At Gate's Edge

by Winds of Water

Summary

Love's never easy as it is, but it's twice as hard when you're separated by life and death.

Notes

Originally, like so many others, this was first put up on FFnet. For a while I forgot I had an AO3 account, but I have been summarily reminded by many that I have one and should really be posting here. So as I continue writing, I'll be posting updates here as well from now on.

Two things I will note: I pull from both animes; and (spoiler) Hughes will not die.

Aside from that, I do hope that everyone enjoys.
“Let’s go for it.”

Those words echoed in Edward’s ears. Those words had been the last thing he remembered saying. Beyond that were screams, flashes of blood, and the looming Gate followed by a flash of white light and the sensation of falling back, falling back away from that structure that had caused a flash of fear inside him.

“Let’s go for it.”

There they were again. He needed to stop them from echoing in his head. Where was he anyway? The last thing he remembered was… Al!

His eyes shot open.

“Not again.” Edward sighed as he woke up.

Well, waking up wasn’t exactly something he did. Sleeping wasn’t something he’d done for seven years. But he did hate it when he tried to rest just to pass the time, close his eyes and lose complete touch with his fractured reality, and he was jolted back by that memory, those words. It got rather tiresome, as it was the only “dream” he ever really had. And it got him every time.

Edward sighed and began to aimlessly pace around the office he’d been confined in for seven years. He’d seen many occupants come and leave, and none ever saw him. He’d gotten used to being overlooked. He’d gotten used to being here and only here, for he couldn’t seem to leave. He suspected that the only way he ever could leave was if someone were to ever actually see him. But it was obvious to see how many times that had happened.

It was the fact of the matter that Edward was, and had been, a ghost for seven years. The night he and his brother Alphonse had tried to bring their mother back to life, Edward had given his life in order to keep Al from dying. He’d not known he was giving his life, not until he’d come to, here in this very office. The current occupant of the office at the time had had a mirror on the desk; it had shown him why no one could see him. He was practically translucent.

It had been a bitter shock. But over the years Edward had gotten accustomed to being like this.

The office had gone through five occupants in his time here, and now stood empty once again awaiting the sixth. Through listening in on all the conversations that had been held here, Ed had learned he was still in Amestris, Central in particular, in the Military Headquarter building. He’d also learned his fair share of dirt, seen his fair share of the dirt, and figured he’d grown up quite a bit living here. Even if he was confined.

The one thing he missed the most, was surprisingly not the thing most people would think of. That perhaps he missed being alive. Oh no, it wasn’t that at all. He was lonely. He missed being able to talk and have someone respond. Most of the time he could handle the loneliness, he had no choice, but there were days where he desperately wished that he could be a part of something once again. Be a part of someone’s life once again. He talked to stay in practice, but otherwise, he had no reason to believe he would ever speak again and be heard.

The next few days passed without anyone entering the office. These were always the hardest days,
the ones where he wasn’t guaranteed at least some form of entertainment for part of the day. He
normally passed the time by floating around aimlessly. But even that was getting old.

So when that door finally opened again, and in stepped two people, Edward brightened with interest
as he continued to float near a ceiling corner to their side. He was positioned so that it might have
appeared he was sitting on a wall and kicking his legs back and forth, and he leaned forward a bit to
watch these new people.

One was a dark haired man. The other, a blonde haired woman.

“If there’s nothing else?” The woman asked after setting down the cardboard box she’d been
carrying onto the gaudy and splintering orange painted wooden table in the middle of the room.

The man grimaced as he glanced around at the furnishings. The chairs were losing their stuffing,
quite literally, and the floral fabric was stained by suspicious fluids. The desk was tiny, and the chair
no more than a child’s computer chair at the local school. The room was completely devoid of other
affects. “Bring me an order form for some new office supplies. This stuff is getting burned by the
end of the week.” He replied, setting the box he carried onto the desk. “That’ll be a-…” He trailed
off as he turned around, his eyes widening as he stared at the far wall near the ceiling.

Edward blinked, and the bored hand that had been at his chin drifted down. The man was looking
right at him. In the eyes, and looked about as shocked as he felt. “Can you see me?” He asked,
floating down to the floor.

The man watched slack jawed as the silvery apparition not only spoke, but drifted down looking just
about as shocked as he felt.

“Colonel?” The woman frowned, and looked behind her. “I know that chair is hideous, but please
focus.”

“You can see me?” Edward whispered, slowly drawing closer.

The man quickly looked back to the blonde haired woman, his eyes still showing his uncertainty.
“And that’ll be all, Hawkeye.”

Hawkeye nodded, and spun on her heel with a salute to turn and leave.

Right through Edward who rolled his eyes, now used to being walked through. But he kept his eyes
on the man who never once looked away from him. “Who are you?” He asked quietly in his awed
surprise and clinging to a faint hope that he wasn’t imagining this.

“Mustang… Roy Mustang.” Roy answered, and slowly backed up until he bumped against the desk.
“I haven’t drank at all today… maybe it was the food? I’m clearly having hallucinations.”

Edward snorted. “If you thought that, you’d not still be here or have spoken to me.” And a grin split
his face as he hurriedly floated forward until he was right in front of Roy, his silvery translucent
hands nearly touching Roy’s chest. “You can see me! No one has ever been able to see me!”

Roy looked down at the hands in worry. “You have a point about the hallucination thing.” He
admitted, still staring at those hands.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” Edward smiled and took his hands away, and suddenly shot into the air
with a gleeful noise almost akin to a squeal, to spin a few elated times before he came back down to
where Roy was watching him with his jaw hanging stupidly. “I’m Ed. Edward really, but my brother
always called me Ed.”
Roy suddenly managed to shut his jaw as he puzzled over the being in front of him. A being who was clearly glad to see him. “Ed, are you…”

“Dead?” Edward filled in quite nonchalantly, and at Roy’s slight nod, he nodded as well. “I’ve been dead for seven years. Though it’s weird, I still grow older.” He said, looking down at himself. “I died when I was a kid.”

Roy stared back at him, torn between speechlessness and the want to try and figure out why a ghost was here. And why the hell only he seemed to be able to see said apparition. And those questions only gave him more. As his office door opened he put a hand to his forehead as Hawkeye walked back into the office.

Edward quickly floated out of her way as she nearly walked through him again. He never felt it, but it bothered him. There was just something about being walked through that felt as if you were being violated.

“Order form, sir.” She said as she handed it to him. “Do you have a headache?”

Roy gave her an almost plaintive look. “Of course I have a headache.” He said, and waved a hand around the room, indicating the décor and in the process, the ghost Hawkeye evidently could not see. “Can you not see what this place looks like? Everything in it’s so old it’s practically rotting to death.”

Edward gasped, and scowled at this Roy Mustang. “Hey! I may not be able to kick your ass, but just watch me hide everything you need. I can manipulate the inanimate objects in here if I want to you know!” He frowned at the ground. “Somehow…”

Roy hid a smile as he looked away from the indignant ghost and back to Hawkeye.

She glanced around as well, and frowned. “Point taken. At any rate.” She nodded to the order form. “Just fill it out and have it on my desk by the end of today and I’ll send in for new furniture.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant.” But as she turned to walk back out again, he held out a hand to motion her to stop. “Don’t think I’m insane or anything, but have I been acting strange today?”

Hawkeye gave him a pointed look. “Roy, you’re always acting strange.”

Roy glowered at her, and waved a hand around. “No. Stranger than normal.” He explained, and tried to ignore the sounds of snickering coming from where the ghost was now creeping closer.

She frowned at him. “No. What are you on about?”

“Pinch me.”

“What?”

“Pinch me.” Roy repeated insistently.

Edward didn’t bother trying to stifle his laughter. “I’m really here, you’re not imagining me.”

Hawkeye sighed, and shook her head. “Just remember, you ordered me to do it.” She said and reached out to take the arm Roy offered out, and pulled the sleeve back just enough to pinch the skin of Roy’s inner forearm so hard he yelped and jerked away.

Rubbing at his arm, Roy shook his head as he saw Edward was still there, still laughing. “Why me?”

“Believe me, if I knew why an idiot of all people could finally see me, I’d tell you.”
“You asked me to.”

Roy rolled his eyes, to both the answers. But it was not Hawkeye to whom he responded. “I am not an idiot.”

“Of course not.” The words were echoed in unison by the two others in the room. And the dead other looked over at the living other with a smile. “I like her.”

“You would.”

“What?” Hawkeye asked him with a frown. “Are you sure you’re feeling well?”

Roy groaned, and gave another shake of his head. “I’ll be fine. Carry on.”

Hawkeye gave him one last uncertain look before retreating from the office.

