to Briggs, and a borderline apathetic indifference to pretty much everything was filling him like a thick fog, not leaving enough space for any strong emotion.

He kept reaching to the back of his head in the mornings to tie his hair in a braid or a ponytail, it was not even a habit, but a reflex after his whole life spent with long hair. But his hand was meeting emptiness, and the tickling feeling on his palm brushing over short hairs there served as a reminder that his life was never going to be the same.

He looked in a mirror once and didn’t recognise the person he saw. He didn’t look like his brother - Al didn’t wear such a thick layer of exhaustion across his face the last time Edward saw him. He wondered when and if he would see him again.

He knew that his empty stare, when he remembered that he needed to blink only when his eyes were beginning to hurt, must feel disturbing for others. He noticed some uncertain glances in his direction from his men, but most had been avoiding him. They probably just wanted to give him some space. Or perhaps they didn’t really care, having their own losses to mourn.

Voss was appearing now and then at the edge of his vision, but after that conversation on the wall, he hadn’t attempted to approach Edward.

He hadn’t seen neither Bergman nor Armstrong. The former was probably drinking himself to
obliteration somewhere risking to lose his last hair, as for the latter, Edward didn’t really care what she was doing as long as he didn’t have to deal with her.

He was spending most of his time lying on the bed and tracing patterns in the thin cracks in the ceiling with his eyes, walking outside just to throw some food in his stomach in the mess hall, without even registering the taste. Judging by the relative emptiness in the corridors, that was what most of the current Briggs occupants were doing. Moral was not just low, it was non existent. The death of the Fuhrer and the impossibility to contact Central had strongly affected pretty much everyone.

He became scared of the nights. Not of the absence of light, and not even of the nightmares which often came along with the sleep. What he dreaded to see was a familiar face with dark-blue eyes and a soft smile. He was afraid that this would cast away this fog of apathy, and he wasn’t ready to fully face the feelings lying beneath it. Not now, not when he had too much time on his hands with nothing to occupy himself with.

He couldn’t stay here. He couldn’t just sit and wait. Voss had asked him if he wanted to go to Central, and his answer had still not changed. He had nothing left in Central, no one. He had left it more than a year ago, planning to return when the war was over. It was supposed to be temporary, it was supposed to be just another period in his life. Just one, short period of his life spent in the colds of Drachma, doing good for his country, protecting the people he loved, protecting what had become his life. Instead, he failed, and even if it was not his fault, the result was still the same - what should’ve been a temporary inconvenience, became something permanent. More permanent than his life before had been, because as much as he would never voice this to anyone, Roy had become the center of his world. And there could be nothing more permanent than death, Edward knew that too well.

Perhaps, he should’ve stayed with his husband. Maybe it would have changed something.

But maybe it wouldn’t.

He could not go back. There was no “back” to return to.

He was lying on his bed, eyes fixed on the small clock on the bedside table. When the hands reached two in the night, he rose up and left the room. There were much fewer people in the corridors at that hour, and the chance to run across someone who’d ask questions, was minimum. Not that anyone had been eager to talk to him these days anyway.

His goal was a few levels above him, but he exited the elevator one floor higher than he needed - there was still a chance that there will be at least one guard on that floor.

It was easy to transmute the lock on some storage room open, closing the door behind him. It was easy to open a hole in the floor and jump down through it, landing carefully on his toes, the sound muffled by the thick sole of his boots and years of experience. He straightened up and looked around. A desk, two tables, a few filing cabinets and the map on the wall - meagre furnishing, only what was strictly necessary. He remembered this office from when he had stood there the previous year, in front of General Armstrong sitting at her desk, eyeing him with a barely noticeable tinge of doubt and hesitation, before he left Briggs for the endless white desert of Drachma leading more than two thousand people there along with him.

This time it would be only him.

He walked pass filing cabinets to the desk in a search for a safe or something similar. He hoped that Armstrong at least wouldn’t keep such documents in her room. There was indeed a small metal
locker under the desk and Edward quickly drew his palms together and then planted them on the safe’s surface, creating a hole big enough to pull the pile of documents out of it. He quickly looked through them, ditching most of them back in the safe, until he finally found what he had come here for. He shoved a folded piece of paper in the pocket of his coat, returned the other papers back and transmuted the safe’s upper side back to how it’d been.

He made his way back, following the same route he used to get here, without meeting anyone. In the privacy of his room, he pulled the obtained paper out of his pocket and smoothed it out on his bed. It was a map of the service tunnels running under Briggs in the directions of both Amestris and Drachma. He had a couple of hours to figure out the way he was going to use, memorise that part of the scheme, return the map to Armstrong’s safe and then make his way out of the Fort before it began to wake up.

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Exactly one hour and forty minutes later he was standing in one of the corridors on the ground level, peeking carefully around the corner watching a guard making his rounds and waiting for an opening to sneak to a service room on the opposite side of a big hall - from there he would use his alchemy to make a passage to a ventilation system first and then to one of the service tunnels.

But when the guard finally walked out of sight and Edward was about to move, he heard quiet steps from another corridor behind him. Whoever it was, they were definitely heading to where Edward was, and he knew he would not be able to cross the hall and hide in the room without that person noticing him.

Cursing silently, he straightened up and turned to face whoever it was approaching him. He definitely was not going to explain himself to an underling, but on the off chance that it was Armstrong or Bergman finding solace in night walks, he had to come up with something believable enough to justify his standing there in civilian clothes and a winter coat, with a duffle bag on his shoulder.

The steps drew closer and when the person rounded the corner, Edward actually cursed out loud.

“What are you doing here, Voss?” he asked coldly as the Lieutenant Colonel walked to Edward and stopped. There was not, in the hazel eyes, even a flicker of surprise discovering his commanding officer here at such an hour, and Edward mentally slapped himself for not being careful enough to notice that he had obviously been followed.

“I could ask you the same question, sir,” Voss raised his chin looking at Edward through half-lidded eyes, which to someone who hadn’t known the man for as long as Edward had might seem like disinterest or even cockiness, but in fact Voss was watching his face closely, searching for anything it might give away - the man was ready for Edward to start dodging the matter.

Edward let his eyes linger on Voss’s for another moment and returned his attention to the door across the hall, listening closely to the distant thumps of the guard’s boots, trying to determine if he was coming back.

“Getting the fuck out of here, how does that look like?” he answered in a hushed voice throwing a glance over his shoulder. “And if you are here to stop me, I’m afraid this is not going to happen.”

“I am not here to stop you. I’m here to join you, actually.”

At that Edward turned to him again and frowned.
“Say again.”

“You are not the only one who is not willing to just sit and wait for god knows what. This is not what I, we spent the last year for.”

“And now what, you are just going to follow me blindly?” Edward asked sardonically.

Voss just shrugged.

“I have for the last year. Might as well continue.”

"Absolutely not," Edward said dryly, turning his back to the man. "Besides, it wasn't like that. We had orders."

"We have them now as well, but you chose not to follow them, and so did I," Voss said quietly behind his back.

"This is a desertion. You are going to be court martialed if caught, Mark."

"So are you."

Edward hissed through his teeth. This was the first time Voss showed such stubbornness, it was simply not like him to push the matter.

"You are going to stay in Briggs, Lieutenant Colonel. This is an order."

"I am already disobeying an order given by a general, I'll take my risk with one from a brigadier general as well," Edward heard the calm answer.

This was new.

Edward swung around on his heels feeling the annoyance starting to grow inside him.

"What the fuck, Mark?!" he husked angrily, trying not to raise his voice too much.

"I told you: I'm not going to sit here and wait. Whatever it is you are planning, I know it is better than just doing nothing while Amestris is being torn apart."

"You don't know what I am planning, Mark," Edward answered, feeling suddenly very tired. He knew he had lost. If he had more energy, he'd be able to convince Voss to stay. He should at least try, he couldn't let the man who had become his friend follow him on the path of no return.

"You can tell me all about it when we are out of here."

Edward pinched the bridge of his nose and looked up at Voss.

"You don't understand, Mark. There is no going back. I am not going back from there. Why do you..." he swallowed. "You don't have to step on this suicidal road with me."

"It doesn't have to be suicidal, Edward," Voss reached his hand to squeeze Edward's shoulder. "And I am not doing this for you. But I know you want to make a difference. And even if it's small things, it is better than nothing. And I want to help."

"What is the probability that I can change your mind?"

"Zero," Voss answered, tilting the corners of his lips in a small smile.
Edward chewed his cheek and sighed.

“Fine,” he turned his attention to the hall, noting that the guard was once again making rounds between them and their destination. “Fuck, Mark, now we have to wait for another ten or so minutes when he is on the other side of the floor.”

“That’s fine, I need to go grab something anyway. Will be back in ten minutes,” the man said, turning around and hurriedly walking away.

“Wait, what? Shit,” Edward ran his fingers through his hair, having a brief moment of surprise at how short it was, and wondered how long it would take him to get used to that.

He hadn’t been planning on dragging anyone along with him, but he couldn’t deny that Voss’s suggestion - demand more like - of accompanying Edward made him feel a little flicker of relief that he didn’t have to do this completely alone.

He stood there waiting both for the guard to leave and Voss to return, and a few minutes later he heard the quiet steps of what sounded definitely more than one person coming from the way Voss had left, and Edward turned around wondering if because of that delay when he was talking with the man he had missed his chance to sneak away without alarming anyone.

However the people turning the corner and walking to him were not Armstrong or her people as Edward had feared, but two of Voss’s few most trusted men along with their commander.

He recognised Corporal Haley, a lean young man in his early twenties, who was almost a head taller than both Edward and Voss and had very visibly felt uncomfortable about it every time Edward had seen him. But despite his young age and the almost apologetic smile always present on his freckled face, he was the best shooter in Voss’s battalion.

The second was Captain Dean, whose appearance could be quite fully described just by one word - average. Average height, average build, average age, even his face had nothing eye catching, if not for his grumpy scowl, which didn't even look intimidating, but more like the man was deep in his thoughts most of the time. However Edward had seen him in a fight before, and witnessed how fast and carefully the man could react in the dynamics of a fight.

The two of them saluted Edward, mumbling quiet “sir”, and stopped behind Voss when he walked closer.

“Captain Dean and Corporal Haley here wish to join,” Voss said.

Edward gave him a glum glare and turned his attention to the men in question.

“And why is that?” Edward asked simply.

Haley shifted uncomfortably and glanced at Dean, who was staring blankly in the distance. The young man sighed and looked at Edward.

“We heard that we will have to stay here and wait until the orders from Central come, sir. And that they are not going to do anything with all the information about the Drachman’s dispositions we’ve obtained,” he looked at Voss briefly, and the man gave him a small nod. “It doesn’t feel right, sir. And who knows how long it’ll be when…” he licked his lips nervously. “When someone takes office, sir.”

Edward clenched his left hand in a fist trying to ignore how his fingers started quivering at the reminder.
“So you decided to desert. Well, I am not in a position to dissuade you from this. But why not go to your families then? Haven’t you had enough of this damn cold already?”

Dean cleared his throat and said without shifting a muscle on his face:

“Orphan.”

“And my family is in Central,” Haley answered. “They should be safe there... At least for now. But if I go there I will definitely be caught, sir.”

“I see,” Edward muttered, closing his eyes for a moment.

He sighed and opened his eyes. Voss was looking at him expectedly but wasn’t saying anything. Edward turned around and peeked around the corner - the guard was gone. He glanced to Voss, silently signaling him to follow, expecting him to repeat the gesture to his men, and then walked out of the corner and started crossing the hall in wide strides. Three pairs of steps followed him quietly.

Once he reached the door to the service room, Edward quickly transmuted the lock open and dove in, stepping to the side to make room for the others. He closed the door and walked past service lockers and pipes to the opposite wall.

“There is a ventilation duct behind this wall,” he said turning around and pointing to the wall behind him. “We’ll need to quietly crawl in it for a few dozen meters before I can make an opening to a service tunnel. You’ll go first, because I need to close it behind us and there is not enough room there to turn around,” he looked over three faces watching him closely, making sure they understand. “Hope no one has claustrophobia,” he added under his breath, turning back to the wall and clapping his hands.

“Understood, sir,” Edward heard Haley’s quiet response.

He planted his hands on the wall, making an opening, and turned to look at the others.

“It’s Edward,” he said dryly, earning a little twist of a brow from Voss and confused looks from the two other men.

“Sir?” Dean asked uncertainly.

“No sir. Just Edward. We are deserters, remember? No ranks,” Edward answered stepping away from the hole in the wall and gesturing the others to it. “I’ve always hated them anyway,” he muttered, watching Haley crawling first in the narrow duct.

Dean just shrugged and nodded shortly, following the younger man. Voss lingered a bit in front of the opening. He turned to Edward and gave him a small smile.

“They are good men, Edward.”

“I know.” And that’s the problem.

“It is better than going alone.”

“Maybe.”

Voss tilted his head and there was a question in his eyes.

“How long do you think it is possible for four people to survive in the middle of enemy territory?” Edward asked him coldly.
“Ah,” Voss nodded in understanding. “Longer than for just one, I suppose.”

“Not necessarily,” Edward answered frowning.

“They volunteered. I volunteered. You are not responsible for our lives or deaths, Edward.”

“Yeah, sure I’m not,” Edward muttered sardonically and looked away. “Crawl inside, Mark, we don’t have all the time in the world.”

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About half an hour and a few changes of direction later, they were walking along the dark service tunnel.

They took left on the next junction and Edward started counting his steps. On the sixty-fourth, he stopped and looked back at others.

“I’m gonna make us a pass through this wall,” he tapped on the bricks on his right with his metal knuckles. “There is a prison cell behind it. It should be empty.”

Without waiting for an answer, he clapped his hands and planted them on the wall. Blue sparks of alchemy brushed away the darkness around them for a moment, and the bricks moved under Edward’s palms, opening a narrow passage. He walked through it immediately, taking in the surroundings of the cell in the weak yellow light coming from somewhere further along the corridor, between two rows of cells. The one he was in was indeed empty, and Edward crossed the tiny space to check if the bar door was unlocked. A rustle of steps behind him, and Edward moved to the side, letting his three companions out of the cell. He stepped back to the passage in the wall, quickly transmuted it back and joined the others in the corridor.

Edward looked around, making sure there were no guards here or prisoners in the cells. There were only six cells in total and the four around them were empty. They walked past them, reaching the last couple of cells in the end of the corridor. It was a dead end, but behind the thick wall there was a sewage system, part of which led in the direction Edward needed. He stepped to the wall, clapping his hands and summoning the image of the map from his memory, trying to remember the exact width of this wall. Blue sparks, and the wall moved, creating an entry. He was about to step inside, when a hand grabbed his shoulder.

“Edward, look,” Voss said quietly near his ear. Edward turned around, looking at where Voss pointed to the cell in the corner.

A man was sitting there, looking at them with wide eyes. His dark greasy hair was longer than when Edward last saw him, more than half a year ago, but the beard was as messy as usual. Edward hadn’t expected to see Derek Kidwell again when he sent him with a little squad of soldiers back to Briggs last November after the man blew up a part of his camp, and with all the other things he simply forgot about the man’s existence.

Edward made a step towards the cell and Kidwell blinked and slowly moved further from the bars.

“Look at this, Edward Elric deserting the army when his country needs him,” the husky voice sounded too loud in this tiny place.

Edward made another step to the cell and Voss’s grip on his shoulder tightened.

“Let go, Mark,” Edward hissed through his clenched teeth.
“Edward, forget him.”

“What would Mustang say if he knew that his precious bedtoy is such a coward?” Something about this struck Kidwell as funny. He started chuckling, a mix of hiccups and coughs, and the sick, borderline hysterical undertone in Kidwell’s voice was all too apparent.

Edward felt his blood rushing from his face along with the indifference which had been covering his aching soul as a blanket.

“Shut up.” He didn’t recognize his own voice, when he made another staggering step towards Kidwell’s cell, blindly reaching with his automail hand to Voss’s grip on his shoulder.

“Edward, he isn’t worth it.”

“Let go, Voss!” he started unbending Voss’s fingers on him and the hand freed his shoulder.

Short bursts of a laughing coming out of Kidwell’s throat developed into a violent, uncontrollable spasms of insane joy. He was choking on his own spit, his body shaking, he was a shell of the man Edwards had known months ago, hardly any sanity left in him.

“Oh wait, he wouldn’t say anything, because he is dead!” Kidwell shouted and dropped on the floor holding on his stomach.

The sound of the man’s laughter mixed with the pounding of his own heart in Edward ears. He slowly turned to look at Voss.

Dean and Haley were standing behind him with disgust on their faces, and Voss was looking at him with fear, but Edward didn’t have it in him now to try to dig for the reasons of it.

“Go through the passage and turn left,” his voice was cold and bereft of any emotions. “In about three hundred steps there will be a junction. Take right, walk another five hundred steps and wait for me.”

“Edward, please.”

But Edward was already near the cell, looking at the man rolling on the floor, and waiting while three pairs of steps were making their way through the opening in the wall.

He heard Voss lingering for a few moments but then he followed the others, leaving Edward alone with Kidwell.

Edward slowly lowered his duffle bag on the floor, clapped his hands, transmuting the lock open, and entered the cell. Kidwell didn’t notice him, too wrapped up in his hysteria.

Edward stood there for a few seconds, just looking at the mess of a man under his feet, letting the first weak tendrils of pain, and rage, and regret, and everything else that he had been stuffing in the deep corners of his mind, becoming stronger. And with every breath he was taking, the part of him that was his core, that made him who he was - that Edward who Roy had cherished so much, was getting smaller and more distant, until it gave to a cold rage fed with pain that was filling him from head to toes, until he became someone he’d never been, until he was looking at himself over his own shoulder.

He would regret it later.

He couldn’t stop now.
He crouched in front of Kidwell, grabbed him by the collar of his dusty shirt and yanked hard bringing his face closer. A laugh hitched in Kidwell’s throat, and he fell silent, eyes widened in shock at discovering Edward so close.

“Traitor,” was the single word that left Edward’s mouth, and he couldn’t recognise his own voice.

He had a short moment to register the first flicker of fear in the depths of Kidwell’s eyes, before Edward pushed him hard on the floor, the back of his head hitting it with an unpleasant thud.

“Traitor.”

The automail fist collided with the man’s jaw, and the cracking of bones and a strangled cry rang out almost at the same time.

“Traitor.”

Kidwell tried to push himself from the floor, crawling backwards away from Edward, his eyes watering with tears, his beard soaked with blood from his damaged mouth. His back hit the wall and he sobbed. Edward leaned down, pulling him up by his shirt and pressing his forearm to his throat, preventing him from moving.

“Traitor.”

Another hit by the automail, now in the stomach, Kidwell’s body tried to bend involuntarily, but instead only pressed on Edward’s arm at his throat even harder.

Kidwell was coughing violently, grabbing the arm that blocked his breathing with his hands, trying to rip it away, but to no avail.

The rustle of feet moving on the floor, struggling for balance, the wet choking sounds and hissing of air barely making its way down the man’s lungs. Wide eyes, full of tears and fear, fixed on Edward’s.

There was a cloud in Edward’s mind, a fog on his thoughts, in front of his eyes. Something warm slid down his cheek, and he wondered if it was his tear, or a drop of blood from Kidwell’s mouth.

He didn’t care. He wasn’t there.

He felt as if someone else put more pressure on Kidwell’s throat closing his access to air entirely. He felt as if it was someone else screaming in the face of the man struggling to take another breath, like he was the one responsible for all the pain Edward had to endure, for all the deaths of his friends and loved ones Edward had to live through.

He had never felt such rage in his life before.

He was terrified.

He felt nothing.

With a soft crack all the sounds ceased, and only the deafening pounding of blood in his ears was now filling the silence.

Edward took a step back and lowered his shaking arm. Kidwell’s body slid to the floor, limbs bending in a way that would be uncomfortable if the man was still alive.

Breathing hard, Edward walked to the bars, grabbing on one for balance. He couldn’t tear his eyes
from the man he just killed, the mask of horror frozen on the dead face.

Waves of adrenaline along with nausea were washing over him, and he swallowed hard, trying to calm the unpleasant knot in his stomach. His cheeks were wet, tears or blood, it hardly mattered, when he swiped it off his face with his sleeve.

Focusing on making his legs obey his commands, he slowly exited the cell, reached out to his duffle bag on the floor and put it back on his shoulder. He didn’t look back when he walked through the passage in the wall, turning just for a split moment to transmute the wall back to its original state.

By the time he reached his companions, his heartbeat had settled to normal. He didn’t stop, silently walking past them, ignoring the wary look Voss threw at him. He could hear three pair of steps following him.

No one said or asked anything while they were making their way through tunnels.

They walked up to the surface in about an hour, emerging through the small hidden hatch near the foot of the mountain west from Briggs.

Later that night when they settled for a camp and Edward was lying in his sleeping bag, the howling of the wind and the cold around him was almost familiar and soothing and he could just pretend for a moment that the last few days in Briggs didn’t happen.

He didn’t see any dreams that night. And only the distant voice of a stranger, yet sounding vaguely familiar, coming from everywhere and nowhere, where he couldn’t possibly reach, was asking him:

“Why did you kill him?”

“He was an enemy.”

“He was a prisoner. It was not for you to decide.”

“It’s a war. He was an enemy. He had to die.”

“He was a human!”

“He was an enemy. You don’t understand.”

“No, I don’t!”

**Amestris, Fort Briggs**

“I’m glad you don’t.”

It’s been almost four days since the Drachman ministers arrived in Briggs, and Ed is slowly starting to lose his mind. Roy worked his magic but it had little effect on the stubborn Drachmans, so the only compromise they’ve managed to reach, is that while Kidwell gets an access to the same areas of Briggs as the rest of the delegation, he is constantly followed by a number of Ed’s men. At a respectful distance of course. Because he is not their prisoner or anything, though Ed would very much love him to be. And as Ed follows Roy almost everywhere these days, and all Roy is doing is meeting with the Drachmans, it is inevitable that Ed gets to see Kidwell too often for his own liking. And when he doesn’t see him during the day, he sees him in his dreams when he is asleep.

As a result he doesn’t sleep well, and it makes him even more antsy during the day. Roy calls him paranoid. Ed says that even if he is paranoid, it doesn’t mean there is nothing to be concerned about.
Roy kisses the tip of his nose, smiles and gives him that look, as if he is being amused but finds it absolutely endearing. Ed punches him and Roy laughs. Ed walks away cursing under his breath that he refuses to hold responsibility for Roy apparently loses his common sense when Ed is in close proximity. “Fourteen years, that stupid man, when is it gonna end,” he grumbles, and Roy says something that he apparently finds phenomenally romantic, and it makes Ed happy but more worried at the same time.

The thing is, that every time he and Kidwell cross ways, the man keeps throwing at him meaningful glances which Ed extremely doesn’t like. The apparent meaning of such glances is “I hate you” and combined with a way too satisfied smile makes these short experiences too eerie. And as if this is not enough, Ed can’t get rid of the image frozen in front of his eyes of the mask of utter horror on Kidwell’s dead face when the man was lying on the cold prison floor after Ed, no, *that Edward*, had killed him. And he has to swallow around the lump in his throat every time his memory superimposes this image over the one he actually sees with his eyes.

He wishes he could avoid seeing Kidwell.

He wishes they could just return to Central and forget all this.

Because as much as he wants to pretend that none of that has been happening to him, he can’t lie to himself because the pain he feels is his own - both the one he experiences in that other reality as well as the one his more conscious self feels by seeing himself suffer like that. He has been handling it well for a long time, relying on the logical part of him, which has been letting him be grateful for the life he has now, instead of dwelling on the horrors of the life he’s managed to avoid. But now, when he hasn’t fully recovered yet from the shock of - almost - losing Roy four days ago, he saw another dream, too soon. And his body is flooded with emotions, so intense and overwhelming, that even his constant conscious attempts at grounding himself here and now, are not bringing much result. And all of this is even more complicated by him actually being in the same place as his other self in these recent dreams. And his own body, his own brain has been betraying him now, and it is almost unbearable sometimes.

All the things they’ve managed to change, all the differences they’ve brought to their lives, pulling their reality as far away as they could from that one they’ve been warned about, and yet somehow he’s managed to end up in the same place at the same exact time he’d be if Roy didn’t receive those notes. The only differences: there is no war and Roy is alive.

For now.

And it gives him an uncanny feeling which is starting to make it hard to distinguish his own feelings from the ones he adopted from that Edward in his dreams. And he feels that time is not moving for him here.

Ed hates waiting and Ed hates when he doesn’t know what to expect. And the fact that he formally can’t do anything to ease up his paranoia makes it only worse.

So Ed uses that he’s made himself joined at the hip with Roy these days to let himself be a bit more clingy than he usually is, without being obvious about it, justifying this as a way of grounding himself a bit while his brain is busy producing the scenarios of all the possible disasters that can happen. But in fact he still can’t get over those horrible moments of thinking - believing - that Roy is dead, which hasn’t really weakened much during these few days, and the presence of the potential threat to Roy’s life is not helping the matter. It is nothing major, just brief little touches he can allow without it looking like a public display of affection. He brushes Roy’s fingers lightly with his own flesh ones while they are riding in the elevator, he smoothes out invisible wrinkles on Roy’s uniform, he breathes a little more deeply when they walk along the corridor, letting the faint scent of Roy’s
aftershave reach his nostrils. Roy doesn’t comment, though Ed is almost sure he’s noticed, but when they lie in their bed in the end of a day, Roy covers Ed’s face with maybe a bit more butterfly-soft kisses than he usually does, and when he pulls him closer and Ed puts his head on Roy’s shoulder, his hand around Ed is perhaps a breath tighter than usual.

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They walk into the room where today’s meeting with the delegation is going to be held and Roy proceeds to sit at one side of the long table, while Ed stops beside the door. Hawkeye is here as well, across from Ed and there are two Briggs soldiers at the other side of the door. They don’t have to wait long, when the door opens and Minister Stürmer comes in, followed by Solsky and two Drachman guards. They exchange greetings with the Führer and sit at the other side of the table. Ed waits a moment for Orlov, Kidwell and the last guard to come inside as well, but the door stays closed. He frowns and throws Roy a wary look.

Roy understands the unspoken demand and delicately asks Stürmer, “Did Minister Orlov and Mister Kidwell have other obligations this morning? I was not made aware of any change.”

“Minister Orlov is not feeling well this morning. He promised to join us a bit later,” Stürmer answers. “Kidwell is his subordinate, so I am not privy to Orlov’s plans for his presence today. We can begin without them.”

Ed tenses and, signaling to Hawkeye to stay, slides out of the room. He put Havoc and two other men to take turns in watching Kidwell and if he did anything suspicious, they would report this. But Ed will feel better if he sees Kidwell with his own eyes and personally walks him to the meeting room.

He ignores the elevator, rushing up the narrow staircase, taking two stairs at a time. He spots the tall blond man in the end of the corridor standing near the doors leading to Kidwell’s room.

He comes closer and tilts a brow in question, looking at Havoc.

“Hey, Jean. Is he inside?”

“Yes, didn’t leave in a few hours.” Havoc is chewing the end of an unlit cigarette and judging by its condition he has been at it for a while now. “Why are you here, boss? Thought you’d be on a meeting.”

“I thought he’d be on a meeting too,” Ed says grimly.

“Yeah, I did too. Hoped for a little break,” Havoc pulls the crumpled cigarette out of his mouth and looks at it wistfully.

“Have you seen Orlov?”

“Orlov? That morbid looking guy?” Havoc asks and when Ed nods, he rubs the back of his neck, looking puzzled. “He left with one of their guards about half an hour ago. Thought he went to the meeting…”

Shit.

“Looks like he didn’t,” Ed mutters and reaches to the door handle, but as he is about to turn it there is a muffled thump from the level above them and he turns his head in the direction of the sound automatically collating it with a map of the Fort in his head. There are living quarters on that floor, but they are probably empty at this time of the day. The meeting is held on the floor below them, so
he will leave it to Armstrong and her people to check on the place of what seems to be a small explosion - right now he has more urgent matters to take care of.

He glances at Havoc and jerks the door handle, bursting inside the room. At first he thinks it’s empty, and several dozens of curses rush through his mind in a matter of a second, but then he catches a movement with the corner of his eye and turns around to see the bathroom door slowly opening, revealing a very pissed looking Kidwell.

“What are you doing, Elric?!” he shouts exiting the bathroom and making a few steps towards Ed. “Enough that your dogs follow me everywhere now you are breaking inside my room?!”

“The fuck are you doing here, Kidwell?” now, when neither of the Drachman ministers can hear him he is not going to filter his language or hide his frustration. “Shouldn’t you be with your new masters downstairs like an obedient dog?” he spurs, and despite that they both have already demonstrated their mutual dislikes to one another, it is the first time Ed talks with Kidwell with such venom in his voice, and seeing a flicker of surprise across the man’s features, he suddenly realises that here, in this reality, the former State alchemist has never actually given Ed any reason to hate him that much. And Ed lowers his head for a short moment blinking rapidly in the discomforting realisation that the reality of his dreams is getting to him too deeply.

“I don’t have to answer to you!” Kidwell hisses, clenching his hands in fists. “But you are probably not going to leave me alone until you get your damn answer. I am not going to the meeting today, because some of that crap they fed us yesterday apparently wasn’t fresh enough, so I am bound to a bathroom for the rest of the day!”

“And where is Orlov then?”

“The ministers don’t answer to me about their movements, Elric. I satisfied your paranoia. Now get the fuck out!”

Ed doesn’t answer, storming out of the room and slamming the door behind him. He pinches the bridge of his nose in a gesture he’s unconsciously picked up from Roy, and groans. He is not sure if he can trust Kidwell and his sudden diarrhea but there is nothing he can do right now without causing an international conflict. And there is still the matter of that explosion on the upper floor.

“Your break will have to wait,” he says turning to Havoc. “Stay here and watch him. I’ll try to send someone else to assist.” He wants to add, “and don’t let him out of the room”, but he knows they have no right for this.

“And if he wants to leave?” Havoc asks.

“Fucking shoot him,” Ed grumbles under his breath.

“Boss?...”

“Follow. Just follow,” Ed says louder and adds after a short consideration, because he just can’t not, “And then if he does anything suspicious shoot him.”

Havoc is scratching his stubbly cheek, when Ed turns around and without waiting for an answer runs away.

The upper floor is already full of Briggs soldiers and he spots Armstrong. She notices him and they fall into step, rushing towards the far end of the long corridor where the clouds of smoke are bursting through the breach in the wall of one of the rooms.
“Shouldn’t you be with the Führer?” Armstrong asks him.

“I went to check on Kidwell, he didn’t show up at the meeting. Have you by any chance seen Minister Orlov?”

“I saw all three of them leaving the meeting room after the explosion went off.”

“Wait, what?” Ed stops abruptly and looks up at Armstrong who slows down and turns to look at him impatiently. “The meeting just began, why were they leaving?”

“They seemed worried about the explosion, so I sent my people to take them in the safe room under the Fort.”

“And Orlov was with them?”

“I already told you, Elric. Now, if you’ll excuse me—”

“And Roy?”

“What?”

“Was Roy leaving the room with them?” Ed asks harshly.

“I didn’t see him,” there is a deep frown between Armstrong’s brows as she turns fully to him. “Why do—”

Whatever it was she was about to say is interrupted by the loud - much louder than the first one - sound of an explosion coming from somewhere under their feet. And Ed feels his heart sink at the thought that the room where Roy was meeting with the Drachmans was vaguely in the direction of where the sound came from.