Edward followed Roy with his eyes as the man went around the desk to take a seat, never once did their eyes break contact. “Please don’t tell me you’re going to be a pain and keep thinking I’m an illusion until you finally get a clue. I’m lonely. You don’t know what it’s like being stuck in here and no one ever seeing you. Until now, that is.”

Roy’s eyes narrowed calculatingly. “No… you’re real.” He decided, knowing that although it went against all his prior beliefs about the existence of ghosts, there was no way to pass this off as anything but reality. “You’ve been stuck in here? Did you die here?”

“No.” Edward smiled faintly, and drifted up as he folded his legs as if he were sitting in a chair. “When I died I was at home. In Risembool.”

“That’s nearly six hours away by train. How’d you end up here? And why are you stuck here?” Roy questioned further, drifting less away from the apprehension and slight fear he’d felt at the ghost’s presence initially, and now finding himself just a bit curious.

Edward shrugged his shoulders, and waved a hand through the air. “I have no idea. I just woke up here after I died and I was this.” He motioned to himself. “I’ve been stuck here seven years. I’ve counted. Every single one of them. I’ve seen seven calendars be completed before my eyes, and for those seven years I have been unable to leave this office. I can’t pass through that door. And believe me, I’ve tried. I don’t know why I can’t, but I just can’t.”

“No wonder you’re lonely.” Roy frowned, feeling some pity for the ghost. “And no one has been able to see you? At all? If you can manipulate inanimate objects why not just write a message to someone?”

Edward laughed, and straightened out of his sitting posture. “To what purpose?” He laughed. “I don’t know if exorcists or whatever would be able to banish me, but I rather this than nothing at all. If I’m to have my druthers. And that’s only to say if the person didn’t believe they’d gone crazy. Or in the case of the last person who used this office, the drugs hadn’t been behind the hallucination.”

Roy slowly nodded, leaning back as best he could in the inadequate chair as he puzzled over the apparition before him. He’d never imagined he’d see such a thing before, and now that he was, he couldn’t help but stare. Edward was pure silvery light, but it was like looking at an old black and white photograph, there were clear definitions to everything. Aside from the slight glow that surrounded him. Really, he could have almost passed Edward off as an angel, but for the lack of wings. “How did you die?”

At that, Edward sighed. “I was young and stupid. And I gave my life to save my brother for the
mistake I pushed us both into. I just didn’t know the price I’d have to pay to save him.” And he looked at Roy sharply. “Not that I regret it, or anything. Regret saving my brother. I wouldn’t take it back.”

“Yes,” Roy agreed, “but how? What happened that caused you to give your life to save his?”

“We attempted to bring our mother back from the dead.” Edward replied after a moment of considering and weighing his options. It wasn’t like he could be punished for attempting one of the most outlawed practices ever thought up. He was dead, what more could a human that couldn’t touch him physically or with alchemy do to him?


Edward frowned, and nodded. “I don’t understand… how do you know me? I’ve never seen you before in my life.”

“I knew your dad. Briefly. I got a letter trying to find him, a letter from your brother after your death. You two had been mailing trying to find him. I still have all the letters. They always came to me for some reason. He mailed again saying that you had died…” Roy’s face was drawn in thought. “He wanted so badly to find your father. I think he’s staying with a family… Rockbell, or something?”

“They were close to us.” Edward smiled with melancholic fondness. “I’m glad it worked though… that he’s still alive.”

Roy’s look grew stern. “That was a very foolish thing you did. Both of you.”

Edward leveled him a withering look. “You don’t think I haven’t come to that realization? Or that he hasn’t? He had to bury me, and I’ve spent nearly half of my life in solitary confinement.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Roy faltered, feeling suddenly very off balance.

“Of course not.” Edward grumbled. “Not that I’m expecting sympathy or anything, but have a heart. I was young and impulsive. I’m paying for my sin in a way the Military could never duplicate.”

Roy carded a hand roughly back through his hair as he watched the ghost before him. And he came to a quick decision. “Listen, I don’t think that sort of talk… your sacrifice, your brother, that sort of thing, is probably the best thing to talk about. Nothing can be done to undo what happened. And clearly you’ve come to terms with it. I was rude enough to try and make more out of it.” And he lowered his hand as he came to his final decision. “Can we maybe start over?”

“Start over?” Edward echoed as he paused what had been some irritable floating around the ugly chair in a circle. And he turned so he could look at Roy. “How do you mean?”

“I mean,” he stood up and walked around the desk to come and stand before the apparition, “start entirely over.” And he offered out a hand after a moment. “I’m Roy Mustang… and apparently, I don’t know how, but I can see you.”

Edward looked down at the hand being held out to him, and then looked up at the man as if he were crazy. And looking up at him just wouldn’t do- he floated up so they were at eye level. But even despite the ridiculousness of the actual act Roy had made, he appreciated the gesture. So he looked down again and brought his opposite hand towards Roy’s until it was about to pass through. He held it there, and looked back into the black eyes. “Edward Elric… I’ve waited for you a long time.”

Roy smiled, and his eyes crinkled a bit in amusement. But he didn’t dare comment right now on
Edward’s attempt to even their height. “I’d like to get to know you, Edward. If you’ll let me. And in turn I’d be honored to let you know me.”

And Edward smiled, and moved his hand so that it passed halfway into Roy’s. “Thank you.”

Roy glanced down at their merged hands, and instead of feeling unnerved by the sight, he felt a strange sense of relief. “You’re welcome.” And slowly he lifted his gaze back to Edward’s, finding himself staring into translucent silvery eyes. In a way they were almost… hypnotic.

Hawkeye chose that moment to enter the office, and Roy barely had time to jerk his hand back down to his side before she looked up at him from the file she’d been reading. “Sir, how is this getting any work accomplished?”

Edward tried to stifle his laughter, not that it mattered. Only Roy would hear him.

Roy cleared his throat in a dignified manner. “I was merely getting measurements of the room, Lieutenant.”

“Ah, very good, sir.” She smiled, and walked over to hand him the file. “This is a request for Armstrong to transfer over as well.”

Roy took it with a smile. “Glad he made his decision at last.”

“Which Armstrong?” Edward asked aloud, and floated over to look at the file which Roy inconspicuously opened for him to view on the pretense that he too was glancing down at it every now and then. He only shut it when Edward drifted back with a “hmm.”

“I’ll deal with this as well then before I leave.” Roy nodded to her, and Riza left with a salute. He turned to look for the ghost, finding Edward was hovering just above the desk in an appearance of sitting on the edge. “Why did you want to know which Armstrong?”

Edward swung his legs back and forth. “Just that I know his sister. She used to visit the last occupant of this office sometimes.”

Roy considered the teen, and slowly nodded as he fiddled with the file. “Your knowledge of people could come in handy if you’d be willing to share at times where you recognize a name or face.”

“Hey.” Edward held up a hand, closing his eyes as he shook his head. “I am not a tool. If you expect me to give you information, you better be willing to keep that promise to talk to me. I don’t do things for free.”

Roy smirked at him, “like you’d let me ignore you. But don’t worry, I’ll talk to you. I meant it when I said I want to know you. And you me.”

Edward opened his eyes, and lowered his hand with a matching smirk. “Then we have a deal. Though it’s entirely up to you not to let people start thinking you’re crazy. I can’t exactly help the fact that I’m invisible to everyone but you.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Roy promised with a roll of his eyes, and he walked around to sit in the chair at his desk. The file he set up on the desk where he ignored it in favor of turning to the ghost who had flipped around to face him.

Though Edward’s legs were now no longer in sight as they’d merged into the desk.

“How badly do I need to disinfect the rest of the office before the new furniture arrives?” Roy asked
after a moment of trying not to feel unsettled by the image.

Edward grinned, and looked around. “Badly. Most of it... well, you really don’t want to know what was spilled in a lot of places. If I were you I’d get people scrubbing every inch and have the carpet cleaned.”

Roy grimaced and looked down at the file. “I’ll do that as well then along with everything else.”

“I’d stop sitting in that chair, too.” Edward pointed out belatedly. “And wash those clothes when you get home. Immediately.”

Roy quickly got out of said chair, all of a sudden feeling very paranoid about just how badly this place might be lacking as far as sanitary conditions went. “Is there any place in here that’s clean?”

Edward smirked, and shook his head. “If you want a clean place to sit and do work, I’d have the blonde lady bring you something like a towel to sit on. And maybe to lay your things on.” He nodded to the cardboard box. “I’d burn that too.”