Ed dashes back to the stairs, not trusting the elevator now and ignoring Armstrong’s shout of “Elric!!”. He first peeks to the corridor one level below checking if it was affected by the explosion. Not noticing any traces of it he hurries downstairs and is immediately startled by the intense feeling of a transmutation being performed here and the heavy smell of smoke bursting in his lungs with his next breath. He bends over at the sudden spasm in his chest and starts coughing.

When he can finally straighten up, his heart is pounding somewhere in his throat, and he struggles to swallow around it. He takes two uncertain steps in the direction of the thick clouds of smoke hiding half of the corridor from view, shakes himself from the temporary stupor and, raising the collar of his jacket to cover his mouth and nose starts walking again, crossing the distance between him and the epicenter of the explosion in wide strides.

When he is closer and the smoke begins to tail off, he can see that it is coming from the meeting room and notices that there is no fire despite that the thick wooden door is completely burnt out, leaving just a few black coals still hanging by some miracle to the hinges.

The alchemy feels incredibly strong here.

He’s felt this kind of alchemy before.

He sucks in a breath, bitter with smoke, at the sudden spike of a headache behind his eyes, and he shuts them, bringing his slightly colder automail hand to his forehead, hissing in pain.

He felt this before. He saw this before.
It is the same type of alchemy Kidwell used to blow up the Amestrian camp in that old dream Ed had last year. They made a mistake. He made a mistake. Both he who wrote the notes and mentioned Kidwell’s name in the list but let out the specifics of the alchemy the man uses, as well as he who sent Kidwell away from Central without thinking about the possible consequences of having a potential enemy out of his sight. Disregarding the importance of his name appearing in the list Edward gave Roy. Relying on the notes too much, forgetting that some important information might be missing there.

And he could blame no one but himself. There is still the question of which him he is blaming more. And perhaps it doesn’t matter, or maybe there is no difference.

But now he doesn’t have the time to think about it - he needs to find Roy first. He needs to makes sure that the man is all right.

The smoke is almost thin enough to see the abused room through it and Ed makes a few steps towards the entryway. He stops at the threshold, taking in small pieces of coal and a layer of black ash covering the floor - this is all what is left of all the furniture, and Ed prays to all the gods he has never believed in, that it's all what it is - burnt out furniture and nothing else.

His blood is pulsating violently in his ears and he almost misses the sound of several pairs of feet running to him from both ends of the corridor.

"Sir?"

Ed turns around to one of the Briggs soldiers. "Where is the Führer?" he asks in a hoarse voice.

"He left with your people right after the Drachmans, sir."

The wave of relief washes over a tight fist around his chest, loosening its grip on Ed and he inhales sharply.

"Where?"

"Should be in one of the bunkers on the ground level I think. Standard procedure," the soldier answers, shrugging.

"I saw them going upstairs actually," another soldier steps closer and scratches his head in confusion.

"Dammit," Ed curses quietly. He must check on Kidwell first, Roy can protect himself and there are Hawkeye and several others with him.

He is almost near the stairs again when he stumbles across Havoc who is running to him with a highly disturbing expression on his face.

"Boss!" Havoc stops in his tracks, his eyes widen as he looks at the remains of the dark smoke behind Ed.

"What the hell are you doing here, Jean?!!" Ed practically shouts, grabbing the man's shoulder. "I told you to watch Kidwell!"

"I did!" Havoc almost whines turning his attention to Ed. "He got away, boss! I don't know ho—"

"What?! What the fuck happened?"

"After the first explosion I kind of expected him to at least peek outside, to see what's going on, you
know,” the man started explaining rapidly, "but he stayed in the room. And I thought, alright, easier for me. And then the second explosion went off and I decided to at least knock on the door, so I did, but he didn't answer. And I just went inside the room and it was empty! I even checked the bathroom and under the bed. Boss, you know me, I wouldn't miss him, I have no idea how he—"

"Fuck!" Ed screams and punches the wall with his automail hand.

"There is enough destruction in this place for one day, Elric, without you causing more," the cold voice from above them says and Ed looks up to see Armstrong hurriedly walking down the stairs. "The Führer?" she asks without changing her tone.


"Meaning?"

"One of your men saw him and the others going upstairs."

"The entrance to the bunker is on the ground level."

"I am aware," Ed answers dryly. "Also, Kidwell is on the loose fuck knows where. And I am almost sure he is responsible for the explosions."

Armstrong frowns and walks past them.

“Go find Mustang and get him to the bunker. I’ll send my men after Kidwell,” she says and starts immediately throwing orders to the Briggs soldiers gathered on this floor.

Ed turns to Havoc and speaks hurriedly:

“Jean, you know how the matter looks like when it was transmuted?"

“Like small tiles?” the man answers hesitantly, tilting his brow.

“Yeah, something like that. I think Kidwell transmuted the wall in his room open to sneak out. I doubt there is an array left, but the structure of the wall should look a bit different. Go with Armstrong’s people and find the place where he exited, explain them what to look for. It should be possible to trace his route - I doubt he is using open spaces now to move through the Fort.”

“Will do, boss,” Havoc nods and goes to Armstrong while Ed rushes up the stairs bracing himself for a long walk to the top levels of the Fort - he wants to at least check their room in case Roy decided for some reason to go there, before considering other possible options.

If they both walk out of this situation intact Ed is going to kill Roy himself. What was the man thinking, going god knows where when some rogue alchemist is blowing up the Fort?! Ignoring the standard evacuation to the safe room and, as Ed is sure, the voice of reason in the face of Hawkeye. And now instead of searching for Kidwell Ed has to look for Roy, because as much as he trusts their men to protect him and he knows that Roy is indeed capable of protecting himself, Ed will not rest until he personally drags Roy to the bunker.

Ed is clinging to this irritation, fueling it to anger - this is the emotion he needs right now. He can not allow himself to surrender his mind to the doubts and fears flooding it, trying to breach through the too thin wall of “That didn’t happen. That is not going to happen” Ed has built up in his mind in a desperate attempt to separate here and then , to distinguish his world from the one that has been so insistently seeping through his dreams, tendril by tendril, one breach in his worldview after another. What he considered solid and unbendable, the set of rules he once promised himself to never violate,
has been smashed to pieces with just one move of his automail, with just one clap of his hands, with just a few moments of his arm pressed to the too fragile cartilage of the human’s throat. There is nothing permanent and even the bounds he set for himself are much more flexible than he has tended to believe.

There is nothing permanent, as life never is. But it was so easy to forget this, when his own life became so tightly bound with another, something he had never considered was possible fourteen years ago, but he fell so fast and so deep that he even missed that moment when I became we, and it felt so right that he almost wanted to believe that it would last forever. Ed has always thought himself mature enough not to let feelings interfere with his reason and judgement, let alone love of all things, but even with an almost constant worry on the verge of his conscious, because he just can’t not worry at all, his life is so full of moments of such intoxicating happiness and bliss that he could almost forget that beyond their little bubble the time is still passing.

And that there are too many circumstances which can end this in a matter of seconds.

And the realisation - which should not be a realisation at all, because it should be just plain apparent, because who if not Ed is well aware of how fragile human life is - which came when the remains of the burnt telegram were laying ashes under his feet in that dream four days ago, shook the very pillars he built his world on.

His breaths are coming out fast and short as the rapid pounding of his heart in his chest, and he blames this on his hasty pace when he finally reaches the floor where his and Roy’s room is. He rounds the corner and he can see the silhouettes of a few men standing guard near the door. He recognises them as he gets closer and allows himself a little sigh of relief, before slowing his rushing steps and squaring his shoulders.

“’s he ‘ere?” Ed asks his men, pointing at the door, his breath is still not steady enough to produce more than a couple of words. Roy can consider himself lucky - Ed will not scream at him for at least a few more minutes as he collects his breath. He needs to exercise more often, he thinks absentmindedly, they both probably do.

He receives a nod and a quiet “Yes, sir”, and opens the door to the room. Hawkeye turns her head to him as he enters, her hand is laying on the gun on her hip, a deep frown between her eyebrows. She visibly relaxes when she recognises him, but Ed walks past her to the man now rising to his feet from where he was sitting (sulking, Ed thinks) on the couch. The relief on Roy’s face mirrors the one Ed feels seeing his husband alive and well, but he brushes it aside, and points an accusing finger of his left hand in the middle of Roy’s chest.

“You!” he breathes out hoarsely, “the fuck — I—” He is still out of breath.

“Ed, thank God!” Ignoring the murderous look in Ed’s eyes, Roy grabs his outstretched hand and brings it to his lips. “I was worried,” he says, pressing a kiss on Ed’s wrist.

He was worried!

Ed tilts his hand, catching Roy’s one in a tight but soft grip, and with some effort tears his eyes from Roy’s face, turning to look at Hawkeye.

“Why is he not in the safe room?!” he asks her, pointing with his free hand at Roy above his shoulder, earning a hesitant “Hey, I’m here!” from the man and choosing not to react.

“It was that or shooting him in a leg and then dragging him to the bunker,” Hawkeye answers dryly.
“Next time - shoot!” Ed grumbles, throwing a glance at Roy.

“I will. Although I hope there will not be a next time like that. What happened?”

Ed sighs, relaxing a bit and only now noticing the soft brushes of Roy’s thumb on his hand. He gives Roy’s hand a short squeeze.

“It’s that fucker Kidwell,” Ed says giving Roy the “I told you” look. “He escaped his room, probably transmuted the wall open. He is using long distance alchemy.” Roy’s expression goes from relieved to glum at these words and Ed looks at him meaningfully, tilting his brow, until the man nods, showing that he remembers that dream from the last year Ed told him about. “Armstrong’s men are looking for him, but there is not knowing where he will appear next - this Fort is fucking huge.”

“We should take the Führer to the bunker then,” Hawkeye says and Ed studies Roy’s face, ready to fend off any retorts that might follow, but Roy just squeezes Ed’s hand before releasing it and gestures to the door.

“After you.”

Ed rolls his eyes and walks to Hawkeye, who opens the door and steps out of the room. The barely noticeable tickling on his skin makes him stop in his tracks.

“Ed...” he hears a wary voice behind him and he turns to look at Roy seeing the same confusion on the man’s face as he feels now himself.

It is when he can finally place that feeling, it is already too late.

The strong wave of alchemy crashes over them and Ed barely has a moment to realise that it is coming from under them, when the floor starts shifting under their feet and time stretches in that particular way which happens when the blood is so rich with adrenalin that later, after it wears off, some would swear they were able to see the flight of a bullet.

It is not a bullet now though, but a slowly widening opening in the floor and the movement of Roy’s body is what Ed sees in such lucidity that he thinks it’s been already a few minutes since it started when in fact just a couple of seconds have passed. But what happens next takes just a few moments, too fast to react or fully comprehend. Ed’s foot catches on the edge of the opening in the floor, he wobbles, trying to keep his balance, and a hand grabs him by the collar and throws him backwards as if he doesn’t weight anything. And as his back hits the floor in the corridor, the deafening explosion goes off from somewhere below them, and a wall of fire and smoke erupts through the hole in the room’s floor, swallowing Roy.

He can hear the distant shouts and cries through the ringing in his ears and his eyes hurt from how he is staring without blinking at the thick black smoke streaming through the door.

And for a moment he is paralyzed, feeling his conscious split in two only to collide back the next moment, and for one very long second he isn’t sure - which one. And it is not just eerie - it is straight horrifying.

He slowly rises to his feet, leaning on the wall for leverage, he feels dizzy and his legs refuse to hold him and he is not sure if the reason for that is the explosion or something else. He makes one unsteady step towards the room and he thinks absentmindedly that the smoke will not be even a problem for him, because he doesn’t think that he is actually breathing right now at all. Another step and he pulls his hand from the wall almost falling over, when a hand catches his forearm, tugging him back and he hears someone shouting his name in his ear.
He is trying to pull his arm from the tight grip but to no avail and then a familiar face focuses into view, but there is an expression on it he has never seen there before.

“Edward! Edward, do you hear me?” Hawkeye looks terrified. And that look on this always collected face is like a bucket of freezing water spilled on him, and Ed’s heart sinks.

“Riza…” he husks. “Roy… Roy is there. We need—”

She is answering him something, still keeping hold of his arm, but he only sees her lips move and no words reach his conscious. He is shaking from adrenaline and shock, his body urging him to move, to do something, instead of standing there frozen. The explosion went off from under them after the hole on the floor opened to the level below. They are almost in the middle of the corridor, it will take too long to reach one of the stair on its ends.

Ed blinks, shakes his head and looks at Hawkeye.

“Move away.”

“What?” She releases his arm but stays in place.

“Move away!” Ed shouts, falling on his knees, clapping his hands and planting them on the floor.

With blue sparks the floor moves under Ed’s palms, opening a narrow hole to the level below. He jumps without thinking twice as soon it is wide enough for him to get through. Hawkeye shouts something, but his attention is on the door in front of him. He dashes to it as soon as he lands, not caring to even straighten up first or look around. His right shoulder collides with the door, smashing it open, and he instantly bends over coughing violently - the room is filled with smoke and it attacks his lungs. His eyes are watering with tears, and he claps, blindly reaching to the wall behind him, making it move to create a wide opening which should let the smoke flow to the corridor faster. He covers his face with his sleeve, trying not to breathe too deeply, and takes several cautious steps towards the center of the room. Roy must’ve fallen down somewhere here. Ed must find him. He is trying not to think of what he saw at the previous explosion site, when everything within the radius was burnt down to ash. Roy is the Flame Alchemist. He will not go down from something like that.

Another few steps and he is purposefully ignoring the rustling mess under his feet. It is just burnt out furniture, nothing more, he tells himself. A few more steps and he should’ve reached the middle of the room by now. The smoke is slowly fading and he opens his mouth to call for Roy, but his throat is sore and he starts coughing again.

As he straightens up and opens his eyes, a hand grabs his automail, bending it behind his back, another hand is pressing hard at his mouth as he feels a hard push under his knees, and before he knows it, he is being dragged somewhere, and when he manages to find his footing again and yank his hand free, he is in the small bathroom, and there is much less smoke in the air here. It takes him a second to turn around, transmute his automail blade, swing and strike it forward, only for his hand to be pushed away at the last moment. He is grabbed by the collar and spun around until his back collides with the wall. And the face of his opponent is close enough to recognise it through the smoke, which he does in an instant at the same time as this trick, because they’ve been there before, with Ed’s being violently pushed back to the wall, but unfortunately today’s circumstances are not as appealing.

Roy, weary, hair in complete disarray, ash smudged on the side of his face, but alive, and visibly unwounded, lets go of Ed’s collar and gives him a small smile.

Ed is going to kill him. As soon as they get out of here and he deals with Kidwell, Ed is going to kill
Roy.

The wave of relief feels like a twenty store building falling down on him.

“The f—” Ed begins, but Roy covers his mouth with his hand.

“He is here,” he whispers.

Ed raises his brows and Roy lowers his hand.

“What?”

“Kidwell is somewhere nearby,” Roy explains. “Not in this room, but perhaps in the adjacent one.”

“Wh—” Ed begins but drifts off, as realisation hits him. Kidwell had no way of knowing that Roy returned to their room instead of going to the bunker, unless he followed him. He probably hid somewhere nearby and maybe even waited for Ed to be there too, before activating the array. Which leaves the question of when he managed to prepare arrays in several places of Briggs beforehand, if he was always followed by one of Ed’s people. But that is a question for after Ed catches this fucker and beats the living hell out of him.

“Too bad for him then,” Ed says grimly, making a move to exit the bathroom, but he is stopped by Roy again, who is gesturing him to lower his voice.

“Keep it down, Ed. He planned for me - or us for that matter - to fall down here. He may have another array prepared if he hears that we survived.”

Ed nods and, without saying another word, they both enter the room again. The smoke is almost gone by now and Ed quickly scans the surroundings. The floor is covered with ash, the walls are black from the fire and there is not a single piece of furniture left standing. Roy heads to the breach in the wall made by Ed earlier, but Ed stops in the middle of the room and crouches.

He starts swiping the ash away on the small part of the floor before him - if Kidwell prepared another array in this room it is probably somewhere here. He can hear the rushing steps in the corridor and Hawkeye’s voice, full of relief, “You are alive!” sounds simultaneously with Roy’s cry of “Get out of there, Ed”. As the brush of Ed’s hand on the floor reveals the thick lines of what must be the array he has been looking for, at the same second, because of course, how could it be different today, when Ed is always just a flicker of a moment late, he feels a surge of alchemy and the lines under his fingers flutter with blue sparkles. It happens in one second, and it is long enough to realise that it is too late to do anything, but not enough to accept it. His heart skips a beat and he only wishes he had enough time to turn his head to check if Roy has a chance to dash away from the danger.

He is too late. A blinding flash along with a sudden heat and the blast of thunder hit his senses, completely disorienting him. He gasps and waits for the pain to come, or for his conscious to fade, but the stingning under his closed eyelids and the almost unbearable heat on his skin are too real but almost not painful enough. He struggles for breath and manages to push some air - hot and low on oxygen - in his lungs. It burns his throat, but the sensation makes him focus more on the signals his body is sending him. That is when he feels a firm arm around his shoulder, hand holding him at the back of his neck. And there is another body pressed to his, and he can feel another chest heaving as hard as his own, fighting for breath.

He opens his eyes and he sees fire.

Walls of raging fire all around him and a reflection of it in the dark blue eyes of the man, whose free hand is outstretched before them, holding the ferocious element at bay.
Ed has seen Roy in action, using his flame alchemy more than once. Be it a small gesture, like lighting a fire in their fireplace, or a bigger one like sending tendrils of flames after their enemies with just one snap of his fingers - it has always been captivating, the ease with which the man tamed something so fierce and vicious.

Yes, Ed has seen Roy doing his alchemy. But never like this.

Deep frown between his brows, drops of sweat sliding down his temples, squinted eyes with fire in them and hand with a pale scar on it, holding so much power on just the tips of the long elegant fingers. And Ed just can’t tear his eyes off him.

The fire is dying rapidly around them, until it is completely gone, and Roy lowers his hand, and the one around Ed moves to cup his face. Roy looks down at him and there is an evident relief in the dark eyes. He brings their foreheads together, sighs and closes his eyes for a moment. A thumb brushes Ed’s cheek gently and he could get lost in the sensation of being held by Roy like that, but he pulls back from the embrace, seeing the man open his eyes, that for just a flicker of a moment look so tired, that Ed wants to just let him find the closest bed, and sit nearby watching him sleep peacefully, but there is still so much that needs to be done before they can rest. He rises up, offering Roy a hand, which he accepts, and stands up beside Ed.

They step in the corridor and are instantly met by Hawkeye, and Ed can swear he has never seen her that pale before. She gets hold on her face once she sees they both are alive and the fear in her eyes is quickly replaced with cold rage, which is a much more familiar sight, though not less terrifying.

“To the bunker. Now,” she says coldly, her hand reaching to her hip where her gun rests in its holder, and for a second Ed almost believes that she outranks them both. And honestly, Ed would gladly delegate her this authority now, letting her lead them both to the safe room, but there is still the matter of Kidwell not having an automail fist in his face yet.

“Not yet, just stay with Roy here,” he tells Hawkeye and looks at the men behind her - both Briggs soldiers and their security team from Central. “Spread out and check this whole floor starting from the rooms adjoined with this one,” he points over his shoulder to the burnt out room, “Kidwell is somewhere here. Bring me this fucker,” he finishes grimly.

“Ed?” Roy quietly says behind him and Ed turns to look at him. He locks his eyes with his for a moment and he is tearing up between the urge to throw himself at Roy to bury his face in the crook of his neck, and the growing need to scream in his face about how stupid and reckless he thinks his husband is and how dare he make Ed run around Briggs searching for him and worrying sick. But there will be time for this later.

“You are staying here with Hawkeye until we get Kidwell,” Ed says dryly. “And I swear to god if you take one step from her I will divorce you,” he finishes dreadly catching an approving glance from Hawkeye.

Roy opens his mouth, closes it, sighs and opens it again.

“Of course, Ed,” he answers calmly.

Ed holds his gaze for another moment but Roy doesn’t say anything else, so Ed turns around and goes to check on the rooms nearby. The soldiers are practically swarming the floor following Ed’s order, there are at least one or two in every room, but in case if Kidwell used alchemy to make an opening in a wall or floor, Ed starts quickly checking for any traces of recent transmutations.

He finds it fast, a faint mismatch of a pattern on the floor of one of the rooms. Sending a few soldiers
to the level below them the normal way, Ed transmutes the floor open and quickly jumps down. He finds himself in a wide long dark room, filled with dusty crates and boxes. The light from the hole in the ceiling makes it a bit easier to see but that as well means that if Kidwell is still here, Ed’s arrival sure didn’t come unnoticed.

Ed transmutes the blade out of his automail and as soon as he does that, a gunshot breaks the silence, sound ricocheting from the low ceiling, making Ed’s ears, still ringing from the explosion, hurt, and Ed winces both from that and the brutal force with which the bullet collides with the forearm of his automail, getting stucked in the plates, and making Ed take a step back to hold his balance.

“Are you such a shitty shooter or just an idiot?” he shouts in the direction from where the bullet came, crouching behind a big crate. “Oh, you were probably aiming at the light from the transmutation,” he quietly moves under the cover of another crate and farther from the light falling from the ceiling. “Idiot it is then.”

There is no answer and Ed stills, listening. He can hear a faint rustle of clothes but it is hard to pinpoint where the sound is coming from except for it being somewhere on the opposite side of the room. He waits for another rustling and sneaks as quietly as possible from under his cover towards where he thinks Kidwell is hiding. He stops and holds his breath for a moment, and the quiet scratchings reach his ears - Kidwell is definitely drawing an array. Ed listens for another moment and when he is able to place where exactly the sound is coming from, he claps his hands and smashes his palms on the floor - enough is enough.

A wave of heaving up pieces of concrete rushes from Ed’s hands, tipping over the crates and boxes, until it hits the opposite wall. Someone yelps, and Ed is already on his feet dashing to where the sound came from. He is fast enough to reach Kidwell when the man is still lying on the floor, trying to free himself from under the rubble the floor turned into. He reaches to the gun when he sees Ed approaching, but not fast enough, and the metal of the automail leg collides with his wrist, making an unpleasant cracking sound, and Kidwell screams in pain and fear.

Ed transmutes his automail blade back and without thinking twice throws a punch with his right fist to Kidwell’s face.

The man cries out and Ed uses the same hand to grab him by the collar and yank him up. He pushes him to the wall, Kidwell is sobbing and dripping blood from his broken jaw on Ed’s right hand.

Ed hears himself growling.

Kidwell tilts his head and the faint light from the upper floor reflects in his widened eyes. There is nothing but animalistic fear in them.

_Traitor_.

Ed’s breath catches and he unclasps his grip on the man’s collar, as if just touching him burns. Kidwell slides down to the damaged floor and just sobs, not making any attempts to move. Ed picks up the gun from the floor and, making sure it is loaded, takes two steps back and aims it at the sobbing man.

They stay like that for another minute, silence filled with just Kidwell’s cries and Ed’s shallow breaths. He tries to ignore the shaking of his left hand and the cold sticky sweat running down his spine. The door to the room opens at the same time as someone jumps down the same way Ed did. The room fills with soldiers, someone brings a light, and Ed averts his eyes from the bleeding man on the floor.
He lowers his hand and lets the gun drop when someone peels Kidwell off the floor, fixing his hands in handcuffs behind his back and tugging him up. Edward is being told something, but as long as it is not a question he can pretty much ignore it.

He used to think they’ve changed so much. And yet here he is, with Kidwell’s blood dripping from his automail onto the floor, as if he was meant to.

Ed is a man of science, he doesn’t believe in fate, neither in gods. The only deity he believes in, because he has seen it with his own eyes more than once, is the Truth and it has nothing to do with it. But just this once for a short moment he can swear he can hear it laughing at him.

He walks away without looking back.

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He doesn’t get to Roy right away as he stumbles across a seething Armstrong on his way up. She doesn’t technically interrogates him, but it comes really close to that, and Ed is too spent to argue, so he just gives her short answers. He takes hold of one of his men running past them and tells him to let Roy know that they have caught Kidwell. When Armstrong is finally done with him and he gets to the remains of his and Roy’s room, neither Roy nor Hawkeye is there. Havoc finds him standing there looking blankly at the black ash, and tells him Armstrong was heading towards the bunker where the Drachmans have been hiding all this time, and perhaps Roy is also there. They make their way to the elevator - finally no more stairs or jumping through holes in floors like a monkey - and Ed gets rid of his coat along the way, just dropping it on the floor - it is cold without it, but he can’t bear looking at his sleeve drenched in blood. Havoc doesn’t comment.

When they exit the elevator in the narrow dim corridor, the heavy metal door at the end of it is opened and Ed sees Armstrong’s back inside the room. Ed tells Havoc to stay outside, as he walks in.

It is a big room with a table in the middle and cots and shelves with some provisions along the walls. Several Briggs soldiers along with Hawkeye are standing at both sides of the door. All three of the Drachman ministers are sitting at one side of the table with their guards behind them. There is a question on Solsky’s face and a highly irritated expression on Stürmer’s. Orlov is even more agitated than usual, fidgeting in his chair and throwing nervous glances at the Amestrians. He flinches visibly when he sees Ed entering the room, and averts his eyes.

In front of the ministers Roy is leaning on his elbows at the table, the lower half of his face is hidden behind his intertwined fingers. With his half lidded eyes and a slightly tilted brow, he looks calm and unimpressed. But from where Ed is standing, he can see the tightness of Roy’s pressed together lips, and he knows for sure that the man is pissed.

Ed stops near Armstrong, mimicking her stance, folding his hands behind his back, and while Roy is doing the talking, he chooses Orlov as the target of his murderous glares, as the anxious man seems to Ed the most suspicious of them all.

“If Drachma wanted you dead, we wouldn’t be spending so much time trying to find a mutual ground for the treaty, Mr. Mustang,” Stürmer says angrily. “Suggesting that the Emperor would send his Foreign minister to attempt the assassination of the leader of another country is preposterous!”

“You are the ones who choose to bring Kidwell here, while being perfectly aware of our position concerning that man’s presence anywhere near the Amestrian high ranking officers, which includes me,” Roy answers calmly.
“You are the ones who basically expelled him in the first place, and yet he is still an Amestrian citizen!” Solsky slams his palm on the table surface, making Orlov throw a nervous glance at him. No one else moved a muscles. “For all we know he can be your spy and this could be your attempt on killing us!”

“Oh, yes, but of course,” Roy answers sardonically. “That is why there is not a single scratch on you, yet I and Colonel Elric were caught in two explosions. This makes perfect sense,” he drops his hands and leans back in his chair. “And may I remind you, that if I wanted you dead, I wouldn’t need help from some second-rate alchemist,” he says, raising his hand and snapping. A small flame dances on the tip of his fingers for a few seconds, before vanishing when Roy lowers his hand.

Solsky’s face reddens and he makes an attempt to stand, but he is stopped by Stürmer’s hand on his shoulder.

“This demonstration was completely unnecessary, Mr. Mustang,” the Foreign Minister says, frowning. “We are well aware of your abilities. And I am sure my colleague here didn’t mean what he said. Nobody here, ” he throws a glance at Solsky, “is stupid enough to suggest that you would execute such a ludicrous plan. And yet I insist that neither would we.”

“I see that this is going nowhere,” Roy says dryly. “Perhaps we should wait for the results of Kidwell’s interrogation first then.”

Orlov pales and Solsky hisses through teeth.

“The mere words of some looney are not enough as evidence to make Drachma involved in this!” Solsky says harshly and clenches his hands in fists.

“You see, we are not in court here and neither of us is obliged to prove anything to a third party,” Roy squints and there is metal in his voice. “Assassination attempts, successful or not, on the leader of this country or his family may be considered a declaration of war.”

Ed swallows and steals a glance at Roy. The man says these words as if they mean nothing but a simple warning, but Ed sees a reflection of his own horrors in the tightness of Roy’s eyes - he knows that Roy will avoid starting a war at any costs, but they can not allow this to be evident to the Drachmans.

“It would, if they were executed by a non Amestrian citizen,” Stürmer breaks the silence. Ed can say the man is still angry, but his voice this time sounds much calmer, and he is obviously holding himself back now that the conversation took such a turn, when the wrong choice of words can potentially lead to a war between two countries.

“It would anyway, if he acted on your order,” Roy cuts off.

Stürmer leans back in his chair and frowns, but doesn’t say anything.

“That you happen to be in the places of the explosions doesn’t necessarily mean they were aimed at you,” Solsky grumbles, but more hesitantly than before.

“I can personally state with certainty that there were indeed two assassination attempts on me and my spouse,” Roy tilts his head shortly in the direction where Ed is standing. “And if I have enough reasons to suspect that one or all of you share responsibility with Kidwell for those attempts, I will see this as an act of aggression towards Amestris.”

“And I can personally state the fucker shoot at me,” Ed speaks for the first time. “If you want evidence of that I have it right here,” he rolls the right sleeve of his shirt and raises his left hand.
pointing at the damaged plate in his forearm and the bullet there. He is answering Solsky, but looking straight at Orlov. He can feel Roy’s stare but ignores it. “Actually, let me save us all some time here without spending it on pointless talking,” he lowers his arm, but leaves the sleeve rolled up. “Sir?” he adds, glancing at Roy, for the sake of keeping some semblance of subordination in the presence of the foreign party.

Roy’s eyes linger on Ed’s automail for a moment, and then he looks up at Ed and nods.

“Go ahead.”

Ed steps to the table, grabs a chair and drags it from under it. Chair legs make a horrible screechy sound and Ed can practically feel everyone in the room wincing. He will apologize later. Maybe. He places the chair at the end of the table, close to Orlov, whose eyes have stopped jumping from one face to another and finally settle on Ed’s. Ed drops himself in the chair and his automail arm on the table, barely a dozen centimeters from Orlov, who flinches at the action.

“I have a few questions for your jumpy friend here,” Ed says. “First: why were you late at the meeting this morning?”

“I don’t see why I should justify myself to you, Mr. Elric,” Orlov says with venom in his voice.

“Answer his questions, Alexey,” Stürmer says dryly.

Orlov squares his shoulders and fixes his hair with long fingers. Ed notices them quivering.

“I had an upset stomach,” he answers, his unblinking eyes roaming along Ed’s face.

“Lie,” Ed says shortly. “I know you left your room soon after the others. Besides, I’ve heard this excuse today already. Turned out to be bullshit.”

Orlov licks his lips nervously and opens his mouth to answer, but Ed claps his hands in the space between them, and Orlov twitches back in his chair. Ed averts his eyes and briefly touches the seat of his chair, transmuting small tweezers out of it, and, putting his automail arm on the table again, bends over it and digs the tweezers in the small hole the bullet made, trying to pull it out.

“I wonder what Kidwell will say,” Ed goes on, trying to sound as disinterested as possible - being around Roy for almost two decades could teach even the most short-fused person the basis of how to keep a controlled mask over their emotions. “They will have to fix his jaw first though,” he looks at his hand, as if for the first time noticing the dried blood on it, makes a displeased sound and pushes away the image of a dead body on the floor, rising before his eyes from the depths of his memory. Not now. “Or maybe not - he still has one unbroken arm to be able to write.” Ed pulls out the bullet from his arm, drops it on the table and turns his attention back to Orlov. The man’s eyes are fixed on the small deformed cylinder and a drop of sweat is running down his temple. “You see, I know that Kidwell couldn’t have prepared those arrays by himself. Which means that someone helped him.”

Orlov looks up on Ed, and blinks. The corner of his eye is twitching.

“Your innuendoes are outrageous, Mr. Elric.”

“I also happen to know, from first-hand experience, that Kidwell is a fucking coward,” Ed continues ignoring Orlov’s comment. “I bet it won’t take much time until he tells us the name of his accomplice,” he pauses for a moment fixing his eyes on Orlov’s. “So, do you want to wait until then or do you have something to say now?”

There is a tense silence in the room following Ed’s words and he can feel if not see several pairs of
eyes focusing on the man before him. Orlov feels them too, his eyes twitching in an attempt to hold
his gaze on Ed but here and then jumping to one of the other faces, and the grip of pale fingers on the
edge of the table tightens each time.

Ed is not saying or doing anything else, waiting almost patiently and silently praising himself that he
has outgrown his short-fused younger self, because if he has picked up anything from when he
witnessed Roy graciously negotiating with all types of officials within Amestrian or other countries’
government, it’s that sometimes you just need to give your opponent a chance to dig his own grave.

And he doesn’t have to wait long, as the absolute amount of tension Orlov can apparently handle
reaches its limits, and the man suddenly jerks himself up, his chair falling on the floor behind him,
and as Ed does the same, instinctively settling in a fighting position with his right arm in front of him,
he registers a rustling of boots on the floor behind him, Roy’s chair being moved, and the click of
what must be Hawkeye’s gun holder being opened when she pulls her gun out of it.

“I did what must be done!” Orlov shouts, his hands shaking on his sides. “What you all cowards
couldn’t do!” he points an accusing finger at the other Drachman ministers. Stürmer is looking at him
with a deep frown between his eyebrows, Solsky’s eyes are wide. “I’ve had enough of you licking
the boots of these,” he looks between Roy and Ed, his upper lip is twitching in what looks like
disgust, “faggots!” he finishes, spurting out the word as if he was hoping it might cause some real
damage to the people he addressed it to. “The Emperor is too weak, all of you are too weak!” Orlov
screams at the Drachmans, his voice breaking on the last word. His forehead is glistening with sweat
and the movements of his eyes are more agitated than before. His gaze catches Ed’s for a moment
and what he sees in Ed’s eyes makes him step back. He stumbles at the fallen chair behind him and
loses his footing, colliding with the shelves standing along the wall. He grasps the edge of it to pull
himself upwards, his breathing coming fast and loud, his whole body shaking now.

“Pathetic,” Ed hears a low voice, saying what has been on Ed’s mind, and he turns his head to look
at the other Drachmans.

“Pathetic,” Stürmer repeats again, rage and contempt are clearly readable on his face when he is
looking at Orlov. Solsky by his side has fixed his gaze on Roy, he is blinking fast and his fingers are
fidgeting around the high collar of his coat, tugging it as if it threatens to suffocate him.

A strong hand grabs Ed’s shoulder, and he looks over his shoulder. Armstrong glances at him, tilting
her head to the side, and silently pulling him to the side. Ed abandons his place near the table and
steps back, positioning himself behind Roy, who now sits back to his chair at the table.

“Arsist this man,” Armstrong orders her men and they walk to Orlov, who is still clinging to the
shelf. He doesn’t fight when his hands are locked in cuffs behind his back and Briggs soldiers are
walking him out of the room. Armstrong throws a quick glance at Ed and Roy and follows after her
men.

Roy puts his elbows on the table, hiding half of his face behind his locked hands once again. Ed
folds his arms on his chest and looks grumpily at the remaining ministers. With the corner of his eyes
he notices that Hawkeye hasn’t put her gun away yet.

The silence is stretching.

Stürmer is the first to break it. He sighs heavily, closing his eyes for a moment, and when he looks at
Roy again, his face is as composed as it can be in such circumstances.

“I assume I don’t have to explain to you that we were not aware of Orlov’s… plans, Mr. Mustang,”
he says carefully.
“Mm,” is all that comes out of Roy’s mouth, neither a ‘yes’ nor a ‘no’, but Stürmer nods as if it was what he had been expecting.

“But we of course understand, that we are partially responsible for letting such ideas take root in the mind of our compatriot,” he adds watching Roy closely.

“Partially,” Roy answers coldly. Solsky swallows loudly and rubs his face with his palm.

“Orlov is certainly a Drachman citizen, and I remember your earlier words about any threat coming to you or your family,” Stürmer continues, quickly glancing at Ed before returning his attention to the Führer. “However I am positive that we can find some mutual ground without resorting to more extreme measures.”

Roy shifts in his chair, dropping his hands on the table.

“You are well aware of our conditions, Mr. Stumer,” he says. “And until now you have been quite aggressively refusing to even discuss some of the points of the treaty we suggested you.”

“I am sure we can renegotiate them and come to an arrangement which will be more satisfactory for the interests of your country, Mr. Mustang.”

Roy nods and stands.

“Then we will meet tomorrow morning to discuss the terms,” he says and starts walking to the door, ignoring Stürmer’s quiet “Of course”.

Ed falls into step behind him, hearing Hawkeye follow them when they exit the room and head to the elevator. What almost costed them both their lives apparently has the potential to become a turning point between endless negotiations with Drachma which have led to no results till now, and the moment when they finally will sign a treaty with that country.

And as he enters the elevator, inhaling the thick smoke scent which is coming from both his and Roy’s bodies, he doesn’t know what to think about it yet.

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They both are quiet on their way to the room given to them in the place of the destroyed one. Ed waits for Roy to go inside first, and closes the door behind them.

Roy turns to him as soon as Ed slams the door behind them.

“Ed, before you say an—”

“What the fuck were you thinking, Roy?!” Ed shouts, not even waiting for the man to finish.

Roy puts his hands in his pants pockets and raises his chin an inch higher, guarded expression on his face - his usual stance for those rare occasions when they are about to argue about something where Roy is not willing to budge no matter what. Unfortunately for Ed he really never does.

“About your well being, mostly,” Roy answers dryly.

Ed can tell him how worried Roy’s stupid actions made him, but this will result in the yelling match which will end only when one of them loses his voice, so he goes straight with the heavy weaponry.

“He fucking died for this, Roy, how dare you be so reckless?!”
“I don’t need to be reminded of that, Ed! I saw him with my own eyes,” Roy answers raising his voice. “So forgive me for not wanting this happen to you.”

“Well, apparently you forgot what you felt back then, Roy! But it is me who is seeing this now and let me tell you—”

“This is not a competition, Ed! You have these dreams, I get it, and I am sorry you have to experience all that, and it fucking pains me to see how they affect you. But for some reason you decided that now you have to carry this alone, Ed, and be solely responsible for whatever happens!” Roy pulls his hands out of his pockets, clenching them in fists on his sides. “Do you really think I don’t care?! Do you think I forgot what we are doing this for, Ed?! Do you think I can ever forget those lifeless dull eyes when you were standing in the middle of my room telling me about the deaths of our friends, about my death, with such pain in your voice that every word was cutting me like a fucking knife?!” he makes one step forward and Ed has to fight the urge to step back. “Do you think I can forget that?! Every day I am grateful that I can look in your eyes and don’t see him there. Every day after you are having the dream I am terrified that I am losing you to that other you!”

“That doesn’t explain—”

“That explains enough! And I am sorry for making you worry, but I will never, Ed, never choose my life over yours.”

"Fuck, Roy! I thought you were gonna die! I thought I’d lose you!"

"I know. And I'm sorry, Ed."

"You don't understand how hard it is! With all what I saw and felt! I thought I was losing my fucking mind, Roy! Don't you dare making me scared like that ever again! You are my whole fucking world, Roy, don't you understand!" he screams and falls silent at the sound of his own words.

Roy's eyes widen in surprise and it is like a splash of cold water in Ed’s face, and he clears his throat awkwardly, all anger is gone completely, being slowly replaced with embarrassment making its way on his cheeks.

"Too much?" he asks hesitantly.

And then there is this expression on Roy's face, the same one he wore when Ed admitted his feelings to him for the first time, and when he shoved the ring on his finger, accepting Roy's handicapped proposal in his own specific way, and later when Roy read Ed's own proposal and turned to him to say "yes".

"No, not at all," Roy answers softly with the affectionate edges in his voice, "just unexpected," and he makes a few steps closing the distance between them.

"Your sappiness is contagious," Ed says in a small voice and averts his eyes.

"I am happy I have managed to contaminate you with some of it."

And then there are hands in Ed's hair and on the nape of his neck, and Roy is pulling him into a kiss, and Ed lets him tilt his head and he breathes in Roy's parted lips a moment before they cover his. And Ed wonders not for the first time, how Roy manages to make some of their kisses feel like the first one, filled with anticipation, sweetness and a little bit of happily disbelief of how right and how good Roy's lips feel moving gently against his. Or perhaps it is not Roy but them both.
The soft brush of tongue along his lip and Ed opens his mouth to let Roy's tongue in, meeting it with his own, and he whimpers and raises his flesh hand to cup Roy's face, and he moves the fingers along his jaw, only slightly brushing their joined lips with the tip of his index finger.

Roy smiles into the kiss. Ed loves him more than anything.

They part but don't pull back, looking at each other, and Roy's fingers caress Ed's face with butterfly-light touches.

"I will do anything for you, Ed, anything," he kisses Ed's brow and the bridge of his nose, "You are my whole life, Ed," he moves his lips to the shell of Ed's ear, "I love you, I love you, I love you..."

Roy plants open mouthed kisses behind Ed's ear and on the side of his throat, making Ed's breath catch, and he presses himself to Roy's warm body, and his lips to Roy's collarbone, and he closes his eyes, drowning in Roy's affection, his own love and the soft steady beating of Roy’s heart against his own.

Chapter End Notes

Next update with the short bonus chapter full of fluff and love in a week (it is ready, so no delays with that one, I promise). The next normal chapter is placed about 4 months later after the events in this one (and it's not written yet. But I have like a half of the one after that (an it will be angst-ultimate, just wait for it). Yeah, logic... I'll try not to stretch this fic for way too long though).

Thank you everyone who subscribed and left a comment, you make my days ^_^
Ed always feels closer to Roy somehow in moments like this, as if their connection has been strengthened even more through the physical touch. And perhaps it has, and Ed wonders if they will ever reach the limit of how close they can be to each other, and he hopes they never will.

It's been a week already?! Wow, time flies by.... Well, here is your promised update =) This chapter is small but it's 100% RoyEd, so, enjoy *wink wink*

It is set directly after the previous chapter.

**Warning!** Sexual content ahead. If it's not your thing, you can skip this chapter without missing anything important to the plot.

They stand like that for what feels like hours but still not enough, never enough.

Ed’s eyes are closed and he is spacing out, and when he feels strong warm fingers gently massaging his scalp he realises that Roy has apparently got rid of his hair band and untangled his braid, and now his fingers are playing with the long locks.

Ed lets out an incoherent sound, too tired to even open his eyes. Roy leans down and nuzzles behind Ed’s ear, sending a wave of goosebumps down his spine.

“I love your hair,” Roy says brushing it gently with his hand.

“Mm.”

“I love how you smell here,” Roy kisses the skin behind his ear, and nips on the shell when Ed grumbles a lazy “I smell like smoke, of course you love it, idiot.”

Roy chuckles and kisses down Ed’s neck.

“Roy,” Ed says, trying not to let his shortened breaths be too evident in his voice. “We are both tired, we should sleep.”

“We will,” the man answers mouthing on Ed’s collarbone, his hand working the buttons on Ed’s shirt, and as Ed’s pants are getting too tight for him all of a sudden he can’t pretend to be sleepy anymore.

He takes Roy’s face in his hands, lifting his face to meet his lips in a hungry kiss. Roy opens his mouth instantly, their tongues sliding against one another, and Roy licks in Ed’s mouth fiercely, and
his hand is around Ed’s waist and another on his ass, pressing their bodies together. And Ed understands, he understands what Roy feels right now, because it is what he feels as well.

*I almost lost you.*

Two pairs of strong hands are almost ripping the clothes off from the bodies, the urge to feel skin on skin is too overwhelming.

*I thought I would never see you again.*

Two mouths are gliding together, tongues licking, teeth biting red lips, swollen with attention.

*I was scared, I was so scared.*

The hand in the long blond hair is tugging it down to let a hungry mouth bite the junction between the neck and the shoulder. Two mismatched hands are gripping hips, metal fingers leaving bruises.

*Never leave me.*

They both moan, when they fall on the bed, naked chests pressed together, Ed on his back and Roy’s weight feels so good on him. To be wanted that badly, even after so long, feels utterly intoxicating.

Roy slides down, biting Ed’s nipple, and Ed groans huskily, arching his back. Roy’s hands unfasten his belt and make fast work of the buttons on his pants, and then he is tugging them down Ed’s hips, while planting wet open mouthed kisses down his stomach.

“Fuck, Roy…”

Roy removes his pants and underwear completely, throwing them on the floor. Ed expects him to take him in his mouth immediately, but he feels a sudden change in Roy, the fierce hunger and rough movements replaced with tender touches, softer and slower, and the contrast is a bit unnerving but not entirely unwelcome.

Roy’s hands slide down Ed’s thighs and between his legs, while he is kissing Ed’s stomach, his hips, and nibbles on the pelvic bone. He spreads Ed’s legs and shifts the flesh one to lay it down on his shoulder, never stopping the kisses. His mouth moves lower and Ed feels the openmouthed kisses on his inner thigh and Ed’s breath catches in his throat as Roy lifts Ed’s hips to trace Ed’s entrance with his tongue.

“You are so tense, love,” Roy’s lips are whispering on Ed’s skin, and Roy’s hands fly to caress along his chest and his stomach. Butterfly-light tender touches of the fingers Ed loves so much are tracing his skin, moving to his thighs and then back up to his chest, to brush lightly across his nipples, while Roy’s tongue is a hot wetness pressing itself inside him. And Ed shuts his eyes, and lets out a small whimper finally relaxing, because he is weak, so weak for Roy’s touch.

Roy hums, feeling the tension leaving Ed’s body, and pressing inside one more time, lifts his head and lays Ed’s thighs down on the bed.

Ed is hard and leaking and breathing hard though he hasn’t done anything but lying on his back, but the longing and burning hunger in Roy’s eyes when he sees the damp spot on Ed’s stomach and the glistening of Ed’s cock, makes Ed’s skin feel hot, and he gasps and grasps the sheets, when Roy leans down and licks the precum from the head.

Roy finally takes him in his mouth and Ed can’t help but buck his hips up making Roy take him to the back of his throat. Ed groans at the feeling of Roy’s tongue sliding along him and Roy’s lips
stretched around him. Roy bobs his head, once, twice, his hands roaming across Ed’s thighs and the feeling is so intense, that Ed wants to close his eyes and let himself drown in it. But Roy suddenly stops, pulls back and shuts his eyes for a moment. A scowl of pain crosses his face before easing up to his neutral expression.

“Roy, what is it?” Ed asks, rising on his elbows.

“Nothing, love,” Roy smiles to him, “just my back. It’ll pass.”

Ed rolls his eyes and pushes himself to sit near Roy.

“You old man…”

“Needs one to know one,” Roy chuckles, rubbing his back with the heel of his hand, wincing in pain.

Ed shoves him in the shoulder, but careful enough not to disturb his back even more.

“The fuck! This doesn’t make any sense, Roy. And I am only 32!”

“Ed, you were calling me old when I was younger than you are now!” Roy drops his hand in his lap and pouts.

Ed opens his mouth looking for an answer, but doesn’t find anything he can consider a worthy response, so he just snorts trying to make it sound as annoying as possible, shifts to the side and slightly pushes Roy to lay on the bed.

“Oh, just lay down and shut up.”

He waits till Roy is on his back and moves to straddle him. Roy’s hands fly to grab Ed’s hips as Ed leans down for a kiss. Roy sighs and his lips open, letting Ed’s tongue in. Roy’s lips are silky soft and Ed licks in his mouth, enjoying the distant taste of himself on Roy’s tongue.

Roy moans and his grip on Ed’s hips tighten, as Ed slips his mouth to plant wet kisses along Roy’s jaw and down his neck. His hands are roaming along Roy’s torso and this is the only time - the moments like this - when Ed hates his automail for he can’t feel Roy’s warm skin under both of his palms.

He closes his eyes and nips under Roy’s jaw, and the man bucks his hips and his hands move to grab the flesh of Ed’s ass. Ed’s cock brushes at Roy’s clothed one and they both moan.

Ed slides down, mouthing at Roy’s chest, and then lower, tracing kisses at the man’s stomach, and one of Roy’s hands moves to tangle in Ed’s hair, and Ed smiles - as much as long loose hair is usually more of an inconvenience during sex, catching between the automail plates or just being in the way, the trouble is always worth it, when Ed sees the delight with which Roy dives his fingers in it.

Ed is licking and kissing on Roy’s pelvic bone, breathing his scent, more accented here, enjoying the little needy moves the man is making with his hips, and the small gasps he lets out. Ed makes fast work of Roy’s pants, tugging them down along with his underwear. He leaves them around Roy’s ankles, too impatient to take them off fully.

He nuzzles the soft skin of Roy’s inner thigh, and plants an almost innocent small kiss on his cock, before moving up again.
He reaches to the nightstand and grabs the bottle of lube from it. Roy’s hand fly to take it from him, but Ed yanks it away and opens the lid. He pours the silky liquid on his left palm, leaning down to trace kisses across Roy’s chest, while clenching his hand in a fist waiting for the liquid to warm up a bit. He mouths at the crook of Roy’s neck, moving his hand down to grab Roy’s cock and spread the lube over it. Roy twitches in Ed’s hand and rolls his hips impatiently.

Ed rises up on his knees, releasing Roy’s cock only to reach behind him to take it in his hand again, but as soon as he lines it up with his entrance, Roy grabs him by his arm.

“Ed, love, we should’ve—”

“Can you just shut up, please?”

Ed leans down and presses his forehead to Roy’s collarbone, as he slowly begins to slide down Roy’s erection.

It burns a bit, but he knows how to relax and they’ve done it so many times, that it takes just a few moments until Roy is fully inside him.

“Ed,” Roy breathes out, making it sound like more than just one syllable, more than just his name for him. His fingers dig in Ed’s hips and the low groan from inside Roy’s chest resonates through his body and Ed moans. The feeling of being full like that is overwhelming, it is even stronger than usual, because they didn’t prepare him beforehand, and Ed gives himself a few moments to adjust and breathe through it.

Roy’s hand finds Ed’s left one, laying flat on Roy’s chest, and he covers it with his, pressing it closer, as if trying to make him feel his heartbeat.

“Ed...”

Ed always feels closer to Roy somehow in moments like this, as if their connection has been strengthened even more through the physical touch. And perhaps it has, and Ed wonders if they will ever reach the limit of how close they can be to each other, and he hopes they never will.

They share a deep, needy kiss and Ed swallows Roy’s quiet moan when he starts moving as soon as his muscles stop spasming in their misguided attempt to push Roy out.

Roy shifts his hand on Ed’s and fills the emptiness between Ed’s finger with his own, and his other hand slides up along Ed’s body, leaving burning traces where the fingertips caress the hot skin. It finds Ed’s neck, and the fingers curl over the shell of his ear, his cheek, his chin, never stopping, mapping Ed’s face with the light brushes of skin on skin, and Roy’s eyes follow the movement of his hand until they stop to look in Ed’s eyes, and his lips are moving breathlessly forming that one syllable that somehow holds so much meaning.

“Ed...”

Ed moves slowly, surprising himself with the pace he is taking. Their foreheads are pressed together, eyes locked and Ed can feel Roy’s short breaths on his lips. And their worlds are colliding in one, this small bubble they are in, with Ed’s hair like a blond curtain around their heads, shielding them from the outside world. And their reality is just warm fingertips on each other’s skin, heavy hot breaths on each other’s mouths, eyes, locked together and the pleasure pooling inside their stomachs, washing over them in hot waves one after another with the moves of Ed’s hips going up and down, slowly, so slowly.

Roy meets Ed’s moves with small ones of his own. It is slow and sensual, so unlike most of their
loven making, as Ed is always the impatient and greedy one, always rushing towards his release, not being able to hold back.

Ed tilts his head and brings their lips together. He closes his eyes and dives in the kiss, as slow as the movement of their joined hips. He drinks in the feeling of Roy’s wet soft lips brushing over his, their tongues sliding against one another, licking in their joined mouths. He mews in the kiss and presses himself even closer, moving their locked hands to lay on the side of Roy’s head.

“Ro... ah... Roy...” Their chests meet, skin hot and damp with sweat, and he can feel Roy’s rushing heartbeat against his own.

Roy’s hand moves from where it is caressing Ed’s face to brush along his back and press him closer. Roy bends his legs in his knees, adjusting the angle, and starts rocking his hips. Ed gasps and Roy catches his mouth, kissing him deeply, swallowing all the little sounds Ed is making. Ed cuts the kiss only to slide his mouth to Roy’s ear, nibbling on the earlobe.

“I love you... Ed...” Roy moans, his arm tightens around Ed, their joined hands grip into one another. Roy’s breath is heavy near Ed’s ear and he turns his head a little, kisses Ed’s temple and begins to move faster. “I love you...”

Ed’s cock, pressed between their stomachs, twitches every time Roy pushes inside him, his breath catches with every thrust. Ed closes his eyes, breathing hard in the crook of Roy’s neck, feeling drunk on the warm pleasure washing over him. Roy is whispering passionately some romantic nonsense mixed with Ed’s name in between his heavy breaths, and Ed is moaning quietly, nuzzling at his neck, feeling lost in his scent and his warmth around and inside him.

He tries to meet Roy’s steady thrusts, but he is being held tight and he only can rub himself slightly against Roy’s stomach.

He is close and he lifts his head and captures Roy’s lips in a kiss again. He tenses and moans Roy’s name in the kiss as orgasm takes him. He keeps kissing Roy through it, moaning in their joined mouths and spilling his release in between their pressed together bodies. Roy’s hand moves to grab Ed’s hips, pressing him down, himself deeper in Ed, as he is contracting around him. Roy groans, kissing Ed more hungrily. He thrusts in Ed a few more times, Ed feels his body tensing, Roy’s cock inside him is even harder than before. Roy cuts the kiss, breathes out Ed’s name and with short thrusts comes, pulsating inside Ed.

They both are hot and sweaty and breathing hard when Roy’s body relaxes under Ed. They open their eyes to look at each other, their foreheads once again pressed together. They don’t say anything, just look in each other’s eyes. Roy brushes a damp strand of blond hair from Ed’s face and his fingers curl into the hair at the nape of Ed’s neck. Roy smiles this special smile reserved only for Ed. His eyes are filled with wonder Ed doesn’t quite think he deserves. But his heart swells with all the love he feels coming from this man, from all the love he feels for him, and if he could just stay like that forever, on the high of their afterglow, their bodies joined together, breathing the same air and looking in each other’s eyes, both drunk from the pleasure they are giving to each other...

All these years, and Roy still looks at him like he is the most important part of his life. All these years, and Roy still touches him like he can’t believe he is allowed to. All these years, and Ed is still loved, wanted and being cherished.

All these years, and Roy is still here, with him. Alive. Calling him all these stupid pet names, laughing when Ed complains about it, and smiling at him, like he can’t believe how lucky he is.

And Ed can’t stop tears running down his face at the look in these deep dark eyes, at the soft voice
whispering promises, sweet nothings and words of love.

Ed grins happily, and Roy’s smile widens mirroring his. Ed rubs his face against his neck and inhales him.

“I love you”, he whispers. And when he looks up again, Roy’s eyes are shining.

Chapter End Notes

**UPD Oct 8:** next chapter is half-finished, sorry for the delay, but just letting you know, that this fic is not abandoned, I'm just a lazy ass and easily distracted (by Naruto fics in that case ahaha) xD

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I hope you liked it ^_^

Next update is not going to be soon, ch.6 is flipping me off. But the fic will be finished, don't worry about it - chapters 7 and 8 are *almost* written, and I have a good idea of how ch. 9 should look like. It'll just take some time, so stay tuned =)

Thank you all who subbed to this story and to me.
January 1932

Chapter Summary

"Burn the notes. And forget you ever attempted to make this research."

Chapter Notes

So, it's been a month, huh? Well, I guess I can't say that I was just busy with rl, cause those 7 (seven, Karl!) fics I posted during this month would probably prove that I actually have no life xD

BUT! This chapter is finally here and it is brought to you by "There are no atheists on a falling plane".

Ok, not really falling, but it sure felt that way when it was trying to land (for the second time) into a hurricane. That's literally what a pilot said: we will try and I hope we will succeed. That was fun

So I sort of promised whatever diety was listening, that I will be more productive if I make it to the land in one piece xD

So when hours later I finally made it home through the blocked by fallen trees and flying chairs (true story) roads, first thing I did was turning on my laptop to write this chapter (and I was like oh, I'll just make it super short, and then, BUM, 12k words). It actually took me just four days I think, could've probably done it much earlier oops ahaha.

So be grateful! I'm sorry, next updates will be coming much faster ^_^

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RECAP (5 months ago):

Edward deserted the army and left Briggs with Voss and two of Voss's 'former' subordinates. In the process of sneaking out of the Fort, Edward found Kidwell-the-traitor in the prison cell, beat him up and killed him.

Ed is running back and forth in Briggs from one explosion to another, worried sick for his stupid husband, who, instead of hiding in a vault room, waits for Ed in their room, which then explodes with two of them inside, but they survive, Ed finds Kidwell and kicks his ass, but doesn't kill him. They then find out that one of the Drachman ministers worked with Kidwell in attempt to assassinate the Fuhrer, Drachmans are sorry and they sign a treaty, and then Roy and Ed go to their new room and fuck, and happy end (not really, cuz we have at least 3 more chapters to go aahhaha sorry, I got carried away).

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TRIGGER WARNING!

There is blood and gore near the end of the first part. To avoid it, skip 4 paragraphs after the one where Edward is thinking of looking for his flashlight but decides not to. There
will be mentions of what happened with not gory details later in the second part, so you will not miss the piece of the story anyway.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

January 1932

_Fright is about the feeling that you will die._

_The true meaning of terror doesn't lie in a static condition, but in a change._

**Drachma**

He didn’t know what he expected to see. Did he really think cities on that side of the border would be that different?

The architecture was indeed unlike the one Edward used to see in Amestris, but the never ending cold, covering the buildings and people’s clothes with a thin layer of frosting, blistering in the weak winter sun, was what he had already gotten used to long time ago, to the point when it was beginning to seem normal.

_Long... How long had he been here already?_

People... People were people, enemies or not. They carried their fears and dreams with them the same as Amestrians. And yet there were some rough edges in Drachmans, that Edward thought were the result of, or perhaps the reason for them being able to build their lives in the heart of the unwelcoming merciless winter.

Ever since they left Briggs, they stuck to moving through big towns, avoiding small villages, or really any settlements at all, if there was a risk to attract too much attention to them from the locals. Big cities were relatively safe for them, as much as being in the middle of the country that was waging a war with their homeland could be considered safe in the first place.

Having just four people in their group, with Edward’s alchemy and the knowledge of Drachman’s forces disposition inside the country they had acquired when they still were a part of the Amestrian army, it was pretty simple to sneak up on the outposts and small camps, sabotaging the equipment and eliminating Drachman officers if given a chance.

They would spend a day or two in some town before moving forward, never staying for too long, though milling around the locals was much easier than Edward had expected. The looks of all three of his companions were pretty much average, the only problems were Edward’s toned skin and the too uncommon color of his eyes.

He would’ve grown a beard, but facial hair had never agreed with him, so he would just wrap the lower part of his face in a scarf, tug the cape of his coat as low as possible to hide the bright gold of his eyes and wait for the darkness which came here after a day would barely make it to its second half.

He’d picked up the language fast enough to engage in short basic conversations with the locals. He’d
prefer Dean or Voss doing that as the ones with the least memorable faces, but it was not an option.

They hadn’t seen a lot of friendly faces, if any. Perhaps the long war affected everyone in such way. And Edward was wondering if the Amestrians back home had also forgotten how to smile. He tried to avoid thinking that a big part of Amestris was now occupied by the enemy forces. There was nothing he could do for them now. They were there and he was here. His actions would hardly make a big difference on a big scale, but it was hard to see if anything really would.

More than once he woke up with a feeling of dread, clutching his stomach in a cold fist. He would be lying to himself if he said he never regretted his decision of going here, basically abandoning the people of his country. He knew every alchemist was indispensable now and by leaving he robbed his own country of this war asset. It sit wrong with him, but now more than ever he despised being considered a tool. He was sent here as one and what had this brought to him except for stripping him of the chance of being there for Roy when he could’ve prevented his death if he had just been there? Only that he had obtained a lot of useful information about the disposition of Drachman forces within Drachman’s border - the information no one had been willing to use because there were no one to give the order. He thought he had hardly ever considered himself so useless and his actions so meaningless in his entire life.

It was not a suicide trip, not in the way Voss had meant it. Edward could feel it in the looks the man was sending him when they would settle for the night in some small abandoned building on the verge of a town - if they were lucky; or stuffed in a tiny tent, if they were not. Too small for the four of them and hardly comfortable, it was still a good way to save some body heat. Edward would always be the first one staying on watch. Or rather sitting in this case. Legs shoved in his sleeping bag, moved as far from Dean, Haley or Voss - whoever was unlucky this time to sleep beside him and his emanating cold left leg - he would hunch above a simple notebook which had already been breaking in its spine a bit and would soon just morph into a pile of leaves with nothing to hold them together. A cheap flashlight in his right hand and a pen in his left, he would frantically cover the pages with a scatter of names, dates, alchemical symbols and parts of arrays, barely remembering to switch pages to at least not mix the last two with the rest.

He would have just a couple of hours before the soft rustle of a sleeping bag being unmade beside him would draw his attention to Voss, who, with an eerie precision, always managed to wake up when it was the time for him to take watch, already knowing that Edward, too enwrapped in whatever it was he was doing with his notebook, could stay up all night.

Voss would sit and throw Edward a wary look, but would never ask anything.

Voss had never asked, and Edward wasn’t sure if he was ready to talk with anyone about the ideas he had in his mind - too unusual even in his own experience while being in his head, he suspected that given voice they would make him sound like a madman. Or perhaps he just didn’t want to see doubt on the face of his friend when he told him what he wanted to accomplish.

Because he knew it was not only straight out insane, but had very little chance of success, if any. He knew he was grasping at straws at that moment, but the straws were really the only things that were left within his reach.

He could not bring the deads back to life - that he had learnt the hard way. Dead was dead, and there were too many dead already that even if that crazy trade of parts of his body for the lives of his loved ones would actually work, he had not enough of him left to trade for everyone he wished were still alive. He could not change what happened, it was all in the past, but perhaps someone else could do that.

He had stumbled upon that old book a few years back, while rummaging through the library section
with forbidden alchemy books in the Central Military Command. Forbidden had been not that forbidden anymore for the spouse of the Führer of the country who also happened to be that famous Fullmetal alchemist. A good part of the books there had made very little sense to him, written in languages he hadn’t known. He hadn’t been looking for anything in particular, just for something he would at least be able to read, if not right away understand.