Roy would have wondered if the ghost was messing with him, but the general state of this room led him to believe that Edward was telling the truth. “I’ll do that.” And so he walked to poke his head out the office door and request several towels and ask that the woman put in a request to have the entire office scoured top to bottom by tomorrow.

“There’s a reason that I don’t actually let myself touch anything in here since the last occupant.” Edward said from where he was pacing along one wall, paying close attention to his feet as he walked, but never touching the floor. “Not that it would do me any harm.”

“I find it hard to find fault with that.” Roy said as he watched the ghost walk back and forth along the wall. “So you can pass through inanimate objects or not, depending on what you want?”

Edward nodded, and looked over at him through the curtain of loose silvery hair that had floated forward to frame his face as his head was still tilted down. “But nothing alive. I can’t touch living things, even plants. And they can’t touch me.”

“Perhaps because you’re dead.” Roy shrugged and walked over to the desk where he’d left the file. He would get it signed and back to Hawkeye when she came in with the towels.

Edward’s head lifted fully now, “explain?”

“Well,” Roy uncapped his pen and found the signature line, “maybe things that have no life to them are enough like you that they are tangible.”

“I guess that makes some sense.” Edward mused and floated a few feet up off the floor as he drifted over to Roy. “So Alex Armstrong is transferring here? To your team?”

Roy nodded and finished his flourish of a signature. “He’s a good man, good alchemist.”

“And what of you? Are you any good?” Edward asked quite calmly. “Or am I truly stuck with an idiot?”

“It’s not every day a person realizes they can see a ghost.” Roy countered with a smirk as he straightened and gathered the file up in one hand. “Is it, Ed.”

Edward couldn’t help it, he smiled. “Touché.”
“So tell me something I don’t quite get yet…” Roy began as he looked Edward over. “You said you keep aging?”

Edward nodded mutely.

“How is it your clothes still fit and your hair isn’t as long as you are tall? Which, granted, wouldn’t be much of a stretch with how short you are—”

“Hey!” Edward squawked indignantly.

Roy laughed, and continued. “But really, how is it that you look as you do?”

Edward was still scowling at the height comment. Yes, just wait, Roy Mustang. He’d hide everything the man might need. “Because I can manipulate inanimate objects.” He explained in short, but at Roy’s look, pressed on. “I can hold scissors if I want,” and he reached around to bring forward a lock of silvery hair that went past his shoulders, “so I can cut my own hair. It just vanishes, the cut parts. As for the clothes, they’ve grown with me since I was a kid. They’re the same ones I was wearing when I died.”

Roy felt somewhat more informed. Though he believed that he might never run out of questions to ask the ghost. It was a whole other existence. And even besides that… Edward was likeable. It could have been an imposition to be the only one who could see Edward, but he really didn’t believe that would become the case.

The door to the office opened, and Hawkeye came in bearing a stack of clean white towels. “Here you are, sir.”

Roy immediately hurried around the desk and moved to intercept them before she set them down anywhere. “Thanks, Hawkeye.” He said with a breath of relief, and handed her the file. “Are we sending someone out for lunch or going down to the mess hall?”

“Send someone out, unless you want to be backed up for a month.” Edward yawned and drifted up to the ceiling again to shift into a sitting position as he watched them.

“Because I was thinking,” Roy quickly continued before she could answer, “that we should try some of the places around here first. Instead of joining that mess downstairs.”

Riza nodded, “I’ll send Falman out. He’s been looking a bit bored. Do you have any preferences on what you want to eat? Or I have menus from places out here.” She said, and made her way back out the door.

Roy followed after her, “where’s the nearest bar?” He asked as he went through the doorway, and closed the door behind him, smirking as she laughed.

Edward sighed as Roy passed through the doorway. He’d forgotten what it was like to eat. Forgotten the taste of food. And he’d never once tasted anything from a bar. He would have been legal drinking age if he were still alive. “The pleasures of the living.” He muttered to himself and drifted down back towards the floor.

But even so…

He smiled. He was happy Roy could see him. He wasn’t sure if he’d had his choices, he’d have chosen Roy to be the one. But the man wasn’t that bad.

Even if he couldn’t taste food or drink, at least now he no longer felt as lonely.
When he saw the door open again and Roy step back inside, he smiled at him brightly. “I didn’t think you’d be back so soon.”

“It doesn’t take me *that* long to look at a few menus.” Roy smiled back at him. “Now I don’t exactly have work to do until tomorrow when I start receiving my orders and paperwork and such. So that leaves me with nothing to do but choose new office furniture.” And he walked over to pick up the order form and hold it up. “Do you want to help? After all, this is more your home than it is my office.”

An excited grin split Edward’s face, and he nodded eagerly as his silvery eyes shone with more than the light his near-translucent body emitted. That same light of happiness that had filled them when he realized Roy could see him. “Yes! Please! I’ve never had a choice before.” He glanced around at the current décor. “Especially with this…”

Roy grinned, he couldn’t help it. The ghost was just so thrilled looking, and it filled him with more than a bit of pride to know he’d been the cause. “Okay then. Help me lay out these towels on the carpet. We can sit and browse through together.”

Edward reached out to take the towel offered to him, and for the first time in over a year, he actually touched something. And he stood there with it in his hands, marveling at it as he turned it over and over again.

Forgetting about what they were supposed to be doing, Roy was watching Edward with a smile. The ghost looked so amazed, and Roy was interested to see that when Edward’s hands were making contact, that small section actually glowed a bit. As if it was feeding off the ghost’s own light. “Can you feel it? The towel?”

Looking up at Roy, Edward’s smile faltered somewhat, and he shook his head. “I cannot feel anything but light pressure. I don’t know if it’s soft, or warm. I can’t taste anything. Or smell anything. Sight and sound, sure. But otherwise I am blind to the world.”

Roy couldn’t think of anything to say to that that wouldn’t sound trite, nothing but what he did eventually say. “It’s cold, like the air. And rough around the edges, and the rest of it couldn’t be qualified as soft if it tried.”

Edward met his eyes, the towel hanging limply in his grasp. With a thoughtful expression he studied Roy, his smile gone. But not because he was unhappy. Never in his everlasting life would he have believed he’d actually meet someone who could see him. But he hadn’t just met such a person. He’d met one who wanted to know him, and tell him about things he could no longer know for himself. No… this man wasn’t so bad after all. “Maybe I won’t hide your things after all.”

Roy smiled, and looked away as Edward smiled back. “Come on, you. Let’s have fun.” And he began to lay the towels out.

Edward immediately began to help, until a large enough section of the carpet had been covered by the towels so Roy could sit, the order form in front of and off to the side of him. And Edward floated over to hover a bit off the towels and be beside Roy so the order form was now in between them both.

Roy uncapped his pen, and patted the towels underneath Edward. Though he had to actually reach a hand through the ghost’s body to do it. “Sit. That’s why there’s room for you. Quit showing off your hovering skills.”

Edward rolled his eyes, but obeyed. “Try not to put your hand through me when you can help it.”
He said offhandedly.

“Does it hurt?” Roy asked in sudden concern as his head snapped around so he could look at the ghost.

“No, I can’t feel it. But… boundaries, you know?” Edward looked over at him, and then smiled. “But thanks for giving me room. You don’t ever need to, you know.”

“Yes, I do.” Roy argued, and smiled back. “I’ll remember the boundaries thing. As far as I’m concerned even if you are a ghost, that gives me no right to treat you with any less courtesy. Now keep yourself sat and let’s pick out furniture.”

Edward believed it might be easier said or promised than done to stay sitting when he’d spent so long avoiding coming into contact with inanimate objects. But he would try. Because now he’d not be stuck in an office. Roy was giving him a home. It would be clean, and he’d help choose what was in it. So he eagerly leaned forward to begin looking at the first page with Roy.

Each left side of the opened order form was an inventory picture listing with numbers. On the right hands side, those numbers were marked with prices and a place to check if you wanted it and the quantity. It was all, of course, standard military headquarters furniture, not a lot of variety, but it was something.

“Which desk do you like best?” Roy asked as he too scanned the first page, and pointed with one gloved finger to two choices.

Edward studied each one carefully, looked around the room, looked at Roy, and then pondered them again. “That one, the dark brown.”

Roy nodded, and marked it before flipping the page. He would have liked either, so it was only fair he let Edward make the final decision for it. Now came storage cabinets. Lamps. Window coverings. Decorative plastic plants. Desk chairs. Tables. Couches.

It was the couch section that had made Edward suddenly snatch away the order form and peer at them closely and with such a penetrating stare it was as if he were demanding the defenseless paper to spill all its secrets.

Roy was far too amused to ask for it back. If Edward was so interested in what couch he wanted, than he’d let the ghost choose on his own. After all, he figured that the couches would be the items the ghost used most of all. It was only fair to let him decide.