Xingian was one of the languages he knew well, and he stopped in his haphazard search once his eyes had settled on the familiar words. The book was old, as pretty much every single one in that section. The content was frantic - pieces of arrays, unfinished formulas, big pieces of text, suddenly interrupted with rows and rows of numbers. It all didn’t make sense from the first glance, and that only made Edward more determined to figure out what the book was about. It took him a few hours to understand what the texts and arrays represented. He had spent three nights sitting on the floor right under the shelve he had found the book at. On the fourth Drachma declared war to Amestris and the book had been forgotten. But Edward remembered enough of it to begin to realise its importance now, when it might actually matter.

Using Dragon Pulse and long distance alkahestry as the mean to breach the matter of time - Edward had dismissed it as fantasies of a madman before, but right now it had been that last straw he had been able to grasp.

It was true that he had never heard of anyone performing such a complicated alchemy. It didn’t make it necessarily impossible per se, but Edward was too familiar with the entity that would most definitely show itself once you try. There was nothing given in this world, especially when it came to attempting to trick death. He would have to pay for what he was trying to achieve, if he was able to make it work in the first place. He wasn’t thinking of what Truth might take from him. It didn’t matter. If he succeeded, there would be no him left in the first place. He had decided on the price once he started covering the pages of his notebook in the frantic notes, mirroring the ones he had seen in the book of the Xingian author. He couldn’t help but wonder, what circumstances that alchemist had found himself in, that had made him begin researching such subject in the first place, and if he had been able to use the knowledge he had left in his book.

Edward would laugh at the irony, but he couldn’t feel the muscles in his cheeks responsible for a smile. Perhaps, it was just the cold that had made him feel numb.

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“...I wanted to marry. Have a family, kids,” Haley looked down and scratched the back of his head sheepishly.

Edward marveled at how much the youngest member of their group still resembled a normal teenager. Even being in his early twenties, he still had some hopeful sparkle in his eyes, and a light blush would rise on his freckled cheeks in the rare occasions when the man was talking about something personal. He was so young and full of life. And yet he was here, with Edward, deserters of the army, stuck - because now when they were so deep in Drachma it was already much easier to keep moving farther than coming back - inside the enemy country, because he chose to consider Edward’s way to be better than the one suggested by the other officers.

The thought that Edward hardly knew himself what that way was and yet he dragged this young man along with him was making him sick. He shifted on the bed uncomfortably - they managed to gather enough money to pay for a room in a small hotel, disguising themselves as soldiers of the Drachman army and Edward doing all the talking. It was a rare possibility to sleep in the relatively warm and fresh sheets, instead of clinging to each other, draped in their worned out sleeping bags. They would be on the move again in the early morning but now they had this short time when they
could just sit and talk.

Edward couldn’t remember who had started the conversation about their plans and the dreams they had before the war hit, but now, when he was listening to the young man talking, he couldn’t ignore the discomfort raising in him - it was wrong. The dreamy look in Haley’s eyes, the thoughtful sheepish smile and the light blush on his cheeks - it all was wrong, it had no place in this reality they found themselves in. The dreams which would hardly ever have the chance of coming true - there was no point in deluding themselves into thinking otherwise.

And yet Edward couldn’t bring himself to stop Haley from talking. If there was anything of his old self still left alive in him, it was the understanding that having fallen into the dark pit of self-loathing and regrets he shouldn’t drag others along with him. Them actually accompanying him in Drachma was more than he would’ve ever asked from anyone.

So he was sitting there, right leg folded under him, hands massaging absentmindedly the aching muscles near the automail port on his left leg, looking through the curtain of his slightly grown hair at the young man, who in the heat of his story looked like he almost forgot where they were, like there was no endless freezing whiteness outside the window and in their future, and the all the blood and dead they had left behind them. Edward was drinking in the almost carefree expression on the freckled face, thinking that there were times when he could also smile like that, all-teeth grins, happy wrinkles on the edges of the squeezed in laughter eyes.

The pre-war Edward would’ve smiled, planting his hand on the young man’s shoulder, saying words of reassurance.

The Edward-when-Roy-was-still-alive would’ve silently given himself a promise to do whatever it takes to deliver this young man to the destination where his dreams may come true.

The now-Edward was silent both on the outside and inside. Every word of Haley was settling itself on Edward’s shoulders, making him lower his head even more.

He glanced up at the sound of a short but sincere laughter, noticing how even usually indifferent Dean slightly tilted the corner of his lips in a small smile at something Haley had said. He looked to the side at Voss, and there was a tightness in the corners of his eyes Edward hadn’t seen for a long time - the hazel eyes were laughing, though the man was silent, looking warmly at his two former subordinates.

Edward brushed his hair from his face and leaned with his back to the wall, listening more closely to what his friends were discussing.

“Raising kids is such a drag, you don’t know what you wish for, kid,” Dean said to Haley, but his voice sounded friendly.

Haley just laughed, rubbing the back of his head, and didn’t comment.

“That’s a good goal to have, don’t listen to what Dean says,” Voss said softly, and Edward noted how the man used the word ‘goal’ instead of ‘dream’ making it sound more possible than it actually were. No matter how bad Edward felt about it, he mentally thanked Voss for supporting an optimistic mood. At least someone should do it. ”What about you then,” Voss turned to look at their other companion. “If not your own family, then how should your perfect life look like, Dean?”


“Boring,” Haley chuckled, more extending Dean’s list of characteristics, rather than commenting on
“Yeah, boring,” Dean agreed readily, nodding.

“And yet something is missing there,” Voss said, frowning in a pretense concentration. “Ah, Edward, what do you think?” he turned to Edward, obviously trying to drag him from the pit of the dark thoughts he had been floating in.

Edward sighed inwardly and shifted on the bed, grabbing the edges of the blanket he was sitting on, and draping it around himself - he was constantly cold.

“Fucking, he forgot fucking,” he said tiredly, but ready to take part in this game, knowing, that it might make Voss stop throwing wary looks at him that often. “Work, eat, shit, fuck, sleep, die.”

Voss gave him a small smile before turning back to others. Haley was blushing, Dean was shaking his head.

“Too much of a drag,” was all he said.

“Not boring enough?” Voss asked.

“No.”

Edward closed his heavy eyelids, hoping that this short participation in the conversation would be enough to count as one, and slowly lowered himself on the pillow, stretching his legs under the blanket, until his feet bumped in Voss’s hip, forcing the man to stand up and move to sit on his own bed. Through the haze of shallow sleep Edward could hear that conversation go on, sounding a bit quieter than before, either the men lowering their voices for his sake, or it just seemed that way to his sleepy brain.

He dreamt of fire, warm hands and dark blue eyes.

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He woke up at the sound of something heavy colliding with the door somewhere nearby and the screams coming from another room. His eyes flew open to be met by pitch darkness. He heard his companions jumping from their beds on the cold floor, all of them instantly regretting letting their guard down to the point, when they removed some most heavy parts of their clothes before falling asleep.

Edward dashed to the general direction of where he left his duffle bag yesterday, colliding with someone in the process, both of them falling on the floor. Three shots rang and the cut-off scream from another room got followed by a sudden silence. Edward could hear three heavy breaths beside him joined by his own. A crack of metal accompanied the rustling his hands made when he opened his bag, shoving his hand inside, and he assumed Haley was hurriedly checking if his rifle was loaded. Edward’s eyes were wide open in a dire attempt to catch at least a glimpse of light.

He finally found his gun, and Voss’s lighter, which had been in Edward’s possession for so long already, that it probably could be counted as his own. The gun was useless in such darkness but he could use some fire alchemy for the distraction.

Not daring to stand up, he crawled to where he supposed the door was, judging by the quiet rustles of clothing and bare feet on the floor that his friends probably stack up in the opposite corner. There was no window in the room, but it was only the first floor, so they could escape through the hole in the wall once Edward blocked the door with his alchemy.
He lit up the lighter to see where the door was at the same time as he heard the heavy steps of several pairs of feet closing in to their room.

He crossed the rest of the distance to it and clapped his hands at the same time as the door was violently ripped off its hinges, falling down on him.

He stretched his arm blindly and touched the wall with the sound of something small falling on the floor between him and his companions.

It took two seconds for the wall under his palm to move and reshape, blocking the doorway and preventing the intruders from stepping inside the room.

It took another second before his world exploded with a hurting white light and a deafening thunder.

In a moment it was dark again, but his eyes were hurting and watering, and he wasn’t sure if it was just a normal darkness, or the flash had gotten him blind. Through the screeching noise in his head he could only hear muffled distant thumps and his own shuddering breathing, sound coming weirdly from within him.

He tried to move, wincing at the sharp pain in his right leg. He clicked the lighter, not seeing any fire, and he felt his heart beating more violently at the rising panic.

_Not his eyes, please, not now, anything but his eyes…_

He clicked the lighter again and a small fire appeared in his hand. He swallowed around the lump in his throat, and slowly crawled from under the heavy door. He reached his left hand to his flesh leg, moving his palm along it’s surface from the hip to the ankles, checking for injuries. His fingers bumped in a small piece of something being stuck in the meat of his shin, and he jerked it out, wincing at the pain. He was sure he would later find more of those in his automail leg, but right now he didn’t have time for this.

His ears were still ringing and he couldn’t hear anything from his companions, hoping that the silence was just due to his temporary deafness. He thought of looking for a flashlight which he remembered stuffing inside his bag somewhere, but it was only a matter of time before the Drachmans would be able to break in, so he decided against it.

He began to move again, towards the wall opposite of the doorway. Almost instantly his hand made contact with something warm and wet on the floor, and Edward groaned. He clicked the lighter again, a puddle of blood, almost black in the poor light, was glistening with yellow flashes running along the surface from the flickering fire in his hand.

He couldn’t remember when he’d gotten sick from the view of blood, war making it almost impossible to see the liquid more than just that - a liquid. But at that moment, crawling in the darkness, his hands and legs soaked in the blood of his friends, almost praying for them to be alive despite everything; _almost_, but not, because he didn’t know anyone who he could’ve been praying to, and he knew, it wouldn’t help anyway, because this is just what his life had been for the past couple of years - him losing everyone and only him always staying alive, only to see someone else die again later, and so on, and so on; he felt a tight fist squeezing his stomach at the feeling of the warm stickiness around his fingers.

He found Haley first. The young man was lying limp on the floor, a hand tight around his rifle, but from the position it was lying in Edward doubted it was still attached to the arm. A few splinters sticking up from his neck and face, blood still leaking from the destroyed artery. Edward moved around him and saw Dean. He could swear the man moved, but it couldn’t be right - his face was a
mess of blood and skin, his chest burned and Edward couldn’t see where his leg was. Dead body moved again, and Edward just sat on his heels, suddenly feeling too tired and just wishing he could lay down and close his eyes for a bit.

The small fire in his hand faded, and he blinked, clicking at his lighter again. He looked up and instead of Dean he saw Voss, all covered in blood and shaking, but since he was shaking, he was still alive, so Edward stretched his hand toward the man, the small fire jumping violently in his shaking fingers, and when a hand took the lighter from him, he clapped, and moved to reach his hand to the wall behind Voss, something soft and still warm under his left hand.

With a blue light, the wall under his palm moved, making an opening for air which didn’t smell like blood. It was still dark outside - of course - but the white snow made the night a little bit brighter, and Edward looked around his shoulder at the destroyed room. Voss was already grabbing both his and Edward’s bags, and Edward thought that he would’ve probably forgotten about them, and the thought of just leaving his notes here because he just forgot, made him shiver. Or perhaps it was just the cold wind, blowing inside.

He peeked out, and, not seeing anyone, jumped down. He landed in snow, that reached his waist, immediately digging its freezing claws into his every nerve, and if he hadn’t been shaking before, he would’ve definitely started now. His duffle bag landed beside him, and he picked it up and as quickly as he could on legs threatening to bend under him at any moment, moved aside to make room for Voss, who jumped down the next moment. The man fell down on his knees, and Edward had to take a step back to help him stand up. Voss was soaked in blood, and Edward just hoped, that it wasn’t his own.

He didn’t know how long they had been limping through the snow, holding each other, just walking somewhere, far from that place, not saying a single word, but they finally stopped, when they reached the trees of a small forest - far enough from the town, they were relatively safe here.

Edward made a bucket out of the dead log and melted and warmed up snow in it, while Voss set up their tent. Edward washed his hands and was sitting on his knees, watching blankly as Voss washed away blood from his face and hair, immediately wrapping his head in a spare shirt. He emptied the bucket and Edward made another portion of water, so Voss could change into clean clothes and try to wash the blood out of the old ones. He wasn’t injured, small scratches on his arms and the side of his face didn’t really count. He had been sitting in the corner behind Dean, which eventually saved his life.

Voss finished and emptied the bucket again, spilling red water on the ground. Edward was sitting unmoving, watching the puddle of red mixing with snow, spreading, getting closer to him, under his knees, cold and warm, because the water he’d made was still warm even now, red and white - it was so bright, and he couldn’t get his eyes from these colors moving under him, and he thought that he should probably stand up instead of just sitting there, but he couldn’t move.

A hand grabbed his arm and pulled him up. He stood up and followed Voss inside the small tent.

He was lying, wrapped in his sleeping bag, left shoulder pressed to Voss’s right one. He was looking up unseeing, unable to sleep, but his shaking finally stopped and he could tell Voss wasn’t shaking either.

His duffle bag was lying beside his right arm, his notes inside. He wished he could tell himself, that the deaths of their companions didn’t matter, because he would make sure to erase this reality from existence, but he couldn’t, because right now it mattered to him.

He closed his eyes and remembered Haley and Dean talking about their dreams. He wanted for them
to have those perfect lives of theirs no matter what.

He sat up, reaching to his duffle bag and pulling out his notes and a pen and finally a flashlight. His head was reeling from stress and exhaustion, but it wasn’t about him anymore, it hardly ever had been. He turned on the flashlight and touched the pen to the paper.

Beside him, Voss sighed quietly but said nothing.

**Amestris, Central Military Command**

The sound of the door being closed a bit louder than normal, which might have been a sign of someone doing that on purpose, is what wakes Ed up. He raises his head from where it has been lying on the scattering of documents and files on his desk and winces at the strain in his neck. He looks up and is greeted by the usual unimpressed expression on Hawkeye’s face, accompanied by those tiny almost invisible details in her seemingly lacking any expression mask, which Ed has learned to read very quickly when Riza became his subordinate - his well being very much depends on his skill at reading her face.

Right now what he sees there makes him straighten up in his chair and brush off the very real wrinkles in his jacket. He clears his throat, puts a lock of his hair, which apparently slipped from his ponytail during his impromptu nap on his working desk, behind his ear, and smiles weakly, preparing to be scolded.

This woman is a savior and a menace of his existence. Roy is still laughing the irony up not even trying to hide the relief on his face that he now can be just friends with Hawkeye without additionally having to work with her.

Ed hates him. And himself for thinking it was a good idea to offer Riza a place in the Intelligence department with him.

He knows that even given a chance he wouldn’t change it.

“You are not a teenager whose body can afford sleeping in all kind of places without consequences, Edward.”

There it is, she must be really unhappy with him if she starts right with his name. Or perhaps it is not working hours yet? Ed carefully looks to the side where the watch is hanging on the wall. Hands are showing a bit after six. He mentally groans - he hardly slept more than three hours, again. And all those three hours in a highly uncomfortable position. He really wants to stand up and stretch to pop a couple of misplaced vertebrae in his spine, but this will only prove Hawkeye’s point, and this kind of heavy artillery he is not willing to give her.

“I was working.”

She sighs and lowers herself in the chair opposite from Ed. “You are even worse than your husband.”

“Hey, how am I worse?” Ed leans forward, putting his hands on the desk. “He sleeps on his desk because he is slacking, and I was working!”

“That’s exactly my point, Edward - at least he gets some rest. And he sleeps on the couch, not his desk.”

Ed throws a glance at his own couch, that Hawkeye made him put in his office after catching him
sleeping on his desk for the first time. He can’t remember ever sleeping on this couch, using it now mostly to stack up his books there. He might need to get an actually bookshelf later.

Ed knows Hawkeye is right, but his dignity doesn’t allow him to admit this.

“He is an old man, he needs more rest than I do,” he grumbles.

“You started calling him an old man when he was younger than you are now,” Riza answers with an amused tilt of her brow.

Ed falls back in his chair, and looks at Hawkeye with what he hopes is an expression of utter betrayal on his face. “Not you too.”

The barely noticeable tightening at the edges of her eyes is an indication that she is probably inwardly laughing at him right now. “He told you this too, didn’t he?”

“I hate you both,” Ed mutters, burying his face in his left hand.

“Go home and get some sleep,” Hawkeye says, standing up. “Be back at twelve hundred.”

“I have work to do.”

“You always have work to do, Edward. And when you don’t, you find some. There is nothing urgent for today.”

Ed sighs and straightens up. “All right,” he says, and fishes out a clean piece of paper and a pen from under the mess of documents on the desk. “But while I’m on it, find me everything you can on these two men,” he quickly writes down Haley’s and Dean’s names and passes the note to Hawkeye. “I suppose they should be a part of the military, but I can’t be certain.”

“Yes, sir,” Hawkeye answers calmly but doesn’t leave, looking at Ed expectantly.

He sighs and stands up, resisting the urge to bend his back - these blasted vertebrae should be taken care of as soon as he is out of Hawkeye’s sight.

“All right, all right, I’m leaving!” he mumbles under his breath, snatching his coat from the hook on a wall.

“I will call to the mansion in half an hour to make sure you made it home in one piece, sir,” Ed hears behind his back while he is fastening the buttons of his coat, and winces. This means she is going to confirm he actually doesn’t end up in the library or in Roy’s or Voss’s offices nose deep in some book or a document he snitched from his office without her noticing, what he actually had been planning to do in the first place.

He just nods in answer, having no chances to talk her out of it, and leaves his office. Walking through the main office of the Intelligence department he makes a quick dash to Hawkeye’s desk and snitches out a ration bar from the drawer, hearing the door behind him being quietly closed followed by a meaningful “hm”.

“Later, Major,” he raises his hand in goodbye and rushes to the exit, shoving a half of the ration bar in his mouth.

Once in the corridor he places his hands on the small of his back, holding the rest of his snack in between his teeth, and bends back, letting out a relieved sigh as he feels two vertebrae slipping back in their places. He has to agree that he might not be as fit for sleeping in such uncomfortable places
as he was when he was sixteen. At least he can’t complain about his knees, or more like one knee in his case, as Roy does.

Stupid old man, Ed thinks rather lovingly, walking along the Military Command corridor towards the stairs. Spends too much time at his desk and too little in their gym room in the mansion. Ed will have to work on this.

He contemplates for a moment going to Roy’s office to check if the man slept on the couch there again, but decides against it - he doesn’t have much time before Hawkeye makes that check-call and sends someone to look for him and drag him home if she discovers he is not there yet. He doubts Voss is at his work place yet, Ed will need to give him a call later. So he rushes down the stairs and out of the building, but instead of walking towards the gates, he turns to the side and crosses military grounds to the library building.

He knows he can do this anytime later, but the almost morbid curiosity is pushing him up the library steps.

Inside he is greeted by a very sleepy librarian who, from the looks of him, just arrived at his working place and hasn’t had the time yet to fully open his eyes. He sighs in a mix of recognition and slight irritation once he sees who this early visitor is and salutes lazily on Ed’s greeting. The young man is hardly surprised to see Fullmetal Alchemist in the library at such an hour, but it doesn’t mean he is going to enjoy it. Ed could hardly blame him for the suspicious looks the man is giving him, knowing, that Ed has caused enough troubles for the librarians during all the years he has been a part of the military, with his unexpected visits at unholy hours and even breaking in a few times during nights when the library was closed, because he needed that one book right now and it can’t wait till the morning, what do you mean the library was closed, I can swear the lock was open, you don’t understand, it is a matter of life and death!

Ed puts his signature in the visitors journal and requests the access to the section with forbidden for the majority of library visitors alchemy books. As the head of Intelligence he doesn’t need a specially written clearance every time he needs a book from that section. Except for the one he wrote himself several years ago, got signed by Roy and just handed to the library personnel with instructions to keep it for themselves, because he will hardly ever have the spare mental capacity to remember always having this thing on me when I need a book, do I look like a fucking paper holder to you?!

The book he came here for is in the same place as he remembers from that memory in his dream. He opens it and he is startled by the familiarity of the scattered handwriting, despite its differences. The book is written in almost the same frantic manner as the notes Roy received from Edward all those years ago, as those notes with pieces of the array and alchemy symbols, only Ed can see in his dreams. And he couldn’t help but wonder if this Xingian author succeeded in what he wanted to achieve, and this book perhaps doesn’t belong in this reality anymore than the notes in Roy’s safe.

He sits at the table and leafs through the old book, noting that the schemes and formulas he has managed to remember from the notes his previous self was making in that weary notebook, are hardly that much different from the ones in the book. He takes a few folded sheets of paper he snitched out from his desk this morning without Hawkeye noticing - otherwise she would’ve instantly realised where he was going to head instead of his house - and quickly writes down the parts he saw in the notes during his dream. He compares them with the book and adds a few more notes and schemes, regretting that he can’t take this book out of the library to work with it in the comfort of his office or the mansion where he could spend endless hours engrossed with his research without worrying that he will be kicked out as he will be here eventually, because the library will be closing around six in the evening.
Absorbed in the entirely new level of alchemy, or in that case, alkahestry, which is unfolding its secrets before his eyes, he forgets about time, only wondering absentmindedly, why he hasn’t tried to find any information on that time-crossing array his previous self used to get here, forgetting in his rush to learn something completely new and fascinating about the hurting look on Roy’s face every time he but wonders out loud about what type of alchemy could possibly do such a complicated thing as crossing time.

On the verge of his hearing he registers muffled voices coming from the entrance of the library, but doesn’t pay them much attention, thinking automatically that it must be someone coming to get a book or two.

He is halfway through the book, and the papers he brought with him are already covered on both sides with notes and schemes, when he hears a chair being moved when someone slowly sits across from him.

“Slacking from your official slacking, Colonel Elric?” Ed hears the familiar voice and looks up at the half lidded hazel eyes. “Hawkeye is looking for you. And she is really angry,” Voss says, putting his elbow on the back of his chair and slipping a mask of utter laziness on his face, but Ed knows this man too well to miss the sharpness with which his eyes are examining the book and the notes in front of Ed. He might not be an alchemist, but he is far from stupid, and Ed closes the book, folds his notes and puts them in the inner pocket of his coat.

“I got carried away. What time is it?”

“Nine hundred. Hawkeye was in my office the second I came inside, telling me that if I consider myself your friend, I should be the one fetching you, before she did it herself. She said, you would be grateful. Are you grateful, Edward?” Voss asks, his eyes clearly laughing.

“I am.”

“That woman is scary, Edward.”

“You have no idea,” Ed sighs, rubbing his tired eyes with the heel of his flesh hand.

“Do I want to know what it is you have been doing with an old alchemy book from the forbidden section this early in the morning?”

“Why do you think it’s an alchemy book?” poor attempt to avoid the topic, but Ed really doesn’t want to discuss this.

“I can recognise an array when I see one, Edward.”

Ed stands up, takes the book from the table and walks to the shelf it was standing on. “Was just curious about something,” he says, putting the book back on the shelf and heading to the exit.

“Nothing serious.”

“If you say so,” Voss answers, standing up and following Ed out of the library.

They stop on the stairs, Ed tugs his collar higher, hiding from the winter wind, which is sending shivers down his spine, and he wonders if he will ever be able to look at winter without seeing Drachma and feeling a desperation which is not even his, but it has implanted itself too deep in his bones to ignore it.

Voss lights up a cigarette and breathes out a little white cloud, thick in the cold air. He squints at the low but still bright winter sun and glances at Ed.
“Roy will know eventually that you are researching it,” he says calmly, studying Ed’s face.

Having too perceptive friends definitely has some downsides, Ed thinks.

“Not if I can help it,” he answers but doesn’t really believe it - with how easily he forgets about everything being absorbed in his thoughts, he knows it’s just a matter of time until he leaves his notes somewhere where Roy can accidentally see them. His husband will not be pleased…

Voss understands this too, and doesn’t answer, only tilting his brow in amusement.

“Say, Mark, do you have anyone named Haley or Dean in your command?” Ed asks wishing to change the topic.

Voss glances at him curiously. “Haley, no. There is Dean though, great guy, a bit too quiet, but perhaps I am too used to your tantrums, that now all normal people seem not loud enough,” he says with a chuckle and jumps a step down to avoid having Ed’s fist imprinted in his shoulder.

“I am not throwing tantrums, you asshole!” Ed yells at him and shoves his hands in his pockets burying his nose in the edge of his collar. “Tell me about Dean.”

“I can send you his file if you want,” Voss shrugs.

“I don’t need a file. Tell me what you know about him,” Ed raises his hand to stop Voss from answering right away, and adds, “Personal things. I don’t care about his work skills.”

“There is not much to tell,” Voss shrugs again. “He is a good guy, very loyal. But I don’t think he has any life outside the military. He is an orphan and I’ve never heard him talk about having a partner or going on dates.”

“I see,” Ed answers, not really surprised, but happy for Dean having a possibility to live the stable boring life he wanted to. “Well, I’ll be going now. Do you think Hawkeye will be pissed if I turn up in the office now?”

“She said she didn’t want to see your petty face until twelve hundred,” Voss answers with a pleased smile.

“She didn’t say petty, you ass.”

“She might have,” Voss laughs and makes a few steps down the stairs to be out of Ed’s reach just in case.

“She doesn’t use words like that.”

“Doesn’t mean she doesn’t think them,” the laughing man starts slowly walking backwards towards the main building, not wishing to risk turning his back to Ed.

“I will murder you,” Ed mutters halfheartedly.

“You will be court-martialed, colonel. What a shame it would be, just imagine, the Führer’s spouse, famous Fullmetal Alchemist - court-martialed,” Voss chuckles, ducking to avoid the messy snowball Ed threw at him, and takes a few more steps away from the raging alchemist.

“I hate you!” Ed wipes his wet hands on the sides of his coat and puts them back in the pockets - the left one is getting really cold already.

“Sure you don’t,” Voss answers, smiling. With a short wave of his hand he turns his back to Ed. “If
you go back to the library, I’m telling Roy,” he adds and without waiting for the answer, walks away.

Ed stands there for a moment, breathing in the cool air. His left hand is still a bit cold after he made that snowball to throw at his friend.

He looks around and sees white. And all the different colors, slightly hidden by snow, but still there. He notices that he is still smiling only when his cheeks go numb. And it is a good kind of numb, and the snow around him is just snow and not his enemy, and the cold is not that bad and it just is, and not trying to dig its freezing tendrils to his very soul.

And Ed thinks, that winter is not that bad and maybe it is also the thing that he has been supposed to change for himself.

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Today is not his day, it hardly ever is after he has one of those memory-like dreams, so he is not really surprised that he manages to oversleep, and he only hopes to avoid Hawkeye’s rage because at least he had some rest as she wanted him to.

He bursts in the Intelligence department office, startling a couple of his subordinates who started working under him just recently - the rest hardly even raise their heads from the documents they are working with, being used long ago to Ed being loud, sudden and rarely predictable. He rushes past Hawkeye’s desk signing her to follow and falls in his chair once he is inside his office, throwing his coat at his desk, not bothered that it might bring the documents scattered on the surface to an even worse mess - it is his mess, and no matter how confusing it might look for anyone else, Ed knows his way through it.

Hawkeye silently hands him two thin files, and he chooses the one with Haley’s name on the top, sliding the second back to her.

“I talked with Voss about Dean, turns out he is his subordinate. I won’t need his file, thanks.”

Ed wonders if she is going to ask him anything or scold him for spending the morning in the library, but she just nods, takes Dean’s file and walks out of the office.

He reaches to his coat and takes his notes from the inner pocket, unfolding the papers and putting them in front of him. He indeed has no urgent work to do today, and what he has, can easily wait till tomorrow, so he is going to spend the rest of the day figuring out the details of that array. He is not going to use it of course, there is no need for that, they have made a good use of this second chance his previous self granted them, so he doesn’t really understand Roy’s worries. He thinks about actually confronting his husband about it - they discuss his dreams, they come up with plans of a better use of the information they received about the previous version of their reality, they do all this together and yet only the topic of this array still remains taboo, and Roy’s eyes look distant and lost every time Ed mentions it.

Ed doesn’t like it. Neither having something he is growing too afraid to even mention to his husband, nor the obvious discomfort the topic brings to the man.

Having decided he gathers both his notes and Haley’s file in one pile and walks out of his office, letting Hawkeye know where he is heading.

He quickly looks through Haley’s file while he is walking up the stairs to the top floor, not bumping into people only because the head of Intelligence Department, Fullmetal Alchemist and the spouse of
the current Führer of Amestris walking the Central Military Command corridors nose deep in paperwork or a book and not paying attention to his surroundings is such a common sight, that most of the people working in the building have long gotten used to it, and learnt to get out of Ed’s trajectory fast. That Ed’s body automatically chooses the same routes once his mind occupies itself with reading and there being only three routes he uses during a day most often - to Roy’s or Voss’s offices and the last, but not the least, to the mess hall - makes it even easier to avoid accidents on the way.

He is in the waiting room leading to the Führer’s office in no time, and he closes the folder to nod to Roy’s secretary. She is holding the phone receiver between her ear and shoulder and listening to someone talking on the other end, and judging by her expression, she’s been at it for awhile.

She smiles weakly when she spots Ed, and points to the door to Roy’s office, mouthing, “Go ahead”.

Ed enters the office, closing the door behind him.

“Busy?” he asks, walking to the table, where Roy is sitting, staring blankly at some document in front of him, chin resting on his hand.

“Not for you, love,” Roy answers a bit too fast, looking up with an almost blissful smile, and Ed wonders what played the main role in boosting Roy’s mood - him personally, or the opportunity to postpone having to deal with a clearly troublesome task if only for the short time of Ed’s visit. Ed thinks it might be both. “Tell me you are not here to talk about Cretans,” he adds then, worry rising in his eyes.

Ed lowers himself in the chair across from Roy and puts his documents on the table. “What’s with Cretans?”

“Oh, good,” Roy sighs with relief and leans back in his chair, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hands. He looks tired, but it’s a normal tired, nothing a good sleep (or a good sex, Ed thinks) can’t fix, so Ed is not particularly worried. Roy has a history of working himself to the point when he was literally losing conscious. So has Ed, but that was years ago, and things have been looking much better now, especially after they managed to - finally - sign a treaty with Drachma last year.

“The Cretans are up to something?” Ed tries again, but doesn’t really hope for an answer - if it was something serious, he would’ve already known, and Roy for sure would have told him earlier himself.

“No, it’s nothing serious, just some mild bureaucracy pains,” Roy answers and leans forward, reaching for Ed’s hand from across the table. “You fell asleep on your desk again last night?”

Ed takes Roy’s offered hand in his, caressing the knuckles with his thumb. “Riza told you?”

“She didn’t. But I happened to notice the lack of my husband with me in our bed,” he answers, squeezing Ed’s hand lightly.


“That’s all right, love,” Roy raises their joined hands and places a small kiss on every finger of Ed’s hand, and Ed is forced to fight the goofy smile - he came here for a serious talk, dammit, why is Roy always like this?! “Just don’t overwork yourself.”

“I know my limits,” Ed mumbles, pulling his hand from Roy’s grip and opening Haley’s file on the first page.
Roy tilts a brow, “I am pretty sure you actually don’t, Ed.”

Ed looks up at him sharply, but Roy’s expression is soft and there is no indication that the man is planning to argue about this now, so Ed lets it slip.

“Haley and Dean,” Ed says simply.

“Oh,” Roy answers and his smile fades.

They’ve talked about both men more than once already, Ed having a whole series of quite uneventful dreams during last few months, not that he is complaining. Considering the circumstances his previous self found himself in, such dreams - every single one in fact - could’ve been way more unpleasant, but except for having to basically slip into the skin of someone who did lose his loved ones and felt it with his every cell, several previous dreams were not that bad.

Or perhaps Ed has just gotten used to them.

“Yeah,” Ed breathes out. “We knew it would happen eventually, right?”

“How did it happen?” Roy stopped asking if Ed was all right after these dreams some time ago. It was quite useless - Ed has always come to him with his worries and nightmares anyway, knowing, that all of him - including the him from the dreams - will be fully accepted no matter what. Honestly, it is still a bit scary for Ed to be loved like that, but it is balanced somehow by the intensity of his own feelings for this man.

Crazy, he thinks sometimes, not really understanding how that happened, but happy that he is still feeling surprised. Crazy, it is so crazy.

“A grenade,” Ed answers simply, taking a deep breath, trying not to let the memories affect him that much. “Small dark room, they were all sleeping.” Ed sees Roy’s face darkening, and looks away. “I think they died instantly. Voss was sitting behind Dean and wasn’t injured much,” he pauses and inhales slowly. “He was under the fallen out door when the explosion got off. Closed the doorway with alchemy, they escaped through the wall. Got some scratches on the legs, nothing major,” Ed glances back at Roy, noting a worry in his dark eyes, and finishes in a quiet voice, “He almost left his notes there while escaping, Roy.”

“Almost?”

“Voss got their bags,” Ed explains.

“You will have to thank the man one day, Ed.”

“I know. I will tell him eventually,” Ed closes his eyes for a moment and pinches the bridge of his nose, shoving the middle finger of his other hand in the general direction of Roy’s face, when the man chuckles quietly at Ed’s gesture. “But not now. Maybe when it’s all over.”

Roy nods, and looks at the documents lying before Ed. “What is this?” he asks, pointing at the opened file.

“I asked Hawkeye to check if we know something about them,” Ed answers, turning the file and sliding it across the desk to Roy. “They talked about their dreams, before they got attacked. I wanted to see if they’ve managed to get what they wanted now.”

Roy looks down at the file and glances back at Ed. “Only Haley?”
“Dean works with Voss, so I just talked with Mark about him. Nothing really special, but looks like the man is living that stable life he wanted,” Ed smirked. “I’m not worried about him. Haley is a different matter.”

Roy frowns and starts reading the file.

“He said he wanted to have his own family, raise kids and live in the country,” Ed speaks while Roy is reading. “Nothing special, guess lots of people have a dream like that.” Roy turns the page, and Ed sees him raising a brow. “But you should’ve seen how his eyes shone when he talked about it, Roy. Guess it was special for him, he grew up in a big family himself, so I suppose it is what really mattered to him.”

Roy finally looks up, a mix of different emotions rushing across his face before he quickly hides them behind one of his masks. He tilts his brow and the corner of his mouth. Ed grins.

“First of all, Ed, I applaud you for the suspense.” Ed smirks and leans back in his chair, shoving his hands in the pockets of his pants. “And second,” and here Roy actually sounds amused when he points at some part in the file before him, “four? Four children?! What is he, twenty-two?”

“Twenty-three,” Ed corrects and smiles happily. “Desk-officer in South city. And his wife is from Aerugo, isn’t this great?”

Roy closes the file and hands it back to Ed with a soft smile.

"Twenty three, and already four kids,” he says in amusement. "And here we are, 32 and 46 year old men spending our nights face down on the desks in our offices,” he finishes with a smirk, which quickly fades away.

"We are workaholics, Roy, even with your tendency for slacking, you still are, this will never change,” Ed says watching Roy's face. “Workaholics suck at raising kids.”

"Of course, Ed," Roy answers with a smile and if Ed didn't know him so well, he would've missed a flicker of something that looks like regret in dark eyes before Roy lowers his gaze.

Ed leans forward, placing his hands on the armseats. "Roy, tell me you are not serious."

"Mm," the only answer Ed gets, and Roy is not even looking at him.

Ed sighs, contemplating if this is a good time for bringing up the research he is doing. But no matter when they talk about, it will not be a pleasant conversation, and the mood is already ruined, so he might as well go for it now.

He takes the pile of the notes he made today and silently hands it to Roy. One look at the diagrams
and array drafts, and Roy is frowning at him with a mix of worry and anger.

I am not getting laid tonight, am I? Ed thinks, sighing inwardly.

“Why now?” Roy asks first, as if testing the waters.

Ed doesn’t see any reason to lie, so he tells him about the book he saw in his dream last night and that he found it later in the military library.

“Burn the notes. And forget you ever attempted to make this research,” Roy says grimly, placing a hand on top of the papers in question. “Thankfully I know the depth of your genius well enough to assume that, even if someone would get their hands on the original research, what took you two years would likely take others a lifetime. It is still a risk though, so perhaps I should see to destroying the book too. Before you told me, I didn’t actually know it existed.”

Ed jumps in his seat, slamming his hands on the desk. “Fuck you, Roy! I’m sick of tiptoeing around the subject for years! What’s your damn problem with this?! And don’t you dare tell me what to do with it, Führer or not!” Ed finishes, expectedly falling into a reaction of anger, even though he planned to try having this conversation in a more civilized manner.

“We are equal partners in this relationship, Ed, I can’t and won’t forbid you doing what you want,” Roy answers coldly, retreating even further behind his mask, and Ed has to force himself to calm down, otherwise he will definitely miss the real emotions he can usually glimpse in the depths of Roy’s eyes. “But I can ask you not to.”

Ed hisses in a breath and makes himself sit back in his chair, still leaning forward and barely controlling his anger which has accumulated in him during all the years he couldn’t even mention the array without the conversation reducing to something ugly.

“If you are afraid, that I—” Ed begins carefully but Roy interrupts him.

“You can’t really believe I would think you might use it, Ed. This is not the reason why I am so against you finishing it,” he says, and Ed can’t suppress the surprised “Oh” - all this time he has actually thought that was the only reason Roy gets so defensive when the subject is raised.

“Then why?” Ed asks in confusion.

“Oh, honey, that you fail to see why, is exactly the reason I don’t want you to work on this array. When you are caught up in your research you rarely able to think of the possible consequences of bringing such knowledge to the rest of the world,” Roy says and runs his hand through his hair, bringing it in disarray. “In fact, if that Edward realised that, since he didn’t pass on any information regarding the array along with the notes, you should be able to see it too,” he finishes and looks at Ed expectedly.

Ed leans back, tilts his head and tugs at the end of his ponytail. “You think someone else might found out and use it?” He can’t believe this thought has never occurred to him before.

Roy nods and his face relaxes a bit, not that guarded anymore. “This is a risk I am not willing to take. Even for the sake of satisfying your curiosity,” he says and then adds, “Especially in the face of your curiosity, considering that when engrossed in research you tend to leave pieces of it all over the place.” Ed makes an attempt to pout and Roy tilts the corner of his mouth in a small smile. “Oh, don’t start to deny it now, when it is probably the reason why you decided to tell me about it now in the first place,” he says with a soft chuckle.

“You know me too damn well,” Ed mumbles and throws a glance at his notes which are still resting
under Roy’s palm.

“That I do,” Roy answers and the change in his voice makes Ed look up at him. There is a deep frown between his brows and a tension in the corners of his eyes. He flips the pages of Ed’s notes, looking for something, then reaches to the drawer and fishes out a blank sheet of paper. “That’s why I know that you won’t be able to sleep at night if you don’t see it,” he says, starting to quickly draw something on the paper. “Not that you actually do now anyway,” he adds quietly, without looking at Ed, and Ed’s heart clenches at the hurt in Roy’s voice.

Roy draws for a few more minutes and Ed starts fidgeting in his seat. Finally Roy finishes and hands Ed the paper with a complicated array.

“You can touch it - I left out one sign, so it won’t activate,” Roy says quietly, when Ed takes the paper. “Even with it though, I suspect it won’t work anyway, being that size. But as you may guess, I haven’t actually checked that, so I prefer to stay on the safe side.”

Ed glances at him, but Roy is looking down blankly, and Ed feels the urge to reach to him, but somehow feels this will not be welcome at this time, so he turns his attention to the array in his hands.

It is by far the most beautiful array he has ever seen. The design is complicated but minimalistic in that way which shows genius - every single element is perfectly balanced with the others and each has its purpose. He recognises a few elements from the book he read and the notes his previous self was taking in his dream, but the rest is completely new to him, and he draws in a shaky breath, realising, that the array like that would probably take him a few years even with the book in hand to finish it, and how his previous self managed to do it in two years having just the memories of the book, is beyond him. He guesses, having actually a motivation for it beyond just plain curiosity, played a key role.

He follows the complicated lines with his eyes, marvelling at the beautiful simplicity of the array, when suddenly realising something, he throws his head up, staring at Roy with widened eyes.

“Wait, you said you didn’t know about the book with the original research.”

Roy looks up at him with a once again guarded expression.

“So?” he answers shortly.

“Don’t tell me you fucking remembered it!” Ed unconsciously raises his voice. “All these years!”

Roy places his elbows on the table and bends his arms, hiding the lower part of his face behind his hands. Ed hates when he does it with him, which thankfully happens extremely rarely. He wants to reach and pull at these hands and grab that face and make Roy look at him until Roy’s expression changes to something less guarded and more trusting.

“It was a few meters in diameter and shining like a new year tree for what I think was at least half an hour,” Roy answers, looking at Ed with searching eyes. “I am still an alchemist, Ed. I am quite capable of remembering one more array.”

“It’s not just any array, Roy,” Ed says, feeling a mix of worry and anger rising up in his chest, and wondering if it’s how Roy felt every time Ed started talking about the alchemy which brought his other self back in past. The man had this array memorised for years, and yet he told Ed nothing. Didn’t he trust Ed with this information? Ed refuses to think that was the case.

“Thank you for stating the obvious,” Roy cuts off sharply.
Ed slams his hand along with the paper in his hand flat on the desk, and stands up.

“I am not him, Roy!” he almost shouts, holding Roy’s gaze, even though the intensity of the different feelings in the depths of the dark eyes makes him want to avert his eyes. He feels small and confused. He feels as if he is again looking at the shadow of the man he loves sitting in front of the fireplace, shoulders hunched under the weight of a sudden responsibility sitting itself there. “I am not him,” Ed repeats in a desperate attempt to drag Roy from whatever dark thoughts are occupying his mind now.

“I know.”

“Then stop looking at me like that!”

“Like what?”

“Like you were looking at me when you told me about this 14 years ago!” Ed raises his voice again. “To not see this look in your eyes ever again is a big part of why what we have been doing is so important to me!”

“I can say the same about you.”

“The hell does that mean?”

Roy closes his eyes for a moment, and then sighs and stands up. “When was the last time you looked at your reflection in a mirror, Ed?” he asks, suddenly no edges left in his voice, and it sounds soft and tired.

“Today, when I brushed my teeth, Roy,” Ed answers dryly. “The fuck is wrong with my reflection?”

“That’s not what I…” Roy trails off, and sighs. He walks around the table to where Ed is standing and puts his hand on the small of Ed’s back, softly pushing him to walk with him. “Come here.”

They walk to the door in silence and step out of Roy’s office, Roy’s hand is still a warm presence on Ed’s back.

Roy’s secretary looks up at them in question.

“Evelyn, take a half an hour break, will you?” Roy says to her with a smile. The young woman nods, stands up and walks out.

“Please tell me we are having makeup sex on your secretary’s desk,” Ed chuckles, glancing at Roy with a brow tilted in amusement.

Ed sees Roy’s facial muscles work to suppress a smile. “Some other time, Ed. We are not finished with our conversation yet.”

Ed sighs in a not so fake disappointment, but he understands that the man is right. They walk to the tall mirror hanging on the wall, and Roy stands behind Ed, his hand on Ed’s hip.

“So, what are we looking at?” Ed asks impatiently.

“Your face.”

“What’s with it?”

“You tell me,” Roy cuts off, and Ed scowls in irritation.
He looks at their reflection, Roy is beside him and the man is looking at Ed through the mirror. Ed turns his attention to his own face, nothing he hasn’t seen before, but it’s not like he’s actually taken special time in studying his own reflection. So he looks. First thing he notices is that his ponytail is probably too messy and he will need to fix it later. He tugs at the end of it near his hip and marvels that he has managed to grow it so long. He thinks back to when he was looking through the eyes of the other Edward in the small mirror, when he was holding his hair in one hand and scissors in the other. He remembers that what struck him back then the most were the deep shadows under eyes which had lost their light. He swallows nervously and looks at the shadows under his own eyes, so different, but the lack of normal sleep is showing. The frown between his brows is a bit too deep for his liking and he makes himself relax his face a bit. He looks tired and on his age, which has never actually happened before, and he knows the years are not to blame, but his own mind, stuck in the loop of living two lives at once, and if he can’t do anything about the dreams, he knows reflecting on it during the daytime is his own choice. But he doesn’t want it to be otherwise, no matter how hard it gets for him, he believes it’s only fair.

“Well, I can’t do anything about it, now, can I?” Ed says quietly.

“I wish it wasn’t that way,” Roy mutters quietly near Ed’s ear.

“Someone should pay for what we have now, Roy,” Ed answers, catching his eyes in the reflection. “It has always been that way.”

“You have already paid.”

“No, I haven’t!” Ed answers, turning around.

“Why should it always be you?!”

“Because I don’t want you to do it!” Ed shouts, grabbing a handful of Roy’s jacket in both hands, looking fiercely in the dark blue eyes. “And it’s not like I can change it, Roy, you know that,” he adds in a quieter voice, not breaking the eye contact with his husband. “You don’t have to worry, Roy. You know I can handle this. Just please, please, stop looking at me like at a ghost sometimes.”

Roy raises his hand and cups Ed’s face, brushing his cheek with a thumb.

“I won’t,” he says softly, bringing their foreheads together. “I’m sorry, love.”

Ed pulls him closer to press their lips together, and he feels Roy’s smile in their kiss.

“So, is it some other time already?” Ed asks mischievously, throwing meaningful glances at the desk behind Roy.

Roy chuckles and steps back. “As much as I wish to molest my beloved husband in every place which would physically allow this, I unfortunately can not disregard the matter of social and, in my case, political limitations to such activities.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

“That means ‘no’, Ed,” Roy answers with a smile and walks to the door in his office. “Wait till we are home tonight. That in the unlikely case that you won’t fall asleep on your desk again.”

Ed shoves him jokingly on the shoulder and follows inside the office. “Jerk.”

“...off I will have to in that unfortunate scenario,” Roy chuckles, sitting down in his chair. “Again.”
Ed opens his mouth to deliver another insult, but quickly closes it, not willing to risk Roy twisting his words into something abominable.

Ed sits down and collects his notes and the sheet with the array from the table. He doesn’t have to look at the array again, he knows he will never forget its lines, and just hopes neither he, nor Roy - hopefully the only two people on the planet with that knowledge - will ever have to use it again. He holds the pile of papers in his right hand and looks at Roy.

Roy raises his hand and snaps, small fire appearing on the tip of his index finger. He could easily spread it farther, but he lets Ed catch the fire himself and direct it to the documents in his hand. Ed picked up some fire alchemy skills throughout the years, he is nothing like Roy when it comes to controlling fire while fueling it, but he can do small things, and burning such an important part of their lives, even with the knowledge of it still present in their minds, he wants to do himself, and he is grateful to Roy, that the man understands this.

A few moments and the papers are gone, leaving just a tiny trace of ash on the floor. Ed lowers his hand and sits limply back in his chair. Roy is handing him Haley’s file, and Ed stretches his hand to take it.

Roy is looking at him with warmth in his eyes and there are no traces of that guarded look he was giving Ed recently.

Ed looks down at Haley’s file.

Four kids, a wife from Aerugo, a house in the country.

Ed smiles and thinks that the document in his hand is far more important than the ones he just burnt.

Chapter End Notes

G U Y S !  I  rrreeeally wanna know what you think of Voss. TELL ME. It's important for the next chapter (for the next normal chapter, cuz the next update will be the short interlude). I wasn't actually planning on having an OC in this story when I just started writing it. But Voss waltzed his way in it and stayed. And I love him. But I'm really curious what you guys think of him.

So, next update in a week - short interlude (and you will probably hate me once you see what kind of interlude it is), and then in a couple of days after that I plan to post the next normal chapter, which is almost 18 months after the events in this one and which is almost written btw, so don't worry.

ALSO I started writing The Very Last Chapter tm and let me tell you - I HAVE SO MUCH FEELS!!! I bet you can guess what kind of dream Ed is gonna have there and I am so excited to write it. Still can't believe that my attempt to first time ever write smth in english eventually grew in such a huge story.
Interlude. September 1925

Chapter Summary

“Home?” Roy asked, his finger gently playing with the ring on Edward’s finger. “Home,” Edward answered, and as they walked to the exit, hand in hand, shoulders brushing, he thought that he couldn’t wait for all those years he got to spend with Roy by his side.

Chapter Notes

Have some fluff with your angst, cuz the next chapter is going to be painful ohoho

Small update before the next full chapter. It’s an interlude, as you can see, please pay attention to the dates.

Little hint for those who is still confused (I have a reader on FFN who still, after reading all of this, thinks that Ed is just jumping back and forth between timelines using time-travelling alchemy, and I don't even know what to say to this person, because how they managed to even get such idea is beyond me): the events in this interlude happened in the previous timeline, the Edward's one, not the current Ed's one (for the similar events but with Ed go back to Part 3 of the series ;))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Interlude

September 1925

It was a fancy place, too fancy for his liking, and he made a mental note to tell Roy, again, that if the man wanted to impress him or whatever it was he was doing it for, inviting him to a fancy restaurant on a Sunday night sure was not the best choice.

There were lights around him, and quiet music, and people, a lot of people, couples mostly, sitting at other tables, talking and laughing, but the kind of laughing that was appropriate for a place like this, sounding more like an accompaniment to the music, like another one of the accessories of this venue, rather than a natural joyful reaction to something really funny. It was all artificial, it was all too much and yet not enough. Too much lights, too much fancy clothes, too much mannerism and not enough sincerity. Edward felt like sitting in the middle of a puppet show being the only one human. He hated it.

He turned his gaze and his frown on the man sitting across from him and sighed tiredly at the goofy smile on the face of his partner - Roy was definitely proud of the place he’d chosen for this evening and Edward couldn’t bring himself to tell him now everything he thought about this decision. Later, he would get his revenge later.
“This place opened just a couple of months ago, but as you can see it is already quite popular,” Roy said, taking a sip of his water while they were waiting for their orders. “What do you think?”

“This place is too fancy and I don’t know which fork to kill myself with,” Edward deadpanned. “Or you.”

“It will grow on you, just give it a chance, Ed,” Roy chuckled.

The waiter brought their orders and Edward duged in - if anything, he wasn’t going to miss an opportunity to eat something which from the look of it definitely costed half of his paycheck.

“Anyway, what’s the occasion?” he asked, finishing his first dish and moving to the second, while Roy was lazily sipping his wine looking at him with a small curve on his lips - the man found a weird pleasure in watching Edward eat. Edward stopped questioning it a long time ago, accepting that everyone had their own quirks. Not like he really cared though, as long as Roy was just watching and not trying to impinge on his food.

The question made Roy put his glass on the table, as he cocked his head with a puzzled and amused expression rising on his face.

“Dear Edward, is old age starting to get you?”

“I’m 26, you bastard!” Edward nearly shouted, throwing a bread crust at Roy, which the man dodged with an annoying easiness and a soft quiet laugh.

“Oh well, how silly of me to think you would remember our five-years anniversary,” the man chuckled with a mocking sparkle in his dark eyes.

Edward stopped chewing and his eyes grew wide. Oh, shit. It was really five years already, wasn’t it? Should he really have remembered the date? They had never celebrated the day they got together - marking one exact day as something special seemed silly to him. They were together and that is what was important, and Roy had never made it known that he’d want to celebrate the anniversary, so Edward assumed the man didn’t care about such things as well. But perhaps five years was some milestone or some shit and maybe it was important for Roy and Edward hadn’t even known. Damn, he didn’t even remember the month, let alone the date, and here Roy went all this way to get them a table in this popular place to spend this day with Edward, and Edward even--

His line of internal self-loathing was halted by a quiet laugh from across the table. Edward looked up and was met with the bright smile and the warmth of dark eyes looking at him lovingly. Roy wasn’t angry at him?

“Oh, Ed, you should’ve seen your face,” Roy said, bringing his hand to take Edward’s one lying on the table.

Edward jerked his hand away, immediately missing the warmth of Roy’s fingers, and grumbled halfheartedly, “If you brought me here to make fun of me, I’m getting the fuck out of here and see if I’m gonna talk to you again, you bastard.”

Roy stopped laughing, but the smile on his face had yet to fade, shifting from the amused one to a softer one.

He didn’t attempt to take Edward’s hand again, instead reaching for the pocket of his suit.

“I’m sorry, Ed, it was of course not why I have brought you here.” He inhaled deeply, slowly releasing his breath, and Edward tilted his brow in confusion. Roy got something out of his pocket
and put it on the table, his hand covering the object from the view. “I know that, most likely, all of this,” he looked around them before returning his eyes on Edward, “may seem a bit overwhelming, and I know this is not your idea of an enjoyable activity, but it is mine, and as I am doing this, I wanted to do it properly.”

Edward’s other brow joined the first one but he decided to let Roy finish before asking the question, as he had clearly prepared the whole speech or something.

“I know we have our difficulties, Ed, and not everything has been smooth in our relationship,” Roy raised his other hand to stop the young man from sputtering his objections just yet. “But,” his face softened and eyes got that dreamy look Roy had so often when looking at Edward, “I can with most confidence say that these last five years has been the best years of my life, and I owe it to you, Ed.”

Roy reached across the table to take hold of Edward’s left hand, ignoring his muttering of “What the hell, Roy” accompanied with a faint blush on his cheeks.

“I love you, Ed, more than anything. I…” He drifted off, closing his eyes for a moment, and brought Edward’s hand to his lips, placing a soft kiss on the knuckles.

“Roy, what?..” Edward frowned, feeling the concern growing in the back of his mind. It wasn’t like Roy to have problems with the choice of words.

Roy opened his eyes and let go of Edward’s hand, his fingers brushing the back of it tenderly.

“I love you, Ed, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you,” he moved his hand from where it was covering the object he got from his pocket, revealing the small black box. “If you have me,” Roy finished, taking the box from the table and opening it to show its content to Edward.

The frown between Edward’s brows disappeared, his eyes grew wide and he swallowed nervously.

“What– What the fuck, Roy…” he heard his own husky voice asking and he coughed to clear his throat. “Is it?.. The fuck, Roy!!”

Roy’s expression was soft but serious, he wasn’t smiling, but his eyes were watching Edward with a mix of fear and hope, and Edward was shocked to realise that Roy was really nervous.

“Edward, will you marry me?” Roy said quietly, not tearing his gaze from Edward’s eyes. The bright lights were reflecting in the smooth surface of the small golden ring lying in the box in Roy’s hand between them.

Edward felt his brain going blank. With a quiet “Fuck, Roy, you…” he reached to the ring and took it out of the box to look at it closer. Only when his periphery vision registered Roy’s face lighting up, he realised that by this action he practically accepted Roy’s proposal. A short wave of panic hit him, before the voice of reason took hold of his running in all directions thoughts. Can he really imagine saying “no”? Didn’t he too wanted to be with Roy forever?

He blinked away his musings and looked at the ring. The engraving on the inner side of it drew his attention. He raised his eyes at Roy, trying to look as unimpressed as possible, while his heart was trying to beat it’s way out of his chest and the warmth of excitement mixed with a bit of embarrassment was making its way to his cheeks.

“I can’t believe you engraved our fucking names on it, Roy. You are too fucking mushy for your own good.”

Roy smiled, finally putting the empty box back on the table
“I know you like it, you just don’t want to admit it,” he answered, cocking his head a bit.

“I hate it almost as much as I hate you!” Edward answered enthusiastically, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically, as he felt his lips widening in a grin. “And this place,” he added after consideration.

Roy let out a short breathy laugh, his fingers playing with the empty box, opening and closing it nervously.

“Is that a ‘yes’?” he asked quietly, and Edward looked down at the ring lying in the middle of his palm, swallowing around the sudden lump in his throat. Why was he so nervous about it? It wasn’t such a big deal, was it?

He took the ring between his two automail fingers and quickly put it on the ring finger on his flesh hand. The breath caught in his throat and he seemed to space out, eyes fixed on the metal band. It was a big deal.

A loud exhale from the other side of the table brought him back to the reality and he blinked twice.

“Fuck…” he said looking up at Roy. Roy was beaming.

“Ed,” he said, no, breathed out, with so much love in his voice that it shouldn’t be able to fit in just one short syllable.

“Fuck, Roy,” Edward repeated, bewildered, extending his current vocabulary to two words, which drew a deep laughter from Roy.

“I can arrange that too,” the man answered, his eyes shining, looking at Edward with awe, and Edward thought he must do something with it, before he got blind.

“Do it then,” he said, standing up from his chair, grabbed Roy’s wrist with his left hand and started tagging him from the table.

“Wait, Ed, I still need to pay for all the food you consumed,” Roy said, still laughing lightly, and reached to his pockets for his wallet. He was putting banknotes on the table and Edward was watching him, thinking that he would do everything in his power to never let this happy expression leave Roy’s face for longer than it was strictly necessary.

Finishing with the money, Roy turned to Edward, letting his hand slide to meet his and lace their fingers together.

“Home?” Roy asked, his finger gently playing with the ring on Edward’s finger.

“Home,” Edward answered, and as they walked to the exit, hand in hand, shoulders brushing, he thought that he couldn’t wait for all those years he got to spend with Roy by his side.

Chapter End Notes

I'll try to upload the next chapter in a week, but I have some doubts. It is mostly written, just one conversation is missing, but it's an important one, so I'm struggling with it a bit. Sorry for making you wait and thanks for the patience =) I think it will be the most angsty chapter in this fic. Broke my heart while I was writing it. Hope you will cry ahaha
June 1933

Chapter Summary

Do you know why snow is white? Because it's forgotten what color it is supposed to be.

Chapter Notes

GET SOME ANGST, SEX AND ANGSTY SEX WITH YOUR ANGST!
If you don’t shed at least a single tear till the end of the first part of this chapter, you are a heartless bastard. I don't even know what to tell you xD

This is the chapter where we learn the main reason of why Edward looked so unhealthy and confused when Roy saw him in the "Beneath the stains of time" (and it killed me while I was writing it in so many ways...)

The epigraph in this one is from Code Geass.

As for warnings here... Well, I would very much prefer if you don't skip anything, as it all important, and if you are here already, I think you have an idea of the level of angst you can expect from me.
But just in case, a little heads up: there is quite a lot of sexual content in this chapter, but not explicit, AND there will be soooort of what maaaay be can be considered a dubious consent, but pls bear through it no matter how awkward it is - it was made this way on purpose.

RECAP (1.5 years ago):
Edward started working on the array which could potentially take him back to the past.
Dean and Haley died in explosion when their group was attacked in the middle of the night.
Ed decides to make his own research on this array, but Roy talks him out of it, stating the potential dangers of having such array lying around.

Also, I'm sorry...

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Drachma

Was it really two years since Roy’s death? It felt so much less than that. It felt so much longer than that. As if his whole life was that - monotonous grey landscape and freezing cold.

Three years, he last saw him almost three years ago.

He had thought he would drown in the loud silence accompanying the gaping hole by his side. He had thought it would be hitting him every day as soon as he opened his eyes in the morning, how lost and alone he was, with no end or relief in sight. He was alone now. Forever.

Except he wasn’t. And every morning he would wake up to see a pair of tired hazel eyes, in some way as lost and broken as his own were, but still looking at him with the faint hope that he was aware of what they were doing here and why. With the hope, that he would be able to fix this and maybe bring them home some day.

He hadn’t given Voss any promises. Even after telling him what it was he constantly was writing down on the crumpled papers which no longer resembled the notebook they once were, and receiving a look that was talking about full acceptance - no doubts, no accusations of being a madman, which Edward somewhat had expected to hear, no questioning the fact that by doing what he had planned Edward would actually erase them from existence, instead giving a chance to those, who weren’t them - not yet, and he hoped they’d never be. He wasn’t able to actually speak the words of a promise of any sort out loud. They had discussed what information might be useful for preventing the war, Voss came up with a couple of ideas and Edward readily added them in his notes, ciphering the most important parts in his or Roy’s alchemy codes. He had tried to explain what he was working with to create the array that might potentially bring him several years back, but Voss wasn’t an alchemist and these conversations eventually shifted to Edward murmuring under his breath while covering the papers with a shaking handwriting, and Voss sitting nearby quietly, only humming approvingly from time to time when Edward seemed to face a problem in his line of thinking and fell silent for a moment.

Now that there were only two of them left, and Edward finally had made significant progress with his work, they would stay in the same place for longer, not rushing forward, all the sabotaging of Drachman’s communications and supply lines long forgotten in the face of the more important task.

Edward would take his notes out as soon as they would stop moving, engrossed in them for the better part of the day and night, falling asleep only when he was not able to focus anymore on what he had been writing, leaving enough mental capacity just to carefully put the papers in his bag or in the inner pocket of his coat before blacking out.

It was partially because he was eager to finish his work as soon as possible, being that close now, and also because of the nightmares which had been visiting him if he was falling asleep not completely exhausted.

But today it was different. Shadows of the past didn’t present themselves in the form of the usual nightmare. Instead it was the happy eight-year old memory that Edward saw today, and it hurt him even more than a dozen of nightmares he had already gotten used to.

Eight years ago Roy invited him in that fancy restaurant and gave him that ring, the small metal band on his finger in his mind weighing more than it possibly could, dead weight on his hand.
He dreamt of lights, and bright smiles, and of deep soft laughter, and of the feeling of a thrill in the face of all those happy years he had been planning to spend with the man he loved more than anything in this world.

But it was not meant to be. Five years, they had had just five years together before everything shattered in front of their eyes.

He woke up in unfamiliar surroundings with a bitter taste of familiarity - if he hadn’t gotten used to the feeling of having a place to call home, then perhaps this, now, would be somewhat easier to endure. Because he hadn’t had a home from the moment he and Al burned down their childhood house until Roy asked him to move in with him nine years ago.

He sat up in his sleeping bag and looked around, waiting for his memory to catch up with his brain, hazed from cold, the constant lack of sleep, and general weariness, and provide him with some information about their current whereabouts.

His hair fell down on his face and he brushed it away. This length was seriously inconvenient - too short yet to put it all in a ponytail, some strands slipping out every time he moves his head, but long enough to always be in a way. He needed to cut it soon.

He was in an empty room, his sleeping bag on the floor. There was a small window in the wall across from him, but it was dark outside and impossible to determine which part of the day it was. He couldn’t remember how they had gotten here, but at least they had a roof over their heads this time and protection from the wind - sleeping in the small tents outside was becoming really exhausting.