Finally Edward set it back down, and pointed to a black leather couch. “That one. But get two.”

“Two?”

“Two.” Edward reiterated firmly. And he looked ’round at Roy. “It will look better with two. Trust me.”

“Then two it shall be.” Roy agreed and marked it appropriately. “Now, last section… do you want any knick knacks?”

Edward shook his head. “I have no use for such things. Though if you would oblige putting books in here… I love to read. I haven’t read in so long. Most written material that comes through here is paperwork. And paperwork is boring.”

Hah! Roy could agree wholeheartedly with that sentiment. “I did order that shelf… we can put books
on it for you. And whenever you want new ones, just tell me.”

There was a knock on the office door, and Hawkeye entered with a paper bag of takeout lunch. When she spotted her boss sitting there on the floor, on a bunch of spread out towels like the man was having a picnic, she shook her head. “Do I even want to know?”

Roy tilted his head as he considered, and beside him Edward was beginning to laugh. “No, probably not.” He admitted truthfully. After all, who would believe him if he mentioned he was sitting here like this so a ghost could sit with him and help him choose office furniture? It just didn’t sound like a sane thing to be saying.

“Tell her the chi energy flow is better from here.” Edward snickered.

If he could have, Roy would have elbowed the brat. Instead he reached out to accept the bag of food with a gracious smile. “Thank you, Hawkeye.”

Hawkeye hummed a bit suspiciously, but saluted and left the room.

“You’ll be the end of my reputation.” Roy sighed as he began to pull out his food.

Edward watched without longing as the man began to eat. He’d had far too many years without food to be longing for it now. Pulling his legs up to his chest he wrapped his arms around them. “Just as long as you never leave me.” He replied softly.

Roy met the silvery eyes, shivering internally at how they seemed to see right through him. As if every wall he built to block out other people was nonexistent. “Surely you know that’s a promise I can’t keep. I have to die sometime too, you know.”

A tired sounding laugh escaped him, and Edward wrapped his arms tighter around his legs. “I’ll take as much time with you as I can have.”

“I’ll not leave you for as long as I am able.” Roy promised instead, temporarily forgetting about his food. “I don’t know why I’m the only one who can see you.” He paused, and glanced down towards the order form they’d filled out together. “But I can… and that’s an encouraging thought.”

Edward smiled at him. “It’s not so bad… you being the one who can see me. Now finish eating. Else that lady… Hawkeye?” Roy nodded. “Will really think you’ve lost it.”

“Point taken.” Roy grumbled, and resumed his eating.

Beside him Edward didn’t move away. He was quite content to sit beside Roy and watch him eat. He hadn’t felt so happy in a long time. And no longer being alone… it made him very happy indeed. He just hoped that Roy would be in this office for a lot longer than its previous occupants. As long as Roy was here, he had someone to speak to, and he had a home. He wasn’t sure it got any better than this.
Chapter Two

Some hours later Roy had finally moved up from the floor and used the towels properly. Which was as covers for the desk chair and a portion of the desk itself. He was staring at the black phone as it rang shrilly, staring at it warily and every ring edging back a bit.

Edward was watching him, laughing softly. He wasn’t sure he should inform the man that the phone actually had been replaced. The previous occupant had spilt a soda on it the day they were leaving and ruined the contraption. So a new one had been put in. “Aren’t you going to get that?” He asked deviously.

Roy looked up at him; the ghost was perched in the air where he’d first initially spotted him. “Absolutely not.” He said firmly.

“But it might be important.” Edward wheedled with a grin. No, he was definitely not informing Roy that the phone was new and untouched.

“It can wait.” Roy decided, for his own health.

“Use one of the towels to grab it?” Edward suggested in as weary a tone as he could emulate.

There was a sudden flurry of movement punctuated by muttered swears, and Roy yanked the phone up on the last ring. He held it with a towel, but held it a good inch away from his ear. “Mustang.”

Edward was laughing again, and leaned his arms forward onto bent legs to angle himself a bit closer.

Roy’s eyes darted up to the ghost, and then he turned the chair so he was looking out the windows. “No, sir. I’ve experienced no problems. I just scheduled for a routine cleaning and have already ordered the things I’ll be needing.”

Edward stopped laughing at that, curiosity winning him over. Who was Roy talking to? And about what?

“Thank you, sir. I’ll not forget to be sure they turn theirs in as well.” And with that, Roy hung up the phone. He let it plop back onto the catches with a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth before he looked up at Edward. “You’re a little terror, I hear.”

“Terror?” Edward scoffed, and straightened where he was. “I’m a ghost, we’re terrors by definition.”

Roy laughed, it was hard to argue with that. Most people would define ghosts as scary things. But this ghost? Edward was nice, but clearly he had a bit of a naughty streak. “That was one of the generals I report to. General Basque Grand, do you know anything about him?”

Edward’s face immediately twisted into some sort of grim disdainful look. “Stay away from him as much as you can. He’s… evil. The last time I saw him he was going on and on about how the last person that tried to challenge him got a one way ticket to the laboratory where they send convicts. The one where they use them in experiments to try and recreate a real philosopher’s stone.”

Roy’s eyes immediately narrowed. “Do you know where this lab is, Ed? Has he ever mentioned?”

“No.” Edward gave him an apologetic look. “Sorry.” And he floated down to the floor. “So stay
Impossible. Roy couldn’t ignore what Edward had said. Even beyond the fact that such a thing was illegal in all the meanings of the word, if he caught General Grand mixed up in such a thing, it was his own one way ticket. A one way ticket to another promotion. And after that… it was a short ride to Fuhrer. Yet the look on Edward’s face… the ghost was concerned. “I understand you want to keep me safe. So you must trust that I will be careful with what you’ve told me.”

Edward’s gaze was suspicious, but he nodded. “Just be careful.”

“You just might be able to get me another promotion with that. Giving me a lead to chase down for it.” Roy smiled faintly, it was difficult to be too happy when Edward had clear reason to be worried. He was sure the ghost didn’t want to be left alone again anytime soon. There was no way to know that Edward would ever encounter another person who could see him. “I want to be Fuhrer one day, you know. And I’ll do whatever I can to get there.”

“Just don’t become evil.” Edward warned him and made as if he was walking across the floor to the man. “Or I’ll be forced to start sabotaging you. I’m a good ghost. I won’t be associated with a bad man.”

Roy did actually smile then. “Don’t worry. I may be ambitious, but I won’t do anything bad to get there. I have my reasons for wanting to be Fuhrer… and I promise you that my reasons would be meaningless if I became like them.” He linked his fingers together, and leaned back in his chair as he considered Edward with a bit of gleam in his eyes. “Interesting, though, that you bring the sabotaging thing up… the general was just asking if I’d experienced any problems with things vanishing, turning up in odd places. My chair collapsing.”

Edward tried not to grin, but was mostly failing.

“You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?” He teased.

“Of course not.” Edward replied, giving up the battle not to grin wickedly. “I never touched anything of the last persons. They didn’t stay for more than a few months.”

“And of those before?” Roy prompted, very much amused by how pleased with himself the ghost looked. He couldn’t really fault Edward for doing such things. After all, there was only so much a ghost could possibly do cloistered to one office for seven years.

“I may have arranged for a few games of hide-and-seek…” Edward revealed with more than a little pride. “And the person whose chair I messed with… they were just asking for it. Trust me.”

Roy chuckled softly. “You little terror.”

“Don’t call me little.” Edward scowled at him. “I’ll hide your wallet, and watch you come back to me groveling for it because you want to eat.”

A smirk playing on his lips, Roy believed that he had better start keeping his wallet in a more secure location. Lest he discover how good the ghost was at pick pocketing. Because he doubted he could ever not refer to Edward as little. It was far too fun to be scowled at for it. “Is calling you short around the same as reaching through you?”

“I’m not short!” Edward protested, and would have whacked the man upside the head if he could have. As it was, all he could do was scowl and remind himself that he didn’t want to at least whack the desk until it was a sanitary one.
“So it’s the same.”

“Only one will get your wallet stolen.”

Roy chuckled and looked back towards the window. He could still see Edward in the pane, however it was more difficult. The ghost, after all, was just near-translucent silvery defined light. It was difficult to make out in a reflection from glass. “Just as long as I only have to beg on my knees for it back, and not play one of your hide-and-seek games.”

“I’d prefer to see you on your knees, I think. Proud man like you.” Edward smirked and looked towards the windows as well. He frowned. They were always completely blank to him. He knew what they were, but what might be beyond them was little more than an empty white world to him. “What’s out there?”