His body hurt, it was nothing particularly new, he had long gotten used to the throbbing pain in his ports, but now on top of it he felt an unpleasant humming in his bones and muscles, along with a pulsing headache - all the familiar signs of alchemical exhaustion. He probably overdid it yesterday, at least he hoped it was just yesterday and he hadn’t slumbered in this state for longer than a few hours. No wonder he couldn’t remember how they got here, Voss had probably carried his unconscious body all the way here.

His eyes adapted to the darkness and he noticed a sleeping bag beside him, pressed close together in an attempt to keep them somewhat warm, a head with dark hair peeking from the bag.

“Hey, Voss,” he whispered and winced instantly at how the words scraped his throat.

The body near him moved, turning to face him. The pair of eyes opened and Voss slowly sat up.

“How do you feel?” he asked looking sideways at Edward.

“Like I’ve died,” Edward answered, pulling his left leg from the sleeping bag and laying it on top. “Nothing new,” he added with a grunt and started massaging the muscles near the automail port, closing his eyes and trying not to hiss in pain.

“Actually you almost did,” Voss said, sighing heavily.

“Mm.”

“That was way too reckless, Edward.”

Edward stopped his futile attempts to bring some relief to his aching leg, dropped his hands by his side and raised his head to look into the darkness outside the window.

“We needed food, it was your idea in the first place,” he said dryly. “I did what I had to so we
wouldn’t get caught. Apparently it worked.”

“You didn’t have to be suicidal, Edward,” Voss pressed, getting out of his sleeping bag to face Edward fully.

“I was not.”

“Yes you were. And it is not even the first time.”

Edward turned to him sharply, a sudden wave of anger mixed with bitter desperation rising up in his chest heating him from inside, deluding his body into feeling warmer than it was actually possible here.

“I don’t need your pep-talks, Mark,” he said harshly.

“Maybe it is time I actually give you one,” Voss answered coldly, looking at Edward determinedly.

“Tch. This is not a walk in the park, I told you that when you insisted to join.”

“I’ve never thought it was, Edward. But I’ve not given up on my life like you have!”

“I haven’t either!” Edward shouted. “I have a task to finish, and you know that!” he waved his hand to where he spotted his duffle bag in the corner.

“Then why are you acting like you have?! There will be no use in what you are trying to do if you die now, Edward!” Voss raised his voice, grabbing his arm in a tight grip in frustration, and this was the first time Edward saw his calm demeanor break like that.

“Because I want to forget!” Edward screamed in his face, trying to rip Voss’s fingers from his arm but to no avail. “Because I don’t think about all this when I fight!” Giving up on releasing his arm from the tight grip he clenched Voss’s collar in his fist instead. “Don’t you too want to just forget about all this, Mark?” He added quieter, looking in Voss’s eyes, the dark shadows under them visible even in the poor lighting, and he thought that he hadn’t even noticed his companion’s fatigue till now, too mired in his own pain.

“Thoughtlessly throwing yourself in a fight is not a very good way for it, Edward,” Voss answered, voice quiet, deep frown between his eyebrows.

“But it helps,” Edward said tiredly, turning his head to look to the side, searching for something his eyes could catch on, but there were only bare stone walls around him, such a contrast with the lights and bright colors from that memory his brain had showed him in the dream. And he smiled bitterly, remembering how annoyed he had been back then about the interior of that restaurant. If he had known that in a bit more than five years the only colors he could be able see would be just different shades of gray, he’d let himself drink in all the little details of that evening, full of lights and bright paints.

If he had known, he would never had left Roy’s side.

The memory hurt, the thought of the “if’s” hurt even more, still, and when he turned to look at Voss again, his hand still clenching the man’s collar, the only thought in his exhausted mind was—

“I just want to forget,” his voice dropping to a whisper when he leaned closer and pressed his mouth to Voss’s lips, chafed from constantly being in the cold.
He felt the man go stiff, but Edward’s mind was blank aside from the one thought, and he just closed his eyes, and there was a burning sensation under his eyelids. He moved his lips, Voss gasped and Edward pressed closer, but the grip on his arm tightened and there was another hand on his metal shoulder pushing him back.

“No, Edward, that’s not what you want. I’m not who you want…” There was the trace of a quiver in Voss’s voice, and Edward let his other hand join the one holding Voss’s collar and pulled slightly.

“Don’t tell me what I want,” he answered in a tight voice and tried to lean in but was stopped by the firm hand on his shoulder.

“Edward,” Voss said sharply.

“Don’t you want to just forget about all this just for a moment, Mark?” Edward repeated his question from earlier, refusing to open his eyes, too scared to look up and see pity or even disgust in the eyes of his friend, and his voice rang with desperation in his own ears. “Just forget, about all this…” His eyes were burning, and he squeezed them, sliding his left hand to curl his fingers around the back of Voss’s neck, the hair too short and too hard to the touch, and it felt so wrong—

He just stayed like that for what felt like several minutes, but could hardly be more than a few moments, waiting for any sort of response, ready to accept any at this point, but not sure which one would make him feel worse.

Voss didn’t say anything when he pushed on Edward’s shoulder, and Edward released his grip on him falling back on his sleeping bag and letting out a strangled sigh. He covered his eyes with his forearm, his fingers trembling from the ravel of emotions, he didn’t want to untangle to name. He swallowed around a lump in his throat and opened his mouth to say something, - what do people say in situations like this? - but in the next moment there were warm lips on his and a hand was taking his arm off his face to fix it behind his head.

He gasped in Voss’s mouth, a lone tear making its way down his cheek, disappearing in the blond hair - the wrong length hair, all wrong - and he grasped the edge of the sleeping bag with his free hand, somehow getting the feeling that Voss wouldn’t want to be touched now, or perhaps it was Edward who didn’t want his fingers to find those unfamiliar - too short, too bristly - hairs at the nape of Voss’s neck.

And he could just pretend…

Lips moved to plant a heated kiss under his jaw and Edward felt the warmth of it spreading down his body. A hand moved along his chest and stomach, to stop at the waistband of his pants, fingers quickly undoing his fly and diving under.

Edward’s breath caught when cool fingers wrapped around him, quickly warming up with the heat radiating from his body.

One hand was holding his own above his head, and another on him, moving firmly, - so differently, - warm breath on the side of his neck.

His head was thrown back and he didn’t dare to open his eyes.

And he couldn’t push down a strangled breath with the name of a person, who had been his whole existence, forcing its way from his throat when he came.

The ringing silence filled the air, and Edward inhaled slowly, quietly, only now noticing the raging beating of his heart.
Voss was a heavy weight on his side, lying limp, face in Edward’s flesh shoulder, shallow breaths only slightly tickling the skin of his neck.

Edward opened his eyes hesitantly, and Voss shifted on him, his hand moving to tuck him back in his pants, and this little gesture sent a suffocating wave of embarrassment and guilt in Edward’s throat, catching it in a tight grip. He swallowed and closed his eyes again.

“I’m sorry, Mark,” he said harshly.

“Don’t be,” Voss answered softly, and Edward felt a hand on his face, brushing away a single tear running down from his squeezed shut eyes, before he moved away. “It won’t matter soon anyway, right?” There was a poorly hidden pain behind the calmness of that voice, but Edward had no energy left to wonder where it could be coming from.

It wouldn’t matter soon.

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He waited for the natural light of the day, not daring to draw any unwanted attention to their location by lighting a candle. The half-destroyed building they were hiding in was in an abandoned district on the verge of some middle-size Drachman town. The chance of someone stumbling upon them here was rather slim, but Edward preferred not to risk it.

Voss left about an hour earlier leaving Edward to his work. The man intended to get to the living areas of the town in the hope of getting information about the current situation in Amestris. Such news were rare, but once in awhile they would hear some gossip or a local newspaper would make a short note about the progress Drachma’s war campaign had been making - very vague, with no details and a handful of lies and propaganda, but at least it was something.

It was their usual routine since Voss had acquainted himself with the Drachman language well enough to manage without Edward’s help, so Edward didn’t have to risk showing his quite recognisable face on Drachman streets. Now with just Voss going there, the risk was minimal, and Edward wasn’t worried - Drachmans were not exactly talkative types, nor ones who would look at strangers long enough to be able to notice that there might be something off with them. Besides Mark’s face wasn’t that memorable compared with Edward’s, whose face, or rather a quite detailed description of it, as they discovered a few months back, was sent to most, or perhaps all, military posts within the country with instructions to shoot on sight.

Edward was sitting under the window, catching the poor light on the papers in his lap, when he heard a gunshot. It sounded too loud to brush it off as something, that might not have anything to do with them, and Edward moved away from the window, sitting with his back to wall. He folded the papers, putting them in the pocket of his coat, and reached to take the gun out of his bag on the floor. Another shot rang and Edward pointed the gun to the only doorway. He wondered if the shots were meant for Voss who was making his way back to their hideout, and he hold his breath waiting for another one, which would be a sign, that his friend might still be alive.

He heard rushed steps on the stairs and prepared to shoot and roll to the side to buy some time for the alchemy he might have to use if he misses.

“Edward, it’s me,” he heard Voss’s alarmed voice, before the man emerged from the stairway, rushing to his side and falling on the floor beside him. He was breathing hard, face pale, one hand squeezing the other shoulder, blood seeping between his fingers from the fresh wound.

“How many?” Edward asked, clapping his hands and planting them on Voss’s shoulder, making the
material of his coat tighten under the wound, stopping the bleeding.

Voss hissed through clenched teeth. “I don’t know. Ten? Fifteen?” he said with a shaky voice, looking at Edward with a frown.

Edward sucked in a breath feeling his heart dropping down in his stomach. Too many. And he was still not fully recovered after the last time. He closed his eyes for a short moment, thinking quickly. They couldn’t just rush from the building, and yet staying here was also not an option.

There was suddenly a hand on his, it squeezed his fingers briefly before retreating, and Edward shot his eyes open.

“I’m sorry, Edward,” Voss said quietly, looking at him.

“What?”

“It’s my fault, they must’ve noticed me, I—”

Edward interrupted him, grabbing his hand, feeling the anger rising up in him. “It is no one’s fault, Mark! Don’t you dare! We just need to think of the best way to escape, we don’t have to fight them, we can—”

It happened so fast it almost seemed inevitable. Perhaps it was. And maybe if Edward had more time he would even think that it was fate finally catching up with him there. But he didn’t have time and he didn’t believe in fate. Especially not in the one that let the war that took the lives of everyone he loved happen in the first place.

He almost thought that it was not fair, when the explosions ripped through the cold air, shaking the stones beneath his feet, wrenching the hand he was holding out of his grasp, bright flash blinding him and ground suddenly disappearing, and he was falling, falling. And the rest of the building was falling along with him. For a few moments his world was darkness, with white spots dancing in front of his shut eyelids, the almost deafening sound of several stores of stones crashing around him, and a feeling of weightlessness.

He wasn’t even able to do anything. Was he that tired? Had he become that weak?

He thought of Voss and that it was him who should’ve apologised before the man for dragging him here, not the other way around.

He thought of the papers with his work on the array. So arrogant and stupid, he had intended to save this world, and yet he couldn’t even save himself from a handful of angry people with explosives. The papers burnt him from where they were tucked in the inner pocket of his coat. He’d thought he was close, perhaps just a couple of months.

It didn’t matter now.

The ease with which he accepted what was happening scared him. He probably would think about it, but he didn’t have time. Something hard hit the back of his head and with a sharp pain his world faded.

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He opened his eyes and heard his own shallow breaths, the rubble a dead weight on him. His head was buzzing and shattering into a million pieces, and he couldn’t move. Above him was a night dark sky with a few stars here and there, or maybe it was his vision failing him, making him see those little
lights. He was so used to the frequent blizzards here that even on calm nights he didn’t look up at the sky.

He glanced to the side and there was a body beside him. He slowly moved his left arm, wincing at the pain running through his whole body at the movement. He stretched his fingers and reached to the thin strip of skin between the glove and the sleeve of the man lying beside him. The skin was still warm but he couldn’t feel a pulse.

Thinking that this should probably concern him more than it actually did he blacked out again.

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The body beside him was not warm anymore the next time he woke up. How long had he been lying here? It was still dark but this time there were no stars in the sky, hidden by the masses of snow raised up from the ground by a blizzard, which was getting stronger with every minute passed.

His face was covered with a frozen crust, the layer of ice and frost on the rubble around him. He couldn’t feel his left hip and the cold from the automail port on his right shoulder was almost reaching his heart, a fist with freezing needles tightening around it. Funny how ice sometimes burnt deeper than flames ever could.

But at least he was still alive. Another guy wasn’t that lucky.

With the help of his shaking hands and his alchemy he managed to crawl from under the rubble, sharp knives thrusting through his head with almost unbearable pain with his every move. He sat on the stone catching his breath and looked down on the dead body lying limp in the crashed stones. By the awkward angle of it Edward assumed the man had probably broken his neck, and thus didn’t suffer.

His face seemed familiar but Edward couldn’t bring himself to focus enough through the sharp pain in his head.

He stood up and slowly made his way out of the destroyed building. He wasn’t sure where he was, but it didn’t matter for him at the moment. He wandered the deserted streets for what seemed like hours until he found a building that looked relatively undamaged. On shaking legs he stumbled inside, falling on his knees. Hidden from the wind, he searched through his pockets. A stack of papers fell down on the floor and he just left it there. After a few minutes when he was almost desperate, his cold fingers finally groped something what he hoped to be a lighter. He pulled the scratched and worn off piece of metal from his pocket and almost cried with relief when he rolled the wheel and saw a small flame. He glanced at the papers on the floor but he knew it would not be enough, besides even through the haze of the concussion he knew he hardly carried just some garbage in the pocket of his coat.

He found some broken wooden chairs. He had to climb to the second floor for them, but it was probably for the better anyway - farther from the ground the floor was not that freezing.

In the light of the fire slowly eating frozen wood, he looked down on himself.

His chest was covered with blood and he could feel its sticky dried out crisp pulling on the skin on his face.

He was so tired... His head hurt.

He made a pillow out of his folded coat and laid down on the floor probably a bit too close to the fire than it was safe, but it was warmth and he didn’t care.
He fell asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow.

He woke up a few hours later, screaming, tears frozen on his cheeks, his mind shrieking in dire attempts to push through the sharp pain in his head to tell him something. But no matter how hard he tried to focus, he couldn’t remember what he’d dreamt about.

He felt that he’d forgotten about something important, but his head was hurting too much.

He fell asleep again only to wake up later to almost run down the creaky stairs and fall on his knees in front of the papers scattered on the floor. He collected them all, he counted them and checked them over and over again.

He knew he hadn’t lost any and yet he was curling into himself on the hard floor in some empty building in the middle of Drachma, pressing his notes to his chest, as if trying to cover a seeping hole in his heart which seemed to become a bit bigger, tears running down his face and mouth open agape in a silent cry for someone who was no longer there.

**Amestris, Führer’s mansion**

Ed reaches with his hand in the dark trying to turn on the lamp on his bedside table, almost pushing it down to the floor.

He sits and looks around in the dim yellow light, grasping for the pieces of the real world around him, *feeling* his pupils being dilated too wide even for the weak light filling the room.

He wakes Roy up. He rarely does it, even after nightmares, even after *these* dreams, letting the man catch whichever limited hours of peaceful sleep he can. But he needs it right now. He needs to forget.

Roy asks him something but Ed covers his mouth with a kiss, harsh and bruising. There is nothing gentle in his actions when he grasps a fistful of Roy’s hair and bits his lip.

Anything to forget the feeling of wrong hands on him, anything to forget the feeling of desperation and emptiness inside. Anything to forget how wrong it felt, yet wrapped up in such a thick layer of apathy and indifference that it physically hurt.

And it is not the fact of being with someone else that causes Ed such a distress, it is the motivation behind it, it is the throbbing pain that made *him* do it. But can Ed really blame him?

Sex has always been the best way to make you *forget*.

Roy groans and rolls them over, pressing Ed into the mattress with strong hands on his shoulders, roughly pushing his legs apart with his own.

Anything to forget the suffocating desire to forget *everything*.

Anything to forget actually *forgetting*.

He digs his nails in Roy’s forearm, he tugs at the man’s boxers pulling them down. Roy is mouthing and biting his collarbone and his neck, and Ed moans, and pulls him up to kiss him again. The kiss is too wet, there are too many teeth, and a faint taste of iron. Ed groans from the depth of his chest and grinds, lifting his hips.
He is being turned over and impatient hands are pulling his boxers down leaving them around his knees. There is a hand in his hair pulling his head back, and teeth and tongue on the back of his neck, and their shuddering breaths are filling up the air.

He raises his hips, bending his back, there is the quiet *pop* of the lid being open, and he whines.

The skin on his skull where Roy’s hand is pulling on his hair, hurts and burns, but he welcomes this pain, because it makes it real. And then there are fingers inside him, two at once, but they are too gentle, too slow and it’s not enough, and he is saying something filthy and stupid, reaching blindly with his hand to grab the one Roy uses to work him open. He wraps his hand around Roy’s wrist, pushing the fingers deeper, and Roy’s pulse is beating madly under the tips of Ed’s fingers.

The hand in his hair disappears and he falls down with his face in the pillow, letting out a needy moan. Roy tears Ed’s hand off of his and Ed grasps a fistfull of sheets instead, because the next moment Roy is gripping his hips hard, fingers digging in the flesh there, undoubtedly leaving bruises, and then Roy is pressing in him, and Ed moans loudly, almost screams, because there is so much of what needs to be just *screamed out* in his chest. He lifts his ass up towards Roy, urging him to move, and when he is fully buried in Ed, they both groan deep inside their throats, and there is a fist in his hair again, pulling it roughly.

Ed leans on his elbows, throwing his head back, letting hoarse moans and half screams escape him freely as Roy starts thrusting in him hard, flesh meeting flesh with sharp and wet sounds, and Ed shuts his eyes, sending everything but the feeling of Roy in and on him out of his mind.

Ed is close when Roy comes, and Ed feels him pulsing, spilling the warmth of his release inside him. But it’s too soon, and Ed whines, and rolls his hips up seeking desperately for more sensation.

“Roy, Roy, please, Roy…”

He is babbling, and whining, and almost crying in frustration, and Roy is saying something, but Ed can’t focus on his voice. And then his hips are being lifted up and he is standing on his knees, and the hand that was in his hair, reaches under him and Roy wraps his fingers around Ed’s length.

“It’s ok, baby, I’ve got you… I’ve got you.”

And Ed gasps when Roy starts moving inside him again, softer, slower, more gentle, but he is still there, and Roy’s hand is tight around him, warm and familiar, stroking, bringing him to his release with firm moves.

Ed comes in Roy’s hand with a strangled cry and collapses down on the bed, hair scattering all around him clouding his vision. He can feel Roy shift, and then there are soft loving kisses on his hips, where Roy’s fingers were bruising him. Warm lips and tongue move to his back and then up to his shoulder, and then Roy lies down beside him, pulling him closer by the hand around his torso. He brushes the hair from Ed’s face and Ed opens his eyes to Roy’s soft smile.

“I love you.”

Roy leans to catch Ed’s lips in his, the kiss is nothing like the ones they shared a few minutes ago, lips warm and soft and too gentle, and it holds much more meaning.

Ed pulls back and turns to his side to be fully facing Roy. He lets the man wrap his arm around Ed’s back, and brings their foreheads together, getting lost in the depth of Roy’s eyes, watching him lovingly with the slightest tinge of concern, but he doesn’t ask anything.

It’s been a long time since he stopped asking, seeing how much more painful such dreams had
become for Ed. And he just waits for Ed to tell him whatever he wants to share or don’t tell anything. He never asks. But Ed tells him almost everything anyway, leaving out the details he finds unimportant, and smoothing out those he thinks can upset Roy too much.

Ed is not sure how much of what he saw tonight he wants to bring up here and now.

“I’m sorry for waking you up,” he says instead.

“I don’t mind,” Roy answers, rolling on his back and tugging Ed along with him. “I’m sorry for hurting you,” he says then, brushing Ed’s hair gently.

“I needed this,” Ed answers quietly, burying his nose in the crook of Roy’s neck and breathing in his scent.

Roy kisses his hair softly but doesn’t answer, only tightening his arms around Ed.

“Roy, there is something…” Ed trails off and shifts, lifting his head to look up at his husband. “He felt so lost, Roy. Spending almost two years in that shithole, only he and Mark since the others died last year. He felt so lonely, Roy. He so desperately wanted to forget about everything. He...” Ed sighs, suddenly catching himself that he is pitying his own previous self. The anger at himself quickly replaces the off-putting feeling - he wouldn’t want anyone to pity him, and he is definitely not going to be the one doing that. If anything, that Edward didn’t deserve this. Respect, endless gratitude - yes. But not pity, never pity.

Ed rises on his elbows and looks at Roy, who is watching him with a mild curiosiy and slight worry in the dark eyes.

“He made a move on Mark,” Ed says, studying Roy’s face for reaction, but surprisingly not seeing any.

“Did it help him?” Roy asks simply, and there is sincere concern in his voice.

“It’s hard to say. Considering the circumstances…” Ed lies down again, his cheek on Roy’s chest. “I hope it did,” he finishes quietly, closing his eyes.

“Good,” Roy tangles the fingers of one hand in Ed’s long hair, gently caressing his back with the other, slowly coaxing him back to sleep.

“Roy?” Ed whispers, opening his eyes again, fighting the sleepiness.

“Mm?”

“Why did you just assume Mark didn’t reject him?”

Roy chuckles, the sound resonates through him, and Ed briefly but affectionately rubs his cheek at the man’s chest.

“Honestly, Ed, I am surprised it didn’t happen earlier.”

“The circumstances suck,” Ed mumbles not sure what to make of his husband’s words.

“The circumstances are exactly why I am surprised,” Roy says with a grim voice.

Ed tenses and rises on his elbows again, looking down at Roy.

“Roy, you know, I wouldn’t—” Ed’s mumbling is interrupted by a short kiss, and he sees a flicker of
understanding in Roy’s eyes. Roy presses their foreheads together and looks in Ed’s eyes.

“It wasn’t you. You don’t have to explain. And if anything, I am happy he was not alone all this time.”

“I would never—”

“I know, love,” Roy kisses Ed’s forehead and the tip of his nose.

“I love you.”

“I know, honey,” Roy traces his fingertips along Ed’s jawline and watches him with such intensity, that it makes heat rise up in Ed’s cheeks, and he is grateful for the dim light. So many years together, and the man can still make Ed’s breath catch in his throat just by looking at him like that.

“You know, there was nothing in the notes about how Mark died,” Ed says quietly as if fearing the words which he will need to say next.

Roy is silent for a moment and his hand around Ed tightens, pulling him closer.

“There is not much about Voss there in general, just a mention that he followed him out of Briggs.”

“He was with him almost till the end.” It’s probably just a few months now left, isn’t it? Ed takes in a deep breath and finishes, “He had a brain trauma. He forgot about Mark.”

Roy frowns and his face darkens. “Did they get separated?” he asks carefully, and Ed suspects that the man doesn’t really believe in this himself.

“The building they were in collapsed,” Ed explains, suddenly feeling nauseous. He frees himself out of Roy’s arms around him and sits up, tugging his knees to his chest. “He hit his head hard, lost conscious for several hours I think. When he woke up, Mark was already dead. He didn’t…” Ed swallows and rubs his face with his flesh hand. “He didn’t recognise him, Roy,” he husks, looking unseeing before him, feeling his heartbeat getting faster. “He just left the place, didn’t even remember him, that he was with him all this time, that he died,” Ed breathes in deeply and they sit in silence for a few moments. “I think, he might remember something at some point, but right now…”

Guess the universe was kind to him in the end. To all of them. He survived and got to finish the array. And he forgot that his friend, the only person that had been keeping him somewhat grounded and not that lonely for these last months, had died under the rubble. Such a small sacrifice compare to the rest of what he’d lost for letting him reach to them, not even giving himself a chance to actually see this new future they’ve built. Always worrying for others and not himself. And now having the opportunity to look at this from the outside, Ed begins to understand everyone’s concerns about him being too altruistic, too selfless, never thinking of his own well-being.

Roy shifts and sits up beside Ed. “This actually explains a lot,” he says thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?” Ed turns to him, but Roy is deep in his thoughts, eyes staring blankly at his own hands on his lap.

“The head trauma. It would explain why he seemed so unwell when I saw him,” he raises his head, and Ed tilts his brow in confusion at how relieved Roy looks. “I didn’t want to imagine what could have happened, to break you past the point of recognition. Head trauma is actually the most benign explanation, here.”

Ed considers his words for a moment. “There was plenty of shit happening, Roy.”
Roy turns to him and reaches to take Ed’s hand in his. “And yet I dare hope it wouldn’t be enough to damage your psyche so badly. You would persist in any circumstances.”

Roy’s smile is suddenly too sweet, and Ed falls back on the bed with a muffled, “Fucking sap,” drawing a low chuckle out of Roy.

Roy’s fingers are stroking his hand gently, and move to twirl the ring. The feeling reminds Ed of a distant memory he received through his other self.

“You know, he had a dream,” Ed says quietly, and Roy leans on his elbow to look down at him. “Never happened before. I mean, he probably had dreams before, but I haven’t seen them.”

“What was it about?” Roy asks, intertwining their fingers and pressing a kiss on Ed’s knuckles.

“How you proposed,” Ed answers simply and then, thinking of how their own engagement went, chuckles, “Guess you actually had balls in the previous timeline.”

Roy makes a pouting face and Ed starts laughing, but his laugh catches in his throat, when suddenly there are lips and teeth nibbling the shell of his ear, and Roy breaths out in the quiet deep voice that always makes the toes on Ed’s right foot curl, “I don’t recall you complaining about any particular parts of my body during that engagement sex you so eagerly requested.” Roy swipes his tongue behind Ed’s ear, and Ed bites his lip, suppressing a moan. “But feel free to tell me all about how my previous self was such a perfect gentleman.”

With these words Roy bites Ed’s neck and Ed gasps, digging his fingers, both metal and flesh, in the man’s shoulders.

“You took me to a fancy restaurant,” he says, closing his eyes, not even noticing abandoning the usual he they both decided to use while talking about the previous timeline’s Edward, too distracted by Roy’s hands roaming down his body.

“Mm,” Roy hums in between the kisses he plants on Ed’s chest. “How not very thoughtful of me. You hate fancy places.”

“I do,” Ed breathes out, feeling one of Roy’s hand slid down to wrap around his once again awakening erection. “But it was nice to see you actually proposing,” Ed tries to make his words sound mocking, but it is hard when Roy is kissing the sensitive skin near his hip bone, the hand around his length stroking it slowly, and Ed can only do so much to not let his voice shake.

“It sounds horribly like you prefer that proposal to ours.”

Ed rises on his elbows and looks at Roy. “I like our version better,” he says truthfully. I like everything now better, he thinks to himself, and when Roy looks up at him, pausing for a brief moment, he sees the same thought in the slight curl of Roy’s lips.

“Couldn’t agree more,” Roy says, resuming his caressing. “Besides, this time I didn’t have to spend money on the ring.”

Ed shoves him lightly in the shoulder before falling back on the pillow. “You cheap bastard,” he says halfheartedly, while Roy kisses his way down Ed’s stomach.

Ed shuts his eyes when he feels hot breath near his erection, but then suddenly all sensations disappear and he opens his eyes in surprise, to see Roy holding himself on his elbows in between Ed’s legs looking at him with an expression way too serious for such situation.
“What the hell, Roy?” Ed cries out, suppressing the urge to buck his hips.

“What?!” Ed’s voice pitches, but he is too aroused to care about how he may sound.

“Tell Voss.”

“Oh my god, Roy!” Ed cries. “Are we seriously talking about this when you are about to suck me off?!”

Roy’s expression softens and he smirks, “So eager, Ed.”

“Of course I’m fucking eager, get on with it already!”

Ed closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose in irritation, hearing Roy laughing softly, when the man takes him in his mouth, pushing all Ed’s complaints to the back of his mind. Ed is definitely going to give his husband a talk about proper timing. Later.

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It is a Sunday, and if Ed wanted to wait another day to talk with his friend in a more formal, or more like less personal surroundings of his office, he knows Roy would have nothing of it, and he has waited long enough already. Today, when Voss would’ve-died-if-not-for, is perhaps the most suitable day to do it.

Besides, the man will probably be happy to have this opportunity to announce he now has two birthdays, as Roy does, and bug Ed into giving him some stupid present or, Ed thinks in horror, a surprise party. He suspects that arguing the utter pointlessness of the surprise party being directly requested, which basically nullifies the surprise element in it, would hardly bring any results.

But first of all, Ed has no idea how to begin this conversation. He is driving to Voss’s place and fighting the unpleasant feeling of déjà vu, thinking that he’s probably had enough of those to last for the rest of his life. At least the previous conversation of the sort, when they informed Voss of the whole situation with the Notes From The Future, he didn’t have to have alone, as Roy actually did most of the talking. But now neither did Roy offer his assistance in this, nor did Ed want him to. It was too personal, his, not theirs personal, and he knows he has to do it himself.

He has no doubts that Voss will believe him, believing is not the problem in this case. Telling your closest friend, that if circumstances would be different, he would’ve died today, and, which Ed thinks is the worst part, would be forgotten by the one, who he basically entrusted his life to, - that is what worries Ed the most.

It is around noon when he arrives to the place. He parks the car and slowly walks up the stairs to the third floor. He freezes in front of the door to Voss’s apartment and frowns trying to come up with words to start this conversation. Apparently in his musings he spaces out, and he is startled by the door in front of him suddenly opening. He blinks and looks up in the familiar curious eyes.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your visit this beautiful summer day, Colonel?” The hazel eyes are laughing. Of course they are.

This is at least twice too long a greeting compared to what Voss tends to usually produce, which Ed takes as a sign of the man being in a particularly good mood. Ed scowls internally, hating himself for basically being a bearer of not so happy news, which can potentially ruin his friend’s mood. For a couple of seconds he contemplates putting off this conversation to some other day, but Roy’s voice
in his head calls him a coward, accelerating Ed’s decision making process.

“Couldn’t wait another day to see you,” Ed deadpans, stepping past his friend inside the apartment. “Don’t worry, Roy thinks I’m in the library,” Ed chuckles and then cringes internally, turning with his back to the laughing man - not the best time for jokes like that.

He walks to the kitchen, familiar with the place, while Voss is locking the door, and sits at the table.

“Actually, Mark, it’s Roy who asked me to talk to you,” he says when Voss enters the kitchen and proceeds to the oven, setting a pot to boil water for tea. “Not that I hadn’t been planning to do it anyway, but it’s just… Ah, shit,” Ed sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose, catching the brief change in Mark’s expression, and wonders, what kind of inappropriate joke the man had to push down seeing that Ed apparently is planning to discuss not joking matters.

Voss takes two cups from the cabinet and sits down across from Ed.

“Last time I saw you stuttering like that was when you were telling me about acquiring some tips from your future self.” The man doesn’t say anything else, looking at Ed with a slight tilt of his head and barely noticeable concern in his eyes, and the realisation, that Ed notices it only because he is so used to seeing this expression, fairly unusual for his friend, on the face of that other Voss - who would’ve died today if not for - is making it even more difficult.

Ed suddenly stills, looking blankly before him, struck by a thought which hasn’t occurred to him before - it shouldn’t be that difficult. It was just one more unfortunate thing that they managed to prevent here. It didn’t matter. He’s gone through this with Roy’s death, they even celebrated the day when he was alive compared to their previous timeline, as if it was the man’s second birthday. Then why does he feel so uneasy right now?

The clatter of the cup set in front of him on the table, pulls him from his musing. He reaches to grab it in his left hand and flinches as the hot porcelain burns his fingertips. He doesn’t take it in his automail hand, not trusting himself not to break it if he squeezes his fingers a bit too tightly in his tense state. Instead he puts both of his hands palms down on the table in front of him and locks his gaze on the dark liquid in the cup, watching the thin streak of steam raising up from the surface.

“Happy birthday, Mark,” Ed husks, not looking at the man, and struggling - and failing- to make some sense of the emotions and all kinds of thoughts raging inside his mind.

The following silence is a deafening ringing in his ears, and Ed can hear his own heartbeat, waiting for Voss’s reaction. He knows the man is smart enough to put two and two together and see what he meant by these words that would sound stupid, if not for the context.

The silence stretches for another moment, until Voss sighs, and Ed hears him taking a sip of his own tea.

“Do I get a present?”

The question is asked in a completely impassive voice, and Ed looks up, to see a small tilt of Voss’s lips on his calm face, but his eyes are too serious, watching Ed carefully under the half closed eyelids. This expression is confusing, and Ed suspects that he is the only one here who is taking this so close to heart, and the seriousness in his friend’s eyes is meant for his sake, and it doesn’t look like straight worry only because he knows Voss considers him capable to deal with whatever shit his life might throw at him, and also because he knows Ed hates making people worry.

He knows they still do though. And the more of the previous version of his life he sees, the more he
Ed begins to understand why. 

“How do you know?” Voss asks, when Ed is silent for too long. “It was not in the notes.” It’s not a question and Ed frowns.

“How would you know? They are written in the code. And it’s not like we told you every single detail of them.”

Voss drinks a bit more of his tea, and leans on the back of his chair, reaching to grab an ashtray and the pack of cigarettes from the counter.

“Well, I believe you’d throw me a party too, and not sit in my kitchen with such an expression on your face, Edward,” he answers, putting a cigarette in his mouth and kindling it with his lighter. Ed looks at it and he has to swallow down a wave of nausea.

“Haven’t seen this lighter before,” Ed hears himself saying, and almost laughs grimly at the lie in his words - he has indeed not seen this Voss using this lighter, but he is absolutely sure it is the same one Edward got in his possession from that other Voss. The same one the man so reluctantly gave Edward to heat up the needle to stitch his wound when they both were still a part of the Amestrian army. The same one Edward used to burn the telegram with the word “assassinated” and the date which Ed will probably never be able to erase from his memory. The same one, Edward almost used to burn a few crumpled sheets of paper which costed more than all the money in the world.

Ed recognises it, it is a big metal thing, with a simple military design, but it looks rather old, with chips and scratches which chaotic pattern Ed remembers so clearly from all the dreams he had. It is not an important information really, but his brain tends to soak any sort of it like a sponge. Forgetting what he doesn’t want to remember is what Ed finds more problematic.

Funny, that he thinks about it now, when today was the day when Edward was finally able to forget. 

His mouth is suddenly dry and his heart has apparently made its way up to his throat where it now got stuck. He takes hold of his cup and gulps. The hot tea burns his mouth and his throat, and Ed sucks in a breath, feeling his eyes watering. He is such a mess today. He hates it.

Voss leans forward on his elbows on the table and frowns in a mix of confusion and worry - there it is, the worry...

“I don’t carry it on me all the time,” he answers, tilting the lighter in question in his fingers. He glances at it thoughtfully and then raises his gaze to lock it with Ed’s. “It’s my father’s,” he finishes simply and falls silents.

Ed’s heart skips a beat and then proceeds with its frantic beating in his throat. Ed draws in a long breath and painfully wishes to not have to deal with all this right now. Or ever.

After a few years of friendship, Voss told Ed about his life as a child in exchange for Ed sharing with him his own sad story. Voss’s mother died giving birth to him and he was raised by his father. Mark spoke highly of the man. He was in the military too, and was killed almost in the beginning of the Ishval civil war when Mark was a teenager. Ed recalls him saying that he had to move to another town after that to some far relative of his, and that he didn’t have much left from his father, except for a couple of photographs.

“You didn’t tell me you had it,” Ed says carefully, suddenly feeling very very tired.
“I told you now,” Voss gives him a small smile and then looks back at the lighter, brushing his finger along the deep scratch on its surface. “They sent it later,” he goes on. “Said it was on him when he was killed. I remember it from when I was a kid, he used to spin it in his hand when he was thinking about something,” Voss accompanies his words rotating the lighter in his fingers. “It’s a memento, I rarely use it, only when I’m home. Don’t want to lose it,” he finishes and looks back at Ed with a soft expression in his eyes.

Ed doesn’t feel so good and he just can’t do it. He’s seen this lighter so many times in his dreams and had no idea that it could be in fact so important for his friend.

And come to think of it, what was a simple object, be it a valuable reminder or not, when the man entrusted his whole life and the lives of two of his subordinates to Edward. Or he just didn’t need it anymore, forced to quit smoking as it was not that simple to get cigarettes in the middle of the war. Or perhaps Voss just knew that he wouldn’t walk out of that war alive, and, basically leaving his whole life behind him in Amestris, he didn’t see his father’s lighter as valuable as it might have been for him in more peaceful circumstances.

The flaws in his own logic make Ed wince as if he was forced to chew on a lemon, and he mentally slaps himself on the face. As comforting as this lying to himself might be, he has realised a long time ago, that Edward from the previous timeline would hardly have survived for so long if he went to Drachma alone. Ed couldn’t thank that other Voss for that, but he can at least show his gratitude to this one by being honest with him.

“You still haven’t answered my question, Edward,” his friend’s voice pulls Ed from his thoughts and he focuses his eyes on Voss, watching him lighting up another cigarette - Ed hasn’t even noticed him finishing the first one. The man is clearly uncomfortable, though it is not showing on his face, but Ed knows - Voss, unlike Havoc, who is rarely even seen without a cigarette in his mouth, is very considerate about how much he smokes during the day, devouring cigarette after cigarette only when other usual means are not enough anymore to conceal his worry.

Ed gulps down the rest of his already cooled off tea and breathes out soundly.

“I see what happened in that other timeline my other self was from when I am asleep. Not every night though, I’d probably go crazy if that was the case, but I get some pieces now and then…” he drifts off, thinking what to say next - there is so much to explain now that he started talking about it.

Voss leans forward, clearly interested. “You dream… you have nightmares about that other reality?” he says quietly with a hint of sympathy in his voice, not even giving Ed a chance to pretend that such dreams can be anything less than that - nightmares.

Ed scowls. “Don’t begin on feeling all sorry for me now, Mark,” he says grimly. “And that is exactly how I said. I don’t dream about it, Mark. I fucking see it. Through his eyes,” he swallows and reaches for his cup, biting his lip when he realises he has already drunk all of its contents. Voss stands up and walks past him, opening the fridge behind Ed. A glass bottle with cool water appears in Ed’s field of view, and he grabs it from Voss’s hand with a short nod. “It’s real for me, Mark. It’s like I am really there,” he finishes darkly after taking a couple of sips from the bottle.

Voss sits in the chair beside him, watching him closely. “And when did it start?” he asks, breathing out the smoke through his nose, and pulls the astray closer, putting his cigarette out.

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Ed chews his lip, suddenly feeling a spike of guilt for hiding this from his friend for so long. “About… eight years ago I think,” he almost whispers searching Voss’s face for his reaction.

Hazel eyes widen for a moment, and Voss leans back in his chair, covering his face with both hands,
breathing out soundly, “Oh, Edward.” There are emotions Ed fails to distinguish clearly in the way Voss says it, and he waits for the man to say more, before choosing how to react. “Eight years, Edward, really?” Voss drops his hands, opening his face, and Ed is startled by the play of emotions on a face more used to express mild mockery half the time and boredom the other half. There is a hint of anger and, yes, some hurt, in his features, and Ed probably shouldn’t be surprised, but this face reminds him too much of the one he sees through the eyes of his other self, one that lately has always been too tired to bother trying to conceal strong emotions. He averts his eyes.

“I won’t apologise for not telling you earlier, Mark,” Ed says stubbornly, fixing his gaze on the bottle in his hand, watching tiny drops condense on its surface. Maybe he should’ve - apologised, or told him everything a long time ago, but Ed doesn’t regret that he hasn’t. It was his own burden to bear. That Roy knew was already enough and perhaps even more than Ed would’ve wanted, but it simply is hard to hide having nightmares like that from someone he shares a bed with.

“I was not expecting this, Edward.” Voss reaches for the pack of cigarettes again, but apparently decides against it, leaving his hand lying on the table. “But at least now I have my explanation, why you’ve looked like that these last couple of years.”

“Like what?”

“Like shit.”

Ed shoves Voss in the shoulder jokingly, relieved to see the corner of his lips tilting in a smile - small, but still there. “Oh, screw you, Voss! I look as gorgeous as ever.”

Voss raises an eyebrow and himself from the chair, moving to sit in the one farther from Ed and his automail fist. “Really? When was the last time you’ve seen yourself in a mirror?”

“Oh, not you too!” Ed shouts, slamming his palms on the table surface in frustration.

Voss chuckles, the mood of their conversation visibly lighting up.

“So, I died today.”

…scratch that.

It is not even a question, said just matter-of-factly, but Ed knows this is just a façade, and Voss probably used that little bickering of theirs to give himself some time to collect himself.

“Yeah,” Ed answers quietly. “Or at least you should’ve… Would’ve?..” Sixteen years, and this shit still refuses to be spoken of smoothly without causing him trouble in finding a correct phrasing. “Well, you are alive now, so,” he gives up, hoping that he will not have to go into the details.

Voss hums, throws a glance at the lighter lying on the table, and then turns to Ed with a smile.

“Thank you, Edward.”

Ed looks up at him, frowning. “What the fuck for?”

“For saving all of our sorry asses, of course,” Voss chuckles.

Not able to sit still anymore, Ed stands up and starts pacing in the limited space of the small kitchen. “I didn’t do that.”

“Didn’t you now?” Voss leans on the back of his chair, crossing his arms on his chest, and watches
Ed with an unreadable expression in his half closed eyes.

“Drop this, Voss,” Ed says dryly, noticing the way his friend is looking at him.

“I don’t know what you are talking about, Edward.”

Ed stops, lifts his hand and points at the man, moving his finger between his eyes.

“This analysing thing you do.”

Voss lets out a short laugh and runs his hand through his short brown hair.

“It’s a reflex activated when I hear bullshit,” he says with a lazy smile. “Can’t help it.”

“Oh, shut it, will you,” Ed drawls tiredly, sitting back in his chair. He drops his face in his hands and closes his eyes.

He hears a chair moving and Voss walking to sit in another one beside him. A hand grasps his shoulder - the metal one, and he can’t feel much, but the pressure is there, and as always in cases like that he can’t decide if he’s glad that his friend doesn’t care that Ed is half metal, or frustrated that what should’ve been a reassuring gentle touch, his brain processes just as a mild pressure on one of the plates with no other information.

“Edward, what is wrong?” the voice is quiet and serious, lacking the ever present hint of a smile in it.

Ed opens his eyes and looks at Voss impassively. “Really, Mark, you are asking me what is wrong?”

Voss drops his hand and leans on the back of the chair.

“I see.”

Ed just raises his brows in question.

“Well, if Roy hasn’t managed to dig through your thick skull until now, I don’t even see why I should even try,” Voss says with a half smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. The resemblance between this Voss and the one who died today is once again unnerving, and perhaps it shouldn’t be - they are the same man after all, but the urge to wipe away this wary expression from his friend’s face is an annoying itch on the back of Ed’s mind.

“The fuck do you mean?”

“I mean, Edward, that you are doing your favorite thing of being a sole martyr in all this,” Voss answers, his gaze too piercing, and Ed has to make an effort not to look away.

“You are not an alchemist, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh, I know about your equivalent exchange alright. But what you are doing now is nowhere even near equal.”

“I don’t need your pep-talk, Mark!” Ed snaps, standing up, and his eyes widen in a feeling of unpleasant familiarity at the words coming out of his mouth. He knows what Voss is going to answer before he hears it.

“Maybe it is time I actually give you one.”

Ed sinks down in his chair, staring blankly at his friend, and whispers heatedly, “You have got to be
Voss looks at him with a small tilt of his head, a question in his eyes flicks for a second, before changing to understanding.

“Looks like someone is having flashbacks,” he says with a bitter half smile.

Ed reaches to shove him in the shoulder, but his movement is slow and Voss easily dodges.

“Not funny, Mark,” he says hoarsely, not even looking at his friend.

“You have your husband for licking your wounds and looking at you with puppy eyes, I am here to deliver your ass some kicking.”

“My ass is being kicked alright without you partaking in it,” Ed says grimly. Like he needs Voss’s preaching in addition to Roy’s one and his one occasional self-loathing.

“I am happy for you and your fulfilling sexual life, but it is not the kicking I meant,” Voss says with a short laugh.

“That’s not what... What the hell, Mark!” Ed shouts, but Voss is just laughing.

Ed is looking at him, feeling how irritation slowly gives way to slight confusion and then all negative feelings just fade away, relief suddenly washing over him. His friend is alive, and laughing, and so different - in a good way - from how Ed sees him in those dreams-memories, and it’s good.

It’s really good, and Ed is suddenly angry with himself for always having this urge to mourn people who are still alive, and somehow it is now even harder with Voss in some way than it was with Roy. If anything, he had years and years to come to terms with knowing the exact date of Roy’s death - be it in the other timeline, but it still was quite unsettling. He had time to mourn that other Roy and convince himself that here and now this wouldn’t happen. And no matter how hard the dream of receiving that telegram hit him, he was quick to recover. And come to think of it - he was lucky to not see Roy’s dead body. But Voss’s death was somehow, maybe not really surprising, but too sudden and in a way unexpected. He saw him die. He saw and didn’t even recognise him, only after he woke up and his real self was once again in control of his mind, did he realise what he saw.

“Edward, what will it take to convince you that you are allowed to be happy about all the changes you’ve made and all the lives you’ve saved?”

“I don’t know,” Ed answers honestly. “I mean, I am happy. It’s just...”

“Just what?”

“He... I mean, well, me there, almost lost these notes once and today almost burnt them. I know it didn’t happen and he eventually managed to give them to Roy, but just thinking what if he didn’t succeed...”

“Never taken you for a person who can stoop to dwelling on ‘what if’s’”, Voss says with a smile.

“It is hard to ignore it, when I fucking see all those ‘what if’s’ brought to life when I sleep, Mark!” Ed raises his voice again in frustration and grasps the still half full bottle of water, downing it in one gulp, wishing for the liquid to be something more alcoholic. Maybe later...

Voss doesn’t answer, and Ed turns to look at him, giving himself this couple of moments of silence to just appreciate once again the difference between what they have here and now, and what it
could’ve been. Ed doubts he will ever stop mourning everyone who died in that past that didn’t actually happen. But at the same time he knows there will not be a day when he doesn’t feel breathtakingly happy for seeing his friends and loved ones alive and enjoying their peaceful lives.

Ed breathes out and smiles. “If you want presents, you are inviting us all to a bar, Mark.”

Voss lets out a small laugh and visibly relaxes. “Wouldn’t miss an opportunity to get drunk with the Führer of the country.”

Ed slams a hand on the table in in the pretense of anger. “Hey, what about me, asshole?! I thought we were friends!”

“You, Edward, are no fun to drink with. One would’ve thought you’d have learned to hold your liquor in your thirties,” Voss answers with a grin.

“I am one third metal, Voss!”

The man laughs openly and leans at the back of his chair, tilting his head. Ed doesn’t want to ruin the mood again, but even less he wants to have this conversation one more time later.

“You know, Mark,” he begins, once again feeling his heartbeat speeding up unpleasantly. “In the explosion where that other you died, other Edward hit his head, probably got a concussion.” Voss is watching him closely and Ed wonders how the man can be so calm while listening to him talking about his death. “He stayed unconscious for a few hours under the rubble, and when he got out of there and saw your body, he didn’t recognise you.”

There, it’s out. It’s the second time Ed is telling this today, and despite how unpleasant the story might be to tell, he feels somehow a bit better, when he doesn’t have to hold this information solely to himself.

“Was I smashed right in the face, that you couldn’t recognise me?”

Ed will need to talk him into using different pronoun when talking about this other timeline - speaking of this as if this happened to him and not another person, be it even another version of himself, is very unsettling for Ed, when he already has enough troubles trying to keep these two realities as far from each other as possible, which is not that simple considering the realistic nature of his dreams.

“No, but I think that Edward hit his head too hard.” Ed sighs and finishes, “I think he forgot you ever existed.”

Voss hums and runs his fingers through his hair. He doesn’t answer, and Ed opens his mouth to say something, but is stopped by the hand pressed to the lower half of his face. He looks in Voss’s eyes with irritation, but he’s surprised to see them laughing.

“What the hell, Mark?” Ed asks after shoving the hand away.

“You were going to apologise, weren’t you?” Voss says with a chuckle, stands up and goes to refill the teapot and set it on the oven again.

“No I wasn’t!” Ed shouts.

He actually was, and it’s frustrating how predictable he is. Perhaps he really needs to think about this martyr complex or whatever the fuck it is.
Voss collects their cups from the table, and throws both the cigarettes and the lighter in the cupboard drawer in the process.

“You know, you gave it to me,” Ed says, sliding back to the talking in the first person without even noticing it.

“What?” Voss asks without looking at him, busy with making them tea.

“The lighter. You gave it to me… I mean that other Edward,” he corrects himself, “a couple of years back. It was still with him today.”

“I gave it to you, hm,” Voss says under his breath, pouring the tea and setting the cups on the table. Ed doesn’t want to do the same mistake again, so he just waits for the liquid to cool off before attempting to drink it. Voss sits across from him, and carefully envelops the cup with his hands as if trying to warm his fingers. “I’m glad it didn’t stay on the corpse somewhere in Drachma, then,” he says and smiles lightly. “And I’m glad I was of help for you there. Well, before I died of course,” he finishes and then something flickers in his eyes and his smile disappears. “I’m sorry, Edward.”

“What?” Ed frowns. “Mark, it’s not your…” he starts but is interrupted by a wide sly grin on his friend’s face. “What the… You are messing with me!” Ed yells, and Voss starts laughing. Ed grabs an empty bottle and throws it at the man with half force. “Jerk!”

“How does it feel to be on the opposite side of this, Edward?” Voss catches the bottle and sets it back on the table.

Ed considers arguing, but decides against it. Voss stops laughing and just looks at him with a wide smile.

“I am so fucking happy you are alive,” Ed says honestly and mirrors his friend’s smile. *I’m so fucking happy we all are alive.*

Voss doesn’t answer, but it’s not really necessary. Ed grabs his cup and lifts it to his lips, taking a careful sip. The tea burns his tongue a bit, but he swallows it anyway, feeling the warmth spreading along his body, and his cheeks hurt from smiling. But it is a good hurting and even the burn from the too hot drink is nothing compared to the ice burns. And like almost every time after the dreams, when he would wake up lost and devastated, but then would see the changes they’ve made, he once again feels enough air in his lungs than he can breathe freely.

And this air is warm.

Chapter End Notes

Please talk with me about Voss!!!!!!

I just wanna say that it was heartbreaking to write that first part and then even more heartbreaking to reread it. I think I have a mild heart attack every time I read the ending of the first part. Please, share with me what you feel and think about this chapter!

Also. Guys. The next chapter will be the last one. Like *THE last one.* And I am super emotional and sentimental about it. And it might be another 2-3 or more weeks until I
manage to finish it actually... sorry! ^_^ You can follow me on twitter (the link is down below in the next section of notes) for occasional updates if you want. Thank you all so much for sticking up with me and this story.

UPD [11.12.17] I am having serious trouble catching the right mood for the final chapter. I have about 3k words written there already and I stuck. Just a quick headsup for you guys - I am not abandoning this fic, it most definitely **will** be finished, but I just don't know how much time it will take. I am ashamed and I'm sorry, guys, for making you wait.

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Credits to flailingthroughsanity for the line "Funny how ice sometimes burnt deeper than flames ever could". Thank you for letting me use it =)
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Chapter Summary

Edward was crying on the floor in the middle of the room in the house that was once his, surrounded by the shining lines of the array that would soon bring him to his death, with the man he once belonged to and who once belonged to him, standing at the side, startled.
And Edward was happy.

Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ

So, here is the deal. I’m gonna break the tradition and split this chapter in two, so this one is past-Edward’s pov chapter, and the next one will be present-Ed’s one and it will be the final one.
I decided to do that, because look at the size of just this part! I think Edward deserves his own chapter, and I want to let it all sink in before you proceed to reading about Ed.
This has absolutely nothing to do with trying to get this chapter out sooner - I’ve already made you wait for two months, so making it even longer would probably not make any difference.

I apologise for the long wait though, but this is the first time since I started writing 8 months ago, when I was writing 2-4k words, reading it and deleting the whole thing. And I did it probably three or four times. To say it was demotivating is to say nothing. This chapter spiked my anxiety and depression like nothing else. Turns out writing from the point of view of someone, who knows he is living his last few minutes, is seriously mentally exhausting (no shit), especially when you are not too mentally stable in the first place.

I hope you will enjoy reading it though and it won’t make you too sad (I actually cried, writing it, but I also cried when I learned, that elephants think that humans are cute, so I’m not the best representation of sanity).

Also, this video is probably the only reason I actually managed to finish this chapter...

RECAP (5 months ago):
Edward and Voss were crushed under the rubble, Voss died, and Edward hit his head, forgetting about his friend.
Ed talks with Voss and tells him about the dreams he’s been having.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
I remember that face.

It was a man, tears in his eyes and joy in his heart at finding someone still alive. He seemed so happy.

Almost as if he, not I, was the one who'd been saved.

Drachma, unknown location / Amestris, Central, Mustang’s house

He’d been dreaming about their living room. The one in the house which was just Roy’s at first and only then became theirs. He’d never considered the Führer’s mansion a home. It wouldn’t be so unusual for him - he’d lived the major part of his life not having a home and not willing to call any place one. Until the day he realised that Roy’s house was no longer just Roy’s.

Neither of them commented on it when they moved to the mansion after Roy became the Führer. It was as much a formality as a security measure. The huge mansion, with too many rooms, too high ceiling and too many people who were neither his family nor even his friends, had never become home to him or Roy.

He missed their house. He missed it even more here and now that he knew, that dreams were the only way for him to come back there if only just in his mind.

So he would dream about their living room, the room that was more special for him than any other in that house.

The room where Roy told him he loved him. The room where they kissed for the first time. The room, where they made love to each other after going back from that pretentious restaurant where Roy had asked him to marry him.

The room that he was planning to set as a location for the array he was working on, if he could figure out how to make his calculations precise enough for that.

So it was hardly surprising when he’d started dreaming about it more often now, when his goal was set and so close. He would always find himself standing in the middle of that room, sometimes the blurry lines of the array under his feet, sometimes just a bare floor, as if he just walked inside simply opening the door, like he had always done before.

The fire from the fireplace would make a couch in front of it throw shadows on the floor one time, the bright light of the summer sun would be making its way through the heavy curtains on another, making Edward squint his eyes, and he would almost feel the warmth on his face.

Sometimes, if he was lucky, he would even see him. Black haired head picking up from where the man would be sitting on the couch, a hunched figure reading something at the desk near the wall. He would hear the sound of the front door opening during the most vivid dreams, and the steps walking towards him. Roy would rarely talk, but when he did, he would never call him any of those stupid pet names Edward had hated - loved, craved for - so much. Not even ‘Ed’, but ‘Fullmetal’, and Edward would wake up with tears in his eyes.
“It is so quiet here”.

“Yes, it is.”

He would know that these were just dreams most of the days. He would think that it was happening for real the nights when his headache didn’t allow him to distinguish even if he was sleeping or not, and later in the morning he would stare at his mismatched hands in a few minutes of paralyzing horror, trying to remember his own name.

He would work on the array when he felt better and not like he was going insane. And he would think just sometimes, that it had been several months already since he hit his head, and shouldn’t the headaches have already passed, and not getting stronger, appearing more often, fading his vision, clouding his conscious, erasing the line between reality and dream, and perhaps there was something growing in his head, preventing his brain to work as it used to, and his time was growing thin, but he was close, so close, and after that it wouldn’t even matter...

He almost lost the papers once. All of them: the ones with the information he was planning to hand Roy, and those with his work on the array. He almost lost his mind when he couldn’t find them for a good two hours. He couldn’t remember where he had put them, and it was driving him crazy. He found them on the table in the abandoned cellar he had been living in for the last few days. The table, where he had left them the day before. He could’ve sworn they hadn’t been there just a minute ago.

He got angry at himself that day.

He wondered once if such alchemy that could take only his mind back, throwing it in his own younger body, existed. He let himself a few moments to marvel at the thought of being there himself. Living himself through this second chance, seeing his brother again, being with Roy again...

Just a few moments of dreaming about it before he forbade himself to even entertain such thoughts in his head, not that it was possible anyway.

He wasn’t doing it for himself. And there was no place for him there, then. He wouldn’t rob his younger self of the life he might have. If of the two of them one must be erased from existence, it should be him - a shadow of his former self, just a shell of a man, so broken and hurting inside, so tired and so alone - they wouldn’t want him there, he wouldn’t want them to know him like that. He even once thought of slightly changing the time he chose for the array, so Roy wouldn’t have to see him like that, and he could just leave the notes there along with the letter explaining it all, and he knew, this would be enough. But the urge to see him once this last time was too strong.

He still remembered that day, it was the memory he was holding onto so hard, he hoped if he forgot it all that would be the only one left. It was the day almost seventeen long years ago, when he decided for himself, that he couldn’t run from his feelings anymore, and even if Roy didn’t want him, he would still be near, he would still support the man and, if possible, wouldn't leave his side. It was the day he came back from his travels and Roy met him on the platform, because Edward had asked - demanded, in his usual manner - him to. They hadn’t gotten together for two more years after that, but Edward still considered that day the turning point in their relationship.

And he knew Roy would be at home at the time he chose for the array to sent him to. And he would see him. The Roy who was still his in a way, the one he still remembered and knew, the one before he would answer that past - other, new, fresh - Edward’s call and would go to meet him at the station. It was beyond stupid being jealous of his own self, but Edward thought that if he could have something good for himself before vanishing like he had never even existed, he wanted to have this, just a few minutes, with his - and not yet, and not anymore - Roy, before he became someone else’s.
And Edward was happy to give his younger self this chance, to live this again, but differently, to experience all the good he had had, and never see the bad. He would make a deal with Truth, he would give it his whole self, not that it mattered - he would cease to exist if the plan worked anyway. He would give them all this chance, and would never see that perfect life he hoped they would be able to achieve, but he almost didn’t care. If neither his younger self, nor Roy would have to see all the horrors he’d lived through these past few years, it would all be worth it.

He would dream of Truth some nights. Of the endless bleakness, and enormous Gates. Of the numerous black hands, tearing him apart, and the white figure whose face held no features but a wide mocking grin.

He would dream of him promising it everything and it letting him through - to the warm lights of the familiar house so many years ago.

He would dream about failing to convince Truth and never going anywhere beyond the white empty realm, his knowledge useless, and he just another victim of the war that would never end.

“You can take anything.”

“Anything?”

“I'll give you anything.” Everything...

And in the days when his mind was clear, he would think, that he would not be able to distinguish the reality from these dreams.

They almost got him that day. The day when he planned to finally do that. He’d tried several times before - or were those just dreams? - but there had always been something missing in the array and it had never worked. He was sure this time. This would be it, the day when he would finally end this.

But someone recognised him on the streets, and he barely escaped when several drachman soldiers ambushed the house he had been hiding in. If he wasn’t so exhausted, he would’ve fought, but he couldn’t risk his life now - not now - so he ran.

And while making his way through the grey drachman streets, his steps heavy, his boots splattering a filthy mix of melted snow, dirt and blood - grey and red, two colors that seemed to be the only ones left in this world - he let a bitter laugh slip from his throat - funny, how he never cared too much about his own safety when he’d been surrounded by people who loved him and worried about him, but now, when he had no one, he was fleeing with his tail between his legs, shackled by the goal he’d set for himself, the goal that most certainly wouldn't even let him make it out alive.

There were days when he felt as if he was standing at arm’s length from himself, watching his life over his own shoulder.

There were days when he was painfully present and though it was the only time when he could really concentrate on what he had been doing, those were the worst days.

He managed to escape, and didn’t even lose any of the important papers he was clutching in his arms. He found another empty house and hid himself there. The short time for drawing the array on the floor was the only thing he needed.

He cleared the floor from the dust and garbage, only then noticing that his left sleeve was soaked with blood. He took off his coat and ripped off the sleeve to make a bandage over what he thought was a bullet wound. Funny, he hadn’t even noticed that one of the shots got him.
He took the chip of a brick and began drawing the array. The pain in his left arm was just a mild tingling at the side of his conscious and hardly more bothering than his growing headache. He had to finish this before it was so strong that it would knock him out.

The array done, the notes in his pants’ pocket, Edward was standing with his feet near the thick dusty red lines on the floor, squinting in pain and pressing his right palm to his forehead, in a futile attempt to ease up his headache with the cold of his automail hand — it had never helped before, but he never stopped trying. The sides of his vision were starting to get blurry, and he hissed in pain and frustration — he couldn’t allow himself to lose his concentration now.

He raised a single sheet of paper he had been holding in his left hand to his face, comparing the array on it with the one on the floor, checking if he didn’t do any mistake. Once sure, he took the paper in his right hand and with his left pulled the lighter out of his pocket.

This lighter reminded him of something - someone. Sometimes, when he wasn’t dreaming of Truth and Roy, he would see another face in his dreams, but when he woke he would never be able to put a name to it. Edward knew he hadn’t come all this way alone. By now he remembered that three more people had been accompanying him. They had probably died sometime ago, and he couldn’t remember either how it happened, or even how they looked like — the faces fading away every time he would wake up.

It should be bothering him - he had always cared for his friends, and forgetting them should’ve felt horrible. But he was becoming surprisingly dull in his emotions these days, distant from his own self.

Edward clicked the lighter and watched the crumpled dirty sheet of paper that costed more than the whole world itself, burn to ash. His fingers trembled when the tongue of fire touched them and he dropped the tiny paper corner on the floor. He gave himself a moment to fix his gaze on the ash under his feet, thinking absently that it was the third time in his life that he was burning something feeling that it was killing a little piece of himself somewhere deep inside.

He stepped forward, and the ash, mixed with red brick dust, swirled in a small cloud around his feet. He took another two steps and stopped in the middle of the big array.

His headache felt like razors behind his eyes, he didn’t feel the touch of his right hand on the left palm - too numb already from the cold, or maybe he’d made the bandage too tight. The clap was quiet in the distant noise of a winter storm outside the half-ruined walls. He crouched and placed his palms on the floor, the lines began to glow bright blue the same instant, and he closed his eyes.

A short second had passed and he felt his body being dragged somewhere, numerous hands grabbing on him, pulling him down. It was familiar and there was something sick in this familiarity. It shouldn’t be like this. No one had to experience this even once, let alone more.

He opened his eyes again when the hands disappeared and the silence was so absolute, it was ringing in his ears, and he couldn’t even hear his own breathing.

He thought he had been used to the whiteness around him, spending so much time among the Drachman snow. But there was something different in the whiteness that surrounded him now. It was the whiteness of non-existence, the dragging bleakness of nothing, the absence of everything that could have a name in the human world.