Roy looked back over at him curiously. All thoughts of a response to Edward’s initial comments leaving him. “You can’t see?”

Edward met his eyes. “No. It’s just white… nothing.” And he moved forward to the window to raise a hand up to but not quite touching the pane of glass. “Like a never-ending snowstorm.” His hand moved nearer, and he was met with something entirely solid that he could not push through. “Even though I’m trying to pass through and not touch the glass, I can’t. It’s like this with all the boundaries of this office. I’m trapped.” And he turned his eyes on Roy again. “So what’s out there? Is it anything beautiful? I can barely remember what the sky looks like.”

Roy couldn’t imagine… being confined here for seven years. Not even being able to see out a window and view the sky, or the people and places beyond. Little by little, he was beginning to have an idea of just how purely Edward spoke when he had said he was lonely. “The windows look over the courtyard, and the main gates of Headquarters. Lots of concrete, and grass. A few trees. And beyond the gates are other buildings, and old lamp posts.”

“Any people?” Edward asked, still staring into the whiteness. Almost as if he believed that if he stared hard enough to picture what Roy was describing, he could see it at last for himself. 

“Very few.” Roy said as he stood and walked the bare half a step to join Edward at the window. And he gazed out through them, as if seeing it all for the first time. “This area lacks the feel of a welcoming place. One you’d want to be walking around in. But the weather is turning bleak… which might account for the lack of people walking around beyond the walls.”

Edward’s hand against the glass curled into a fist that rested against the pane. “A storm?”

Roy looked up at the gray clouds. Some were shadowed in white, some in black. Some bore purplish hues on their bellies. Others roiled, some remained steady. But they were all beginning to cloak the sky overhead with their myriad of appearances. “It just may. It was clear this morning, but weather can change abruptly.”

“It was stormy…” Edward said quietly, still staring out the glass as if he could see beyond it. But what he saw was not the white world, but flashes of the memory of that night. “The night I died. I could hear the thunder… the light of the lightning kept flashing across the room. That was the last sky I ever saw.”

“Do you remember the sun?” Roy asked after a moment.

Roy met those silver eyes, and then looked away. The way Edward looked at him sometimes, like he was seeing straight through to his soul… it flustered him. And really, he didn’t want anyone to see the dark marks he bore. Especially not Edward. Even if he hadn’t known the ghost more than a few hours, it didn’t change the fact that he and Edward had a bond. A bond he couldn’t for the life of him understand why it existed. But it existed. “To attempt what you did, it was no bit of simple alchemy. To get so far that it actually worked enough to cost you what it did… I knew your father once, a long time ago, so it shouldn’t surprise me that you did get so far.”

“You’re not going to try and go off on me again, are you?” Edward asked flatly.

Roy pinned him with a reproachful look. “I know your father was a great alchemist. But how good are you, I wonder.”

“You mean how good was I.” Edward corrected, and then shrugged. “It was easy. Anyone could have gotten the array correct. And the ingredients.”

“But to activate it is another thing entirely.” Roy pointed out. “Some alchemists I’ve known can barely fix a broken pencil.”

Edward snorted at that, “then they’re not very good alchemists.” And he turned away to pace along the wall, making all the proper motions of a purposeful walk, head bowed in thought. “I could do alchemy as soon as I could walk. I was learning alchemy from my dad’s books, which is also where I learned to read. I can still remember it all. I think, had I lived, I would have been a great alchemist. Ghosts are incapable of alchemy.” And he did an about-face towards Roy who still stood at the window. “And what of yourself? I’ve heard nothing of you, Roy Mustang. Are you a good alchemist?”

Roy smiled with characteristic smugness whenever anyone remarked towards his alchemy skills. “How about the Flame Alchemist, does that ring any bells?”

For a few seconds, Edward just stared. And then slowly, very slowly, he drifted towards Roy. “You’re the one so many people are afraid of and call an egomaniacal bastard? You don’t seem very scary to me. Though your hair does look a bit more well kept than the other men I’ve seen.”

Yes… that was him. Sad to say, Roy was rather used to the labels he’d had slapped on him over the years. But the ghost had said nothing regarding his… frivolities. It struck him as strange, but if Edward hadn’t heard, than he hadn’t heard. However, “I am not egomaniacal. I just have very high confidence with myself and my looks.”

“Oh yes,” Edward rolled his eyes. “I never would have guessed. The way you’ve conducted yourself so grandly since arriving here. Everyone else spent their first day fretting.”

Roy smirked at that little tidbit of knowledge. “I’m not easily thrown by anything. The only thing that put me out of sorts for a while today was discovering that there is a ghost only I can see locked in my office. But the part of me being a bastard and people being afraid of me, yes, that’s all true.”

“Yes that dim? Sure, you’ve made me want to whack you a few times, calling me… short.” Edward ground out much to Roy’s amusement. “But I wouldn’t quite go so far as bastard or scary.”

Roy hummed quietly as he watched the few trees he could see lose leaves and bend in the wind. The air gain a beige tint. “You’re different. I have no want, nor reason, for you to be afraid of me. And neither do I want you to think me a bastard. Else our mutual desire to get to know each other isn’t so mutual.”
“So I’m special.” Edward summarized cheekily as he finally drifted up beside Roy again.

“In more ways than one, ghost.” Roy smiled over at him. “And it’s not hard to see why.”

There was a knock on the door, and both of them turned at the sound.

“Enter!” Roy called out, and gave Edward one lingering last look before moving back to his desk.

The door swung open, infusing the room with an aura of overwhelming cheer as it did so. And in walked the person bringing this cheer with him. “Mustang!” The dark haired and spectacled man greeted cheerfully and sauntered in, the door remaining open behind him.

“Hughes!” Roy called back with just as much cheer, however it was sarcastically forced. And they both knew it.

Hughes laughed, “relax. I don’t have any new pictures.” He reassured his best friend. “But—"

Roy groaned.

“-I’m getting a new camera! Now that we’re back in Central I can get the latest model!”

“Fantastic.” Roy said as he flopped down into the inadequate chair. “How did the girls take the move?” And when Hughes made to sit on the floral fabric chair, stained and torn, he reached out a frantic hand as if to yank him to a stop. “Nah-nuh-uh!”

Edward gave the man an amused look, so much for Roy being decently intelligent. He floated over to circle around this man Hughes, studying him quite closely without being seen.

“What’s wrong?” Hughes frowned at him, stopping.

“Don’t sit there, trust me. There’s a reason there are towels on my chair. You don’t want to be touching anything in here until tomorrow. And when I get my new furniture.” Roy told him, and tried not to smile as Edward bobbed up and down through the air inspecting his best friend. “Do you think it’s drafty in here, Maes?”

Edward glared at him. “I’m not creating a draft. He can’t feel me at all. Watch.” And to prove his point, he threw himself forward. Straight through Hughes’s side. He came out on the other end, and Hughes hadn’t even twitched.

“No.” Hughes frowned. “I’m not feeling one. Maybe it’s because you’re by the windows. Could be that one isn’t closed or sealed properly.”

Roy was choking down the urge to laugh. He hadn’t expected Edward to that at all, and shock and amusement from it cancelled out any unnerved feelings he may have had. “Perhaps you’re right. I’ll have that checked as well then.”

Maes shrugged. “Anyway…” he thought back to what they’d been talking about, and then snapped his fingers. “Yes, the girls. They took it very well. I think Gracia is glad to be back. And Elysia is so cute! She’s already made friends with the neighbors children. I’ll bring you pictures!”

“Fabulous.” Roy forced a smile. “I can’t wait… to burn them.”

“Now Roy,” Maes scoffed at him, “have a heart.”

“Burn your camera then?” Roy suggested sweetly.
“Not quite a bastard… but showing the colors.” Edward remarked from where he was still standing next to Hughes.

“Do that, and I won’t buy you a drink tonight as a celebration for you finally getting yourself and us transferred here.” Maes pointed out, knowing that he easily had Roy there. “What do you say?”

“Am I a bastard, Maes?” Roy asked instead, laying his arms loosely over his stomach as he leaned back in the chair.

“Yes, Roy. The only thing missing from you to qualify you as a dragon is the inability to breathe fire.” Maes informed him in an almost weary sounding tone. As if he’d had to assure Roy of his bastardly qualities more than once.

“But I can snap and create fire.”

“It’s not the same. Breathing fire is more… well, it’s just more.”

“He has a point.” Edward observed.

“I didn’t ask your opinion.” Roy informed the ghost, who merely smirked back at him.

Maes rolled his eyes. “You got it anyway, didn’t you. Now I’m off to go scope out the turf. Anyone or anyplace special you want me to drop in on and have a poke around?”

“Having you drop in on and poke around someone may not thrill your wife.” Roy grinned at his friend, and continued over the background of both Maes’s and Edward’s laughter. “But since you’re offering, I would like you to make your way around to Grand’s area. Get a feel for things over on his end. I don’t trust him at all.”

“I’ll do that.” Hughes agreed, and cut out of the office with a sloppy salute and wave combination. The door closed behind him.

Roy on the other hand turned to Edward who was now hovering on his side, head propped on a hand and looking for all the world as if he was lounged in some grassy field. “Maes Hughes.” He explained with a smile. “My best friend since I was about your age.”

“And what is your age now?” Edward inquired of him.

Roy grimaced just a bit. It was a common and wrong assumption that only women disliked being asked their age. However, at least in his case, this could not be farther from the truth. “Why don’t you tell me what you think of him instead?”

Edward was not so easily led astray. However, he saw no reason not to answer the question as well. “He’s a pure man, a good man. I sense a strength to him… nothing so strong as I sense with you. But it’s there. I’ve had many years to study people.”

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“You and I both.” Roy muttered, and glanced away from the ghost. “I’m pleased you like him. He’s one of the few people I’ll ever trust. I don’t have many friends.”

“How old are you?” Edward asked, instead of trying to figure out where he stood in the spectrum of Roy’s acquaintances. Because in all truth, he wasn’t sure that he fit into any category. He was entirely separate, being that he was a ghost.

Roy gave Edward a pointed look, clearly trying to get him to drop it without actually saying it. “I consider very few people outside my team my friends.” And he paused, “did you have any friends?”
“One.” Edward informed him, still not at all deterred. “Come on Roy, tell me how old you are! Please? How am I supposed to get to know you if I don’t even know something common like that?”

“I don’t see how my age has any bearing on me as a person.” Roy hedged, and turned his chair around so he was looking out the window instead. Towards where the sky had lost that beige tint, and instead gained one of a purple and red glow. Yes, it definitely looked like a storm was coming in. He was used to them, but he had never really given them much muse until Edward had shared what was foremost on his mind in regards to stormy weather.

Edward harrumphed, and straightened from his sidelong floating. Roy seemed to be forgetting something. And he instantly flowed through the desk, but his hands grabbed the chair by the towels covering the back, and he spun Roy around. “Do you think I’d laugh at you? I’m dead. Even if I would be eighteen right now, my being dead makes me older than you in some perverse way.”

Roy couldn’t seem to look away from the silver eyes. Not this time. They were as near-translucent as ever, but they held a steel that seemed to paralyze him. Some strange power ghosts had? Or were those eyes really that difficult to look away from when they were filled with passion. “When is your birthday, Ed?”

Edward looked away only to give the wall a withering look, before he turned back to Roy. “Tell me your age, and I’ll tell you when I was born. I don’t have a birthday anymore. I have a deathday.”

“You celebrate the day you died?!” Roy gaped at him in minor horror.

“I’m a ghost! Celebrating the day I was born seems a bit outdated.” Edward frowned at him. He could see how it might seem morbid. And really, it would have been for him. Except for one thing, he didn’t regret losing his life to save Al’s. Such a thing was something to celebrate. Even if no one else understood it. He didn’t think about it so much as he’d died, as he’d stopped his brother from dying. Yet calling it ‘the-day-I-played-martyr’ seemed a bit… indulgent. Deathday was much more suitable.

Roy was trying to comprehend this. He really was. Edward didn’t seem the least bit upset that he was dead. Which, sure, he’d had seven years to become accustomed to it, so he really shouldn’t feel so shocked. But even so… had loneliness really been the only thing weighing on Edward’s mind all this time? And celebrating the day you died? “Why would you celebrate it? I mean, yes, you are a ghost. But still…”

“Because my brother lived.” Edward replied simply. “I told you I didn’t regret what I’d done. I was the one who put us in that mess, I don’t regret that I’m the one who paid the full price for it. I have eternity… best to spend it not being depressed about matters I can’t change. And maybe this is only something you understand when you die…” he mused thoughtfully. “But I am no longer alive, hence why we celebrate our birth. I am dead, so what difference is there, truly, in celebrating the day I died?”

Puzzling over him, Roy put a hand to his chin as he thought. “You’ve really only been lonely this whole time?”

Edward nodded mutely.

“I’m twenty seven.” Roy spoke at last, and watched the smile come onto Edward’s face. “Now tell me your birthday, and your deathday.”

“Why?”
“Well first off, you promised at least the birthday part.” Roy’s smile was smug as he watched the ghost. “And second, it’s about time you no longer celebrate these things alone. I may not understand your reasoning for the deathday celebration. But I promised you you’d no longer be alone. And I meant it. No more loneliness for you, especially on days of celebration.”

Edward was actually taken aback by that, blinking several times in rapid succession. “But… I don’t celebrate my birthday…”

Roy held up his hand to stem any more random flows of thoughts. “Then allow us to celebrate it as a day just for you. Not for anything more specific than that.”

A wide smile suddenly split Edward’s face, and he gave a happy sort of twirl where he still floated, merged with the desk. “Really?! A day just for me? You’d change it to that? And you’re serious? You’ll celebrate with me?”

Roy couldn’t help smiling as well. He couldn’t help himself when Edward became so happy. And he felt another glow of pride to know that he’d been the catalyst for that happiness. “I’m serious about all of it.” He reassured the ghost. “You may not be able to eat, or drink, but I can bring things you can touch. Party things, stuff like that. After everyone’s gone home we can celebrate all night long so no one thinks I’m crazy.”

“You are crazy.” Edward laughed joyfully. “But I’m glad you are.” No… Roy was definitely not so bad. Just when he started thinking this man couldn’t prove himself any more decent of a companion, Roy did or said something else. And Edward couldn’t help but believe him.

“Tell me the dates.” Roy prompted the ghost, and got up from his chair to walk over and pluck his personal black book that held his calendar and some contacts information out of the cardboard box. He grabbed up a pen as well.

Edward immediately zoomed through the air over to him to hover, literally, over his shoulder to watch. “I was born on January twelfth.” He waited until Roy had marked it with ‘Ed’s bday’, and then continued. “I died October third.”

Roy was a little slower to write ‘Ed’s deathday’ down, but he did it and shut the book with a snap. Looking over to where Edward’s head was looming just over his shoulder, he had to fight back a smile. “Does it meet with your satisfaction?”

Edward drew away, circling around so he was in front of the man. “Yes. But what are all those entries I saw that you’d crossed out?”

“I won’t cross you out.” Roy offered the book to the ghost, but when it was declined, he set it back in the box. “They were all dates I had to cancel. Since I was transferred and all. Naturally I couldn’t still go on them.”

Dates.” Edward repeated flatly. “You mean you broke up with this person?”

“It was about fifty people, actually.” Roy corrected, one hand going to the nape of his neck to worry the hair there.

Edward’s eyes widened. “You were dating fifty people all at once? You’re not that attractive! I mean look at you, you’re so wide around the chest. You’re like a military tank on the upper half.”

Torn between outright laughing, and wanting to whack Edward upside the head, Roy chose for middle ground. A bit of laughter followed by, “I am not wide around the chest! I just have lots of muscle, I can’t help that I like to have a nice body for the many people I don’t date. It’s all about
the one night stand afterwards for me. And I may as well have the body to keep up with the
demand.”

“So you’re a whore?” Edward crossed his arms over his chest, giving Roy a look not unlike one a
mother might give to her unruly child.

“No, I just have a healthy sexual appetite.” Roy corrected, trying not to think of how odd it was to be
suddenly trying to explain his sex life to someone he was sure had been a virgin upon death. “And I
*am* attractive.”

Edward snorted richly, one shadowy silver eyebrow arching just a bit. “If you say so. Just be sure
you don’t bring any of your whores in here. You don’t want to know what I’d do to them. And you
better not be screwing anybody with nasty diseases.”

“Don’t worry yourself.” Roy shook his head amusedly. “I’m very careful about stuff like that. And I
won’t bring anyone here, I wouldn’t be able to concentrate anyway with you around.”

“Because I’d be constantly throwing things at you, telling you to get the hell out?” Edward guessed
in simpering tones.

“I’d somehow not put it past you.” Roy smiled at him. “But don’t ever think that I will schedule
someone over time I set aside to spend with you. You’re more important than any clean, decent, one
night stand candidate.”

Edward frowned, and now he reached for the book which he flipped open to look at all the empty
days that he knew Roy would end up filling with these… meaningless flings. “Two nights shouldn’t
be too hard for you to work around.”