He turned around, and the mass of enormous Gates was leaden and oppressive. The white figure the size of a human was standing, unmoving, at the feet of it, the entity that had no form and only took one in some show of cooperation, that was not the case here, had never been.
Introductions were not needed, and once Edward thought of it the voice that sounded from nowhere and everywhere and in his own head at the same time said,

"Long time no see, Edward Elric. What is it you are going to give me now?"

"Anything." It was too much like his dreams, and how many times had he spoken these words to the shadow with no face already? Was he dreaming again?..

"You can take anything," he repeated firmly, knowing the kind of anguish that could tear such words from a man’s mouth. “But let me through first. It won’t take long. This alchemy will drag me back here in no time.”

"Anything?" The Truth repeated as if not hearing the rest of Edward’s words.

“I'll give you anything.” Everything.

He must be dreaming it again.

“So be it.”

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The warm street light was seeping through the half blinded windows, blending with the cold blue shine of the lines under his feet. It was like the numerous dreams he’d had before, and he glanced at the fireplace, feeling a spike of disappointment at not seeing a fire there. Shame, he liked fire. It reminded him of Roy, of the warm evenings spent together on the couch in this room.

He heard the door opening and then closing quietly. A pair of steps that sounded vaguely familiar — wasn’t it bizarre, eerie even, that after all that time and everything he’d been through, he could still remember the sound of his steps? — followed from the entrance and stopped right after the threshold of the living room. Edward was lucky - it was this type of dream again, where he got to see him.

He didn’t turn around right away. Like always when he was dreaming of Roy, he liked to savor the moment, listen to his voice at first — how he loved his voice! Why hadn’t he ever told him that when he had a chance? Or had he?.. — and only then turn to him. He would look differently in those dreams every time, sometimes exactly how Edward saw him the last time — slightly tired, but still irresistible, handsome man in his forties; sometimes it was the younger version of him, the one Edward met all those years ago, when Edward was a broken 12-year-old with the soul of a man so much older, and Roy was so young, so full of ambition, energy and belief, that if he worked hard enough he would fix this world.

Edward had never been able to decide which one was more painful to see.

“It is so quiet here.”

Edward would always say it in his dreams, because it really was - quiet. It was different from the anxious stillness of his nights in Drachma, when he was curling into himself in the corner of some abandoned house, trying to warm himself, and always failing, two automail limbs spreading the cold through his body. He would be falling into a sticky short-lived sleep, that would not bring him any rest, only to jerk himself to full awareness when hearing — or thinking that he heard — any suspicious sound. It was worse on the nights full of the howling blizzard, that could probably cover even the sound of a gunshot, or explosion, and would definitely not let him hear the steps of drachman soldiers breaking in his petty shelter, to kill him, to burn his notes, to destroy the last chance to save this world from devastation…
His mind was so tired.

Here, now, it was a soothing, safe quiet. The one that didn’t hide enemies under the pretense of fake calmness, because there were no enemies here, there were only him and Roy…

“Who are you and what are you doing in my house?”

Edward let himself curl a corner of his lips in a semblance of a smile, and turned slowly.

Roy was young this time, exactly the age he should’ve been if Edward’s calculations had been correct and the array sent him exactly on the day he’d planned for that. Perhaps it really worked this time... Edward had long abandoned any attempts to distinguish the reality from the products of his mind — he knew what he needed to do, he would eventually get there, even if he had to first walk through a thousand dreams like that and twice more dreams where he was watching Roy die. It didn’t matter. He knew if he forgot everything, if his brain became damaged to the point where he wouldn’t be able to even remember his own name, one thing would always stay in the focus of his mind — he had to finish the array, and fix it. Anything else didn’t matter.

Roy was wearing his blue military uniform, as usual, one white glove with his red array already on his right hand, that was raised in alert, fingers ready to snap, black hair in a slight disarray after the long day in the office. The man Edward once had fallen in love with, and never stopped loving since then.

Dark eyes widened in surprise and then squinted, looking at Edward closely. Gods, he was so handsome. So young, full of life, a bit tired, but it was nothing like how Edward saw him last time, worn out under the responsibility of leading the country, under the stress and fears the sudden war had brought. With the grief and desperation in his eyes when he was seeing Edward off to Drachma. As if he had known they would never see each other again.

Edward only wished this look in his eyes, that had forever been imprinted in Edward’s memory was different. Maybe that’s what had doomed them — they hadn’t believed in a good end for them right from the start…

“Fullmetal?”

Why would he always had to call him that? Edward had been long past the few first times when Roy calling him that in his dreams caused a spark of warm pleasant nostalgia. Right now he just wished to be Ed for him again. And all those silly cheesy pet-names Edward hated and loved so much.

He sighed and averted his eyes from the man at the door, turning his back to him again. “Ah, it’s you, Roy. Told you not to call me that.”

He looked outside the window again. It was almost a ritual now even, Edward couldn’t fully control his dreams, but there were some things in which his subconscious agreed to meet him halfway, and this was one of it — Roy would always start calling him with his name after this moment.

“What are you doing in my house, what is this array for, and shouldn’t you be in Creta now?”

What...

Edward’s head snapped up, and he turned abruptly, looking at Roy in disbelief. He was desperately trying to make sense of the words through the haze of his headache, but what he knew for sure, was that Roy never mentioned the array in his dreams before. Might it be…

“Roy?” His own voice sounded strange and too small to him. He felt his body jerk to cross the
distance between them, but he forced himself to stay where he was — if there was a chance for this to be real, crossing the lines of the array would result in it activating again before he was able to hand Roy the notes. He couldn’t risk it.

“I’d say you look like hell, Fullmetal, or like you’ve come through one,” Roy said with a smirk, and Edward could do nothing but look at him with wide eyes, blinking confusingly, as if trying to brush away the haze from his clouded mind. It was like walking through a thick fog, every coherent thought demanded an abnormal amount of concentration from him.

He wanted to look down at himself — last time he remembered, he wore his own ripped off sleeve as a bandage for his injured arm, was it still there? And if it was, then could it be that it was not a dream, but...

“Or were you tricked into taking some magic pill with the promise of making you taller? Well, I hate to break it to you, but instead you just aged without gaining height at all. What an irony, Fullmetal, and here I thought you were a prodigy. You must’ve been really desperate.”

A choked sound left Edward’s throat against his will, and he felt himself trembling. The long forgotten sensation spread along his body, tightening his stomach and forcing him to let the sound he thought he’d already forgotten how to even produce, out of his system. Before he realised what was happening, he was laughing. The air was bursting in his lungs only to be forcibly pushed back out. He threw his head back, feeling his whole body shaking in laughter, that was leaving him breathless. He was choking on air, hot tears making wet trails down his face, his knees bent under him, and he fell down on the floor, dropping his face in the two mismatched palms, howling, shuddering in hysteria, trying to push at least some air in his lungs. He was aware he was saying something, but couldn’t hear or care what, the only thoughts on his mind, it worked! And Roy, Roy, Roy!

Roy was here. Roy was real. He was alive, standing just a couple of meters from Edward. And Edward was here too, and the array worked, and he hadn’t imagined all that, he hadn’t talked with Truth in just his dream — it was real. It was almost impossible to comprehend, after all this time, after all those times when he saw it over and over and over again, hoping for it to be real only to wake up still in Drachma, freezing, with a throbbing headache behind his eyes.

Freezing… He only just noticed that he wasn’t cold here. There were no sharp tendrils spreading through his body from the metal of his automail limbs. His body didn’t feel numb with cold, and the only pain was the one from his injured arm and the ever present headache.

Finally here, finally able to see the man he loved so much one last time, the tension accumulated in his body all these three long years, all the pain, all the worry, left him, leaving him boneless and tired even more than he had been. But for once in what seemed to be forever for him, he was experiencing something he thought he had already forgotten.

Edward was crying on the floor in the middle of the room in the house that was once his, surrounded by the shining lines of the array that would soon bring him to his death, with the man he once belonged to and who once belonged to him, standing at the side, startled. And Edward was happy.

This was impossible to fully grasp, and he decided not to even try — his brain would need much more time than he had to fully realise it, so he just accepted it as it was.

It was real, he really made it.

And it meant that he had only so much time to finish what he’d started before the Truth would reach its hands to him, to rip his body into a million pieces.
Forcing his body into submission, he breathed in, squeezing his eyes for a short moment, and slowly rose to his feet, not even bothering to wipe his wet face. “Sorry,” he said breathlessly, now that the first shock was gone, feeling slightly ashamed by his reaction. He didn’t want Roy to see him like that, even if he wasn’t the Edward he knew, even if he appeared almost as a stranger to him.

It was ironic, that the fear, hurt and the lack of any hope in his Roy’s eyes was the last thing Edward remembered of him, and now the last thing he would be remembered by was the exact representation of everything his husband feared, letting him leave Amestris.

Edward looked up at this Roy, drawing in a shuddering breath. He wanted nothing more than to step to him and feel his warmth, inhale his scent, wrap him in a tight embrace and never, never let go. But he had to stay where he was and the remains of his sanity should be enough not to reveal to Roy more about the future than was necessary.

Roy asked him about the array under his feet, and Edward had had the speech prepared, but only bits and pieces of it were floating in his damaged brain now. He started to explain, as clear as he could, slipping now and then into unintelligible mumbling under his breath. He dozed off at some point, staring unseeingly before him, suddenly losing the feeling of reality, the view before his eyes blurring at the edges.

“…to what do I owe the pleasure?” Roy’s question startled him, he blinked, discovering with surprise, that Roy was now standing in another end of the room, pouring himself a drink.

“I had to see you.”

It was an automatic answer, that hardly was what Roy had asked about, but it was true. He wanted to give himself this little something before the end, a reason to smile perhaps before closing his eyes forever. Or maybe, after spending so much time alone in an hostile country, after going through all this, he was scared to die alone too, with no one left to have a memory of him, like he had never even existed in the first place.

He’d started his life intending to make a difference, he’d helped to save the world from a self-proclaimed god, and he kept living in the hope, that he was making good use of his alchemy. And then the war started, and he’d never really had the time to stop and think, if all the good he was trying to do was enough for him, or if there was at least a small part of him that wanted to leave a mark of his existence as well.

He didn’t have children. He and Roy had once or twice talked about having a kid through surrogate, but it never went past the talks, Roy probably sensing his hesitation. They joked — bitterly — about adopting an orphan or two after the war. They had still hoped that it would be over. But then it never was, and all their friends had died, Roy got murdered, and Edward still had no information about his brother and his family’s whereabouts. He remembered the day when he first caught himself thinking, that he didn’t feel anything already at the perspective of his brother being long dead. He had been so numb, from all the deaths and the cold, but that day he realised for first time that his insane idea might actually work. And he would save them all, and both Roy and Al would be living in the world where they wouldn’t have to worry about surviving another day.

He had an absolute trust in Roy and his own past self, to use the information he would provide to prevent the war. They would have his notes — he was almost sure that he hadn’t forgotten to include anything crucial in them — he’d forgotten so much these last few months, he wasn’t sure how he knew it, but it was a nagging feeling of something missing from his memory, the blanks and empty spaces where there should’ve been something, but these notes were the one thing he was sure of. He remembered someone helping him with them, and he felt grateful and only wished he could place a face and a name to the voice, that was still a lingering distant memory on the verge of his conscious.
But no matter how hard he tried, it was no good, and he only hoped that perhaps his past self would meet this person and grow to appreciate them.

Roy suddenly said something utterly ridiculous, probably trying to ease up the tension, or covering his own confusion. Edward knew it was a lot to take in, but as much as he wanted to sympathise, he simply didn’t have enough energy to spare. He snapped and yelled at him, he wanted to say more but his lucidity was slipping from his grasp, and he frowned trying to take hold of his mind.

“...Admit it, you were just missing my young handsome face, I bet I am quite old in the time you came from.”

Roy was smiling at him, with this plastic smile that held nothing of what he really felt at the time. His words were too close to the truth, but Roy hardly realised that. He was guarded, but tried to seem relaxed, and Edward could easily read through him. It’d been such a long time since Roy looked at him like that. It was understandable, and yet it was just another sign that this was not his Roy. And that’s why he forced himself to form the answer that Roy was probably expecting, though it hurt him to play this game, but it seemed fair, at least for as long as his mind let him be in control of what he was saying.

“That would be stroking your ego too much.”

This was entirely not how Edward expected it to go, yet he hadn’t had any specific expectations anyway. But this conversation felt more like one between strangers — the distance Roy set between them felt even bigger than those almost seventeen years that separated this day from the one Edward came from. Half of his life. Funny, he only now realised he was even older than this Roy. How bizarre...

“I’d forgotten that you used to talk with me with your masks on.” It was not what he came here to discuss, but it was hard to resist commenting on it. He hissed in a breath and wiped his face with his flesh hand tiredly.

“You are married.”

Edward took his hand away from his face in confusion. The ring, right, perhaps he should’ve taken it off before coming here — he didn’t want to reveal much, they would figure it out by themselves sooner or later, and he wasn’t sure he could talk about it now without losing the rest of his sanity anyway. But there was no time, and he had forgotten.

And he actually had never taken off the ring from his finger before. Even after Roy’s death it felt wrong.

And now this Roy was asking him if he was married. Was he? He was a widower, but could he actually say this outloud?..

“Yes.” The answer was weak and sounded like a lie, but Edward forced himself to keep looking in Roy’s dark eyes.

Instead, it was Roy who finally averted his. “Is it Ms. Rockbell?”

“Winry is married to Al,” Edward answered semi-automatically, locking away the part of himself that would be hurting at these words. “They have two kids, the older had his fourteenth birthday two months ago actually... I hope...”

He realised too late that just a minute ago he had told himself he would not be revealing too much, and yet here he was. He cursed and pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers, pleading to the
remnants of his reasonable side, that hadn’t been affected yet by whatever it was in his brain that had been slowly destroying his mind, to step up.

“Well, that’s interesting. Never would’ve thought I’d live to see Edward Elric in his thirties.”

You didn’t!

“SHUT UP!”

When the scream was out, hanging between them heavy in the air, Edward wasn’t sure who the words were addressed to — Roy, who didn’t even know what he was talking about and how much his words were hurting Edward; or himself, to stop himself from spitting out everything that Edward had been storing deep inside all these years, never letting it out, all the pain, and desperation, the utterly unbearable ache, that was burning and eating him inside every time he only just thought of Roy, every time he looked at the wedding ring on his finger. He couldn’t afford it more than he didn’t want to burden Roy with this — he simply would not be able to stop, until he laid himself bare, with every cry threatening to burst through the remains of his self-control, pulling on his nerves and his very soul, until nothing of him was left.

put all that on Roy — he simply would not be able to stop, until he laid himself bare, with every cry threatening to burst through the remains of his self-control, pulling on his nerves and his very soul, until nothing of him was left.

He couldn’t do it now, or ever. His life didn’t belong to him, not anymore.

He was breathing heavily, fists clenched at his sides, eyes tightly shut, trying to compose himself, when the sound of Roy’s voice, suddenly so different from how he had been talking to him before, made him open his eyes and look up.

“Edward.” There was a shadow of the usual tenderness Edward had used to hear Roy say his name with, and it somehow made Edward crawl out of the depths of his mind, getting himself back to the task he had to complete.

“We don’t have much time. The array I used will reactivate itself in a few minutes. I was trying to make it work longer, but some elements just refused to cooperate and… Nevermind! Damnit, Roy!”

He started pacing in the limited space inside the array’s edges, glancing at Roy now and then to make sure he was listening.

Pulling the notes from his back pocket, Edward explained to Roy what they were. They both had to step closer to the array’s borders, so Edward could hand Roy the papers. And once Roy took hold of them, Edward, acting more on a whim, than actually thinking what it was he was doing, covered Roy’s hand with his.

The warmth of their joined hands was spreading to his whole body, awakening his every cell.

“Roy, I…”

I missed you so much.

...this little contact, through the thin fabric of the gloves Edward had used to worship so much was more than he could’ve dreamed of, and he thought that it would even be funny, if it wasn’t that heartbreaking, that now at this moment just the joining of their hands felt better than the joining of their whole bodies. Because the distant memories of their life together were so blurry, they didn’t even seem real. But this time - his hand tight on Roy’s - this was here and now.
And Roy was still alive.

“Sorry, I just… Haven’t seen you in a while”. More than three years in fact and for more than half of this time Roy had been dead.

He had to let go of his hand eventually, and he frowned, concentrating on not letting this affect him too much - he still owed Roy explanations.

“It started with the assassination of the Führer…”

His mind was clearer now, letting him focus on what he was saying, and he was thinking he could do this without repeating the meltdown from before, but the trembles started running through his body in the middle of his explanations, and he wrapped his arms around himself, trying to hold himself together.

What a view he was right now probably, in dirty clothes, covered with dried stains of blood, half of it not even his own. His hair, that once had been his pride, now much shorter, was pulled in a messy bun. He wasn’t sure about his face, he hadn’t seen his own reflection in a very long time, but judging by his constant lack of sleep, he probably could consider himself lucky, that Roy had been even able to recognise him.

He was almost curling into himself, stuttering on his words — he probably was the perfect representation of what he was saying — everything that was wrong in the time he came from.

He inhaled sharply, bracing himself for his next words, still not over what had happened back then. “And they said the Führer had been murdered. That was… That was more than two years ago. I know, if I was there I’d keep this from happening, Roy, but at that time it was necessary for me to go, I couldn’t stay, I couldn’t…” He trailed off and squeezed his eyes shut. It was harder than he thought it would be — to say all this out loud, to drop this information on Roy’s head, to simply stand before him, looking him in the eyes, and not to begin pleading for his forgiveness, that he’d left him in Central and hadn’t been able to save him. It was on the verge of being impossible, saying all this and not add, that it was Roy who had been murdered, not some faceless Führer, but Edward’s husband; not to say I love you, Roy, and I missed you so much.

Edward was straining himself not to say anything on top of what was absolutely necessary. It was draining him from the remains of his energy, and he felt his control slipping, emotions devouring him, and he almost sobbed at his next words, too tired to stop them from leaving his mouth.

“They sent me a telegram saying you got murdered, Roy... A fucking telegram! From someone with a name I’d never even heard! And it is what it’s like now - only names I haven’t heard, people I don’t know, because the ones I know are ALREADY FUCKING DEAD!” He was screaming now, clenching his fists on his sides. “Everyone I knew is fucking dead or missing, Roy! And I hadn’t seen you or heard from you for more than a year, Roy, a year! And then they are sending me this fucking piece of paper! I couldn’t even see you! I couldn’t… I couldn’t even bury you.” His voice is barely a whisper at the last words. “Sometimes I feel that I am losing my mind, Roy. I haven’t had normal sleep in an eternity. I haven’t seen a familiar face for so long… I am tired, I’m so tired, Roy, I’m not even sure this is really happening now, or maybe I finally went nuts, or I am just lying on the floor in that fucking cold basement, passed out and slowly dying and this is just my mind playing tricks on me...”

It was strange, talking about his fears out loud, admitting not only to himself but to someone else what kind of anguish he’d been living in until now. He was looking at Roy, wishing for his vision to be less blurry, so he could see him better, but something wet was running down his face and he realised he was crying. His body, pushed to the limits and further more than once, refused to
cooperate and hold all this pain locked inside for longer.

He pleaded Roy to fix it and he really needed to hear him say, that he would. He’d never doubted anyway, but there was something in these words, that set his mind to peace, relieving him from this task he had been betting everything on for so long.

“I will, Ed, I promise.”

He only noticed that he was twirling the ring on his finger, tugging it off and pulling it back on, when the array under his feet started glowing brighter.

He looked in Roy’s eyes, that were watching him so closely, like they always did, deluding himself for one short moment, that he could see the shadow of the warmth and love that he used to see in the depths of these dark eyes. Perhaps it really was there, but it wasn’t his to take, and his heart was aching at the thought, refusing to realise that the man before him didn’t belong to him.

Refusing to realise, that it was living its last few moments.

He tugged his wedding ring from his finger a few moments before the array would drag him back to the Truth and threw it to Roy. The little gesture he didn’t plan but couldn’t resist now, when he got to see Roy, when he knew that he now would vanish along with his whole timeline, giving this man a chance to make it all different.

“I don’t want it to disappear with me.” It didn’t matter now if he had it or not.

Roy would see what was engraved on inner side of the ring later, and Edward knew, the man would not tell his past self about it. But that was alright. He liked knowing, that the ring would be safe with Roy when Edward vanished.

And maybe one day Roy would give it back to Edward…

The array was shining brighter, obscuring his vision, the wall of light between them. It would take him to the greedy hands of Truth, but he felt neither sorrow, nor fear, he did what he was supposed to and for the first time in more than two years there was enough air in his lungs, and his breaths were coming freely. The impossibly heavy weight that he had been dragging on his shoulders for the last few years, left him, his body filling his veins with a chemical cocktail that made him feel almost euphoric, and even his headache chose this moment to step aside.

Gods, how he wanted to just lie down and sleep...

His lips curled into a smile, and he threw the last look at the man before him, when he felt the soft pull of the activated alchemy.

"Goodbye, Roy." I love you.

Was it the last time now that the dazzling blue light was concealing the contours of the room he spent his best years in, only to reveal blinding white emptiness with Truth sitting in the middle of it, ready to take its toll?

Was it actually happening this time, or was he dreaming and he would simply wake up again?..

Was he…

“DON’T!”
The scream was something he had never heard in his dreams before. He smiled and closed his eyes, feeling the soft touches of small hands on his body.

*I'm sorry, Roy, but this is the equivalent exchange.*

...*and there is already one Edward in this time, who dreams for you to look at him and see the man he has become.*

He didn’t feel his body being ripped into million pieces by numerous black hands of Truth.

He didn’t see the dark pits of the eyes watching him from the gap in the Gate.

He was not dreaming.

*In the white bleakness someone was laughing.*

He didn’t wake up.

Chapter End Notes

As you've probably noticed, this chapter is tightly connected with the events from Part 1 of the series - *Beneath the stains of time*, so if you don't remember it well, I suggest you for a good measure to throw a glance on it after reading this chapter, cause the next one will also have some mentions from it.

It was seriously hard to get this chapter out. I have never before put so much of myself into any other thing I've written.

I will *really* appreciate your comments.

Thank you for your patience.

**UPD**

There is an illustration for this fanfic now, guys! Go to chapter 3 and scroll down! It's when Edward cut his hair.
November 1933 (2)

Chapter Summary

Someone is laughing, the sound is filling in his very existence, and the fear is rising in him, around him, seeping through him, the almost animal fright, that would take his breath away if he still had something in his body to breath with. He wants to scream, to rip this paralyzing horror from himself along with his very soul if it helps him to stop feeling, like he is....

... dying.

Chapter Notes

Hardly anyone still cares about this fic and honestly, I shouldn't either, but this unfinished piece is like a thorn in my ass.

So here is a small update, not even a full chapter, but all I have been able to manage, so Ima just leave it here as a small offering to the FMA gods. And the sad thing is, it will still be lacking that one final chapter... Ugh...

Amestris, Central, Führer's mansion / The Gate

“DON’T!”

He can hear this voice when he stops to exist. He can feel his conscious fading into nothing, and the voice still rings in his ears, just an echo of the scream that sounded so far from where he was, the dire attempt to pull him out of it.

Out of what?..

It spreads the warmth through his body that is no more, the familiar voice, just slightly tinged with desperation, he doesn’t want it to sound like that. He should wake up and reassure this voice, that he has nothing to worry about, that there is no need of adding the sharp ages of fear in this simple phrase.

Don’t...

He doesn’t know what it means, he doesn’t understand, no matter how hard he tries to pull together his thoughts, to grasp something that will help him realise what is happening and what he is supposed to do, the cold touches of numerous small fingers pulling him apart, and all he sees is a blinding whiteness of nothingness. He doesn’t feel pain, but he thinks it should be there. It’s just an abstract empty thought, stripped of all meaning it could hold, because there is no room for concern in void that is his mind. He is trying to inhale, but his lungs refuse to open and he is not sure if he has them anymore.
“Don’t!”

It sounds closer this time, and yet again through the thick haze of dead vacuum, that he is now a part of. Someone is laughing, the sound is filling in his very existence, and the fear is rising in him, around him, seeping through him, the almost animal fright, that would take his breath away if he still had something in his body to breath with. He wants to scream, to rip this paralyzing horror from himself along with his very soul if it helps him to stop feeling, like he is…

...dying.

He is dying, if not dead yet, and he knows that if he was, he wouldn’t be able to feel it, but somehow he does, and with the remaining parts of his consciousness he is registering the uncanny feeling of his own death. It feels like looking above his own shoulder, just an observer, not able to do anything but feeling everything. It is familiar somehow, he knows he has experienced this before, this feeling of being a guest in his own body, but his mind is reduced to only one simple thought — I am dying — and he can’t think of anything else.

“Ed, no! Please, don’t!”

He knows this voice. He loves this voice. He doesn’t like that it sounds so pained and scared. He wants to wake up, open his eyes and reassure the owner of this voice that he has nothing to worry about.

Nothing to worry about...

He feels a pull on his mind, a nauseous feeling like something is trying to turn him inside out, baring his nerves, his fears, his very being. For a short maddening moment he feels being split in two, ripped apart and then thrown back together.

The enormous dark shade of Gates obscures his vision and a white figure in front of it gives him a wide uncanny smile.

No.

“Hello, Edward Elric.”

NO!

~~~

Roy wakes with a startle, his breath catching in his throat, adrenaline rushing through his veins, and for the few dreadful long moments he can’t understand what has woken him up until he looks to the side of the bed and Ed’s face is too pale in the dim light of street lights coming through the window, he is too still — uncanny so — and Roy hurriedly leans above him, face to face, and Ed’s breaths feel too light and shallow on Roy’s skin.

Roy’s hands are shaking on the sides of Ed’s face.

“Don’t!”

His fingers feel numb with fear, when Roy tightens them on the firm muscles of Ed’s left arm and cold lifeless metal of the right, not thinking at this moment, that Ed won’t feel the press of his hand on the automail. Not now, not like that, not when he is barely present.

Roy’s hands are shaking and he shakes Ed in return.
“Ed, no! Please, don’t.”

~~~

“Hello, Edward Elric.”

It is somehow different from how it happened with him the previous times. The whiteness around him is the same blinding endless emptiness, and the faceless figure is the same as he remembers. But there is something lacking, some solid physicality of it all that helps to differentiate between the dream and reality, and for a moment he wonders if he is still seeing through another Edward’s eyes.

“You are living at another’s expense, Edward Elric,” Truth drawls his name, and it sounds almost mocking. It doesn’t seem to notice his confusion, or doesn’t care, as it keeps talking not waiting for Ed’s response. “You know it, don’t you?”

The sudden thought that they might have been wrong, that Roy might have been wrong, and Ed’s conviction, that they didn’t deserve it, that they, he didn’t pay for that, eventually turned out to be not as groundless as Roy thought, makes his blood freeze in his veins.

No…

“Why am I here?” It sounds too weak, and the part of his mind is still occupied trying to find out this absent something that would make it as real as were his previous meetings with Truth. But deep inside, ever since he started seeing those dreams, he’s dreaded that this moment would come. “You want to take the rest of my body?”

It would be almost fair, wouldn’t it? And what is just one — not even complete — body for all the lives that have been saved? He would give it, he knows. Not that he could actually resist it anyway if Truth decides to take it. But it will be different this time. This time he will give it willingly.

“It is not your body that is here.”

Looking down at himself is almost a reflex, he clenches his fists at his sides and doesn’t feel the nails digging in in the flesh of his left palm. He can see himself here, he can move his limbs, but still he truly doesn’t seem to be physically present.

It is different. Is he still dreaming?

“Then where is it?”

“Where you last left it. You didn’t use a transmutation circle, your body is intact.” Truth shrugs and this very human gestures looks eerie made by something that’s only resemblance with humans is the rough silhouette, taken no doubts as the form of mockery.

It rubs Ed in bad way, he wants to look away, to not see this creature trying to present as a human being, with its two arms and two legs, wide toothy grin and such human gestures. He wants to hate Truth now, he wants to blame it — blame something, someone — for everything that is happening, for him being here, for his own death — the one that just happened in his vision of his other life that was and not, and the one that he now will no doubt will have to experience, closing this circle, ending this all, leaving Roy alone…

Roy… No, it is not fair. He can’t leave him just like that, can he? He will never forgive himself.

“Why am I here then?”
“This world has its own rules,” Truth says, ignoring his question.

“Equivalent exchange.”

The toothy grin on the eyeless face grows wider, satisfied with Ed’s answer. He has been a good pupil...

“Indeed, Edward Elric. Equivalent exchange. And the absence of time.”

Ed has never liked this place. There is nothing about it to like, really, but the sticky disgust and fear he feels being here again goes way beyond a simple dislike. He is not scared of many things, and hardly anything can affect him to the point that he needs to put an effort into making his tongue move to be able to talk, but this place does it for him.

Truth smirks when it sees him try to swallow. The phantom feeling of his throat going dry doesn’t dissipate at his fruitless attempt.

“Time does not exist here,” Truth repeats. “This place makes no difference whether it was you using a transmutation circle, or yourself from a different timeline.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ed asks once again looking around and taking in his surroundings. The Gate is still there. The white void is as empty as it has been a moment ago. As it was the other times he was here.

“That means you got here neither of yours nor on my will.” Truth stands up and Ed has a feeling it is looking at something behind him. He wants to turn, but he feels suddenly frozen in place and he mentally shudders.

“I want nothing of you, Edward Elric. It is a mere inconvenience that you appeared here. You are free to leave. Unless you do really think that you owe me something.” Truth turns its head and there is an unpleasant feeling of being watched and Ed has a place of mind to feel a short lived joy that this creature doesn’t have actual eyes. “Do you, Edward Elric? What is it that you believe you must give me for creating a whole new timeline?”

Ed opens his mouth to answer at the same time as a voice that he’s never heard before but that sounds somehow morbidly familiar comes from behind him, and he stills.

“Everything. I’ll give you everything.”

Ed sees a movement from the corner of his eye at the same time as the Gate in front of him starts slowly opening.

A figure steps from behind him and he has just a flicker of a moment to notice an easy smile that is playing on this person’s lips. The smile that looks almost alien on the face that weary, the face that holds the traces of years of sleepless nights, pain, loneliness and buried friends.

His face.

He looks awful, Ed thinks.

Thank you, Ed thinks and he would’ve cried now, but his body is someplace else and his mind here still hasn’t recovered from the feeling of dying, and he just watches as the myriad of black tiny hands reach out for his other self through the gape in the Gate and he feels the gaze of the Truth’s unexisting eyes on him, when the Edward is dragged to the other side.

It happens too fast for the place that supposedly doesn’t have time and Truth is laughing when the
Gate closes.

Its grinning face blurs out when Ed’s vision fades and he is forcefully thrown back into the wakefulness.

End Notes

Please, drop me a line in the comments to let me know what you think, it will make my day!  
^_^  

Tumblr  
Twitter  
Youtube  
Twitch  

UPD My lovely beta-reader Himeneka wrote a missing scene for this fanfic, where Ed and Roy tell Voss about this time-crossing stuff and that they gotta prevent the war and all that, you got it :D You can read it here. Please, give her some love, I wouldn't be here if it was not for her help and support through all my fics!

Works inspired by this one  
Telling and listening by Himeneka  

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!