Roy reached over to lay a hand on the pages and stop Edward from flipping them. “If you believe
that I plan to spend such a small amount of extra time with you… you’re mistaken. Just because your
name isn’t written on the pages, doesn’t mean you aren’t already there.”

Edward looked down at Roy’s hand there on the book, not saying a word. His expression was soft
and thoughtful as he settled the book in one hand, reaching over with his other to brush his fingers
along Roy’s hand. They passed right through as he’d expected. “I can’t feel anything but the same
pressure. It’s always the same. Even though I know your hand added weight.”

Deciding not to remark that Edward clearly saw a difference between reaching through and being
reached through, Roy slowly eased the book away. “Disassociation?”

“Something like that.” Edward shrugged and looked back up at the man, before floating up enough
so that they were at eye-level. “It’s just strange sometimes, being a ghost.”

Roy set the book back away. “Have you ever met any other ghosts?”

Edward shook his head, the silvery and glowing strands of his hair flowing back and forth about his
shoulders at the movement. “If there ever were a place to hold ghosts, this would be the lair.
However if I am anything to judge by, if there are other ghosts… they’re as trapped as I am.” And a
shadow of a smile seemed to grace his lips as he considered the man before him. “I’m already on the
pages?”

“You’re at the top of the list of those I will spend my free time with.” Roy smiled at him, and turned
back to walk towards the desk. “I know I have no duty to keep you company any more than I will be
during the workday. But it’s what I want to do.”
“Just don’t withdraw from the rest of the world completely, except for your ambitions.” Edward said as he drifted after the man. “Else they really will admit you to a psych ward.”

“It’s a fine line to walk.” Roy said as he sat back down with a whisper of a sigh. “But you’re worth walking it. This is the first time I’ve ever had someone be so dependent on me for something. It’s rather nice.”

Edward huffed at the notion that he was any such thing. But he knew Roy was right. Without Roy, he was alone again. And he didn’t want to be alone again. Not so soon. Not anytime soon. And selfishly, not ever. “I’m not some charity case.”

“I know.” Roy soothed. “I only meant that it’s nice to be wanted, unconditionally. Just for me.”

“Perhaps it works out in my favor then that you otherwise seem to have commitment issues.” Edward mused to himself, and tipped backwards so he was hovering on his back a few feet off the floor, his hair falling down like silver water.

Roy chuckled softly. “I can only agree. Besides family, and friends, my ambitions… I think you’re the only other thing that could qualify in my mind as commitment worthy.”

Edward’s head tipped sideways so he could glower at Roy. “I am not a ‘thing’.” He ground out with narrowed eyes. “I am a ghost. A different type of noun. The most important kind.”

“Right, sorry.” Roy held his hands up in a gesture of submission. “You’re the only other… one?” He attempted hesitantly.

Edward mulled it over for a few seconds, and then turned his head away. “It’ll do.”

“Will you tell me about this friend you mentioned? You said you had one.” Roy broached as he recalled the sliver of information.

“Winry Rockbell.” Edward answered after a lengthy contemplation on whether or not he wanted to answer at all. He rarely thought about her. And only in times of wondering if Al was doing okay without him. And those were the few times he ever felt some sadness. But never regret. “She was a lot like a mother in her own right. But she was fun to play with when she played fair. Otherwise she got what she asked for. She taught me that girls don’t play fair.”

“That’s for damn certain.” Roy agreed, thinking fondly on Riza Hawkeye’s adeptness with a gun and its uses for coercion.

“But I had a friend. For a time.” Edward knew he couldn’t ever have her as a friend again. It was just one of those things.

Roy smiled at him. “Well, I know it may be a stretch being first day and all.” He said and stood up. “But you just may gain another friend. Now, I know you had no choice in who… but I hope I’m not too much of a letdown.”

Edward straightened while shaking his head quickly. “It’s not just because you can see me, and you can hear me… but you’re not a letdown. You’ve done more for me in only hours than you could ever imagine.”

Stepping over to where Edward was now floating in a seated position a few feet above the floor, he stooped down. “That’s a relief.” He said as he met the silvery gaze. This time, it didn’t seem to penetrate him. “However I need to be going. I can’t stay late with you tonight, my team and I are going out to dinner and a bar together. But I’ll be back tomorrow morning with books, and all other
sorts of things for you.”

Edward held in a sigh. He’d known the day would eventually come to a close. But Roy was right, he
would be back tomorrow. “I’ll be waiting for you.” He said, and straightened. And as soon as Roy
had stood back up, he reached out his hands to lay them just above Roy’s chest as he’d done in the
first wonderful moments of their meeting. Except this time, Roy lacked the wariness of before. The
wariness that he would cause harm to him. Looking up into Roy’s eyes, he smiled warmly. “You can
see me.”

Roy smiled back at him, and on impulse reached a hand up to let it hang in the air just above one of
Edward’s. “Yes. I see you. Goodbye for now, ghost.”

Edward chuckled, but said nothing about the term. It was accurate after all. “Goodbye.”

Roy drew away from him and walked to the office door. Pulling it open he stepped through only to
look back just before he closed it. Edward was watching him, the smile gone. And he tried not to feel
guilty as he closed the door.

“All ready?” Hawkeye asked him with a smile as she looked up at his exit from his office.

Roy smiled at her. “Absolutely. I have date nights to fill, and dinner to eat. I’m starving.”

From inside the office, Edward had floated over to curl up on the chair. It was still covered in towels,
thus sanitary. And he kept his eyes on the door to not only await Roy’s return, but the appearance of
the cleaning crew who would be scrubbing this office top to bottom. He planned to inform Roy if
they missed any spots, likely, and if so… have his own brand of fun with them before Roy, the
feared Flame Alchemist he’d heard about, got within snapping distance.

So he settled in to wait, and try not to think about Roy being gone.
Chapter 3

It took only a few hours for the cleaning staff to enter the room. And Edward hadn’t budged at all from where he’d taken over Roy’s temporary chair. He couldn’t wait until the new furniture came, because he believed he absolutely hated this chair. But now with a distraction for a while, he felt much happier.

“I hate coming in here. Even if it has been over a year… I still get the feeling…” One of the men, known by the name of Gil, muttered.

Edward laughed softly at that, feeling a flash of pride.

The other, Michael, grunted his agreement as he hauled in a bucket of cleaning supplies. “Damn place is haunted I swear.”

From the chair, Edward scoffed good-naturedly. “Is not. As far as I’m concerned you all are haunting me. This is my home now, has been for seven years. So get out of my home.” He fell into lilting laughter as he watched them.

Gil shushed him in earnest. “We’ve a lot to do, but if we work fast and stay quiet, whatever spirits lurk here may stay asleep for another year.”

Edward leveled a deadpan look at the man. “You’ve not a clue, Gil, really. It’s a miracle you can even use those chemicals correctly. Though on second thought, maybe you can’t. They’ve clearly fried your brain.”

“Well,” Michael muttered softly as he set his bucket down, “let’s just get it done and get out of here.”

“Oh come on,” Edward mumbled dully. “I never do anything bad. I just hide things and move things around.” Though he was seriously considering throwing something at Basque Grand if that evil snake came in here again. And he’d leave it up to Roy to explain it.

Gil and Michael immediately got to work, complaining about the fact that this place had been scheduled for a thorough cleaning top to bottom. It was something that would take most of the night. But only an hour in, they were making plans to skive off early and leave most of it unfinished.

Which Edward was having none of.

He had left the chair a while ago, not wanting to risk someone sticking their hand through him as they moved the chair. It just felt violating when someone did that. It was different if he did it, though he didn’t know why. But that was just how he felt. So now he was drifting aimlessly around the room, inspecting their work. At least, until Gil had mentioned leaving early.

“Colonel Mustang probably won’t notice.” Michael agreed. “As long as we clean the desk, get these towels out of here. Maybe wipe off that table… he won’t notice.”

“Oh yes he will.” Edward growled. Well, maybe he wouldn’t. Roy hadn’t known anything about the state of the office before Edward had informed him. A bit belatedly in areas. So it was likely that Roy wouldn’t see a difference. But still… Edward would notice. And this concerned him just as much, if not more, than it did Roy. “Shit.”
It took him several quick-thinking moments to figure out what to do. And finally it came to him. They believed, as workers of the night, in ghosts. And so they believed rightly, that the pranks Edward had pulled on them over the years were that of a ghostly spirit. Yet they always wanted to leave him undisturbed, which meant to Edward that as long as he continued to do nothing dangerous to them, they would never try to find help that could banish him. If he could be banished. But clearly they respected his presence here, and respected that it was not a presence that wanted to bring them harm.

So he set out not to pull a prank, but to impress his desires upon them in actions. As his words were lost to their ears.

Going down to the buckets of supplies, Edward grabbed for some. They’d never brought anything but glass cleaner and wood polish in here before. And since the last occupant, before Roy, Edward hadn’t bothered touching anything in this room. Which meant that for a little over a year, these poor men hadn’t had to experience him.

Yet they still believed he remained.

Which suited him just fine.

But now with their return, and his return to his tricks, he was glad to see that there was more than glass cleaner and wood polish. And within a matter of seconds, he had both buckets emptied of their contents. Contents which he placed very quickly in a neat row across the carpet.

He then grabbed a cleaning rag that had been draped over the side of one bucket, and threw it at Michael’s head.

Michael sprung into the air with a shout, a hand flying to the back of his head to grasp the rag even as he whirled around breathing heavily.

“What the hell got into you? Be quiet!” Gil chastised from where he was still bent over the desk, running his rag over it.

Michael pulled away the rag from his head, his eyes riveted on the neat little row of their cleaning supplies. Now emptied from their buckets. “Gil?”

“What?” Was the slightly snarled response.

“I don’t think being quiet matters anymore.” He said, pointing a hand at the orderly row of their cleaning supplies.

Gil looked to where Michael was pointing, and swore under his breath. “We nearly made it to two years… what brought it back out?”

“It!!” Edward echoed indignantly. “I may be dead, but I am no ‘it’.”

“Well,” Michael gulped and glanced over at his fellow janitor, “I’m no genius, but I think it’s pretty clear. It wants us to clean.”

Gil let out a sigh at length. “I need a new job.”

Edward smirked and went to float in his favorite corner of the ceiling as the two got back to work. Now throwing an effort into it. At least some of the living could still be taught. So long as he was careful to maintain his place in their minds as nothing of a danger.
Because as he’d told Roy, he wasn’t sure if he could be banished. But he’d rather this, than nothing.

As the hours wore on, the cleaning finished. Gil and Michael looked around suspiciously as they packed up their buckets, but nothing happened at all. So they hurried to the door and left.

Edward watched them leave. He had been satisfied that the area was now clean. All that was left would be for the new furniture to arrive. But now he settled in to suffer another night by himself. And he closed his eyes to lose touch with his fractured reality. To find that which wasn’t sleep, but was as close as he could get.

And hopefully not encounter that dream again. That terrible dream.

**Bine and Weer – Central**

Roy was sitting at a table, mug of beer in hand, as both ladies and men sauntered over to vie for his attention. The rest of his team had already left, as it was nearing two in the morning, and thus closing time for the bar. And as soon as that had happened, the predictable happened right after.

It had started with Maggie, a buxom brunette. Followed by a Jonathon, a lanky man who was actually rather fetching when he blushed. And then there had been Colin, Brandie – which had made for some interesting alcohol jokes, Katie, Brad, Tim, Shawna, and a whole gaggle of others. Currently he was speaking to a Larry… or was it Fred.

He really wasn’t too sure anymore.

And it had nothing to do with his metaphorical beer goggles.

“Can I get you a drink?” LarryFred asked nervously as he fished for conversation.

Roy held his up an inch, and tilted it to one side to make his point.

LarryFred colored, “right, you have one. Can I freshen it?”

“I’m not drinking a wine cooler or some similar nonsense.” Roy said in boredom, and then turned his gaze fully on the man. “You’re not my type. I like my night toys untouched. But if you’re looking for an easy lay, I’d try one of the men at the bar. They may be straight, but they’re drunk enough for you to convince them.”

And thus LarryFred was sent away looking rather disgruntled.

Roy finished his beer in several large gulps and set the mug aside. Standing up he grabbed his coat and made for the door. It didn’t seem that he’d be getting anything tonight. Wrong bar at the wrong night. But he’d live, better not to lower his standards than to end up with a disease come morning.

He was out the door and a few steps down the sidewalk when hurried footsteps caught up to him.

“Your place or mine?”

Roy turned to find a redheaded woman standing there looking at him expectantly. She was not overly pretty, but he was supposed to be drunk. And his analysis was that she was most definitely untouched. “Yours.” He never brought anyone to his place, it complicated things.

She smiled at him. “Then let’s go.”

Roy followed her with a smirk. “And what shall I call you?”
“Whatever you like.” Was the sultry reply.

Clearly, whoever she was, she was definitely tired of being a virgin. He’d just have to take care of that for her. It was so hard after all, to find one anymore. So Roy was more than happy to spend a few guiltless hours at her place. He’d have just enough time to go home for a shower and change.

Three hours later found Roy leaving the apartment of the woman, tugging on his jacket. She had finally fallen asleep, the energetic creature, and so he was making his customary escape.

It was a bit of a walk back to his small house on a corner, but he made it there in time to have himself a shower before reporting in for work. And as he stood under the spray of warm water, washing off the nights exertions and giving his cotton-filled brain a jolt, he found his thoughts straying to a certain unearthly entity.

Yesterday had been a day of many firsts.

And the one that rested on his mind the most, was the fact that he’d committed himself so easily to Edward. The ghost’s name was written in his calendar twice. And not only that, he planned to spend even more time with him. It was the way he treated his friends, this type of commitment. But he barely knew Edward.

And yet…

He did. He and Edward were linked together by a bond he couldn’t begin to wrap his mind around. Much less find an explanation for. Why could he only see Edward? What was so special about he himself? Or Edward? He just couldn’t understand it. And so now he had committed himself to the ghost. For extra time spent with him, and celebrating those two days.

“Maybe I’m losing my mind.” He murmured as he shut off the shower. “But I can’t just not be there for him. I’m the only one he has… that he might ever have.”

And it felt nice to be needed, to be wanted. Unconditionally.

Climbing out of the shower he dried off, dressed, and combed his hair into a sense of order before heading into the sitting room.

Still stacked along one wall were the boxes he hadn’t yet had time to unpack. And in some of them were his books. So he quickly located the ones labeled 'Books', and pulled them free of their fellows. Opening them up he began to sort through what he had, creating a small pile he could take with him for now. He tried to compile as much of a variety as he could.

Once he had a selection he believed Edward might find something to read in, he searched for and found his chess set.

A cup of coffee and a banana later, Roy headed out his front door with his loot for Edward’s entertainment.

He nodded a good morning to Riza, who looked to still be waking up. “Long night? Did you and Havoc hook up?” He teased her with a smile.

Hawkeye glowered at him. “Just one too many shots of whiskey. And Havoc and I will never hook up. Get in there and get working before I shoot you. There’s a stack of papers on your desk.”

Roy winked at her. “You say never now.” And he immediately fled for his office.
As he closed the door behind him, he immediately looked for the ghost. And he spotted Edward in that same corner that he’d spotted him the morning before. Except it looked almost as if he was asleep. But ghosts didn’t sleep, did they?

Shrugging, Roy made sure he was extra quiet as he went over to the desk. He set the books and chess set on top of it near one of the far corners. Sitting down he glanced back up to see that the silvery glowing apparition was still unaware of him. However he did not want to do any paperwork. So he ignored it in favor of grabbing a spare sheet of paper and a pen.

Getting a bit more comfortable, Roy rested his chin on one hand while the other manipulated the pen across the paper to create his pointless doodles.

When a sharp gasp and the sight of a silvery figure just in the peripherals of his eyesight suddenly plummeted several feet sharply, Roy’s head snapped up and the pen clattered from his grasp. “Ed?! Are you okay?” He asked, standing up quickly.

Edward steadied himself about four feet from the floor, his legs curling under him as if he were sitting on them. A hand worried his temples and then dragged back through his hair. “Fine.” He said through a quickened breath.

Roy was already walking over. “What happened?”

Good question. Edward shook his head wearily. He had those dreams of Al that always woke him with a jolt. And then he had those rarer dreams of that awful thing. He only had had it three times before, for which he was very grateful. For they always woke him with a flash of terror that made him freak out every time. “Gate…” he whispered, and looked over at Roy. “This big black awful Gate. Gate of truth… it’s what took my life in exchange for Al’s.”

Roy frowned, the ghost was clearly unsettled by this Gate. “It does exist then?”

“Yes.” Edward wasn’t pleased about it either. “Sorry… I normally don’t have that dream. I guess it’s a dream. But it always makes me do that.”

“It’s okay.” Roy soothed him. He wasn’t annoyed that Edward had just freaked out. He had been worried. He was still worried. Seeing Edward fall like that through the air… it hadn’t been a pleasant experience to behold. “So you do dream then? Do you sleep?”

Edward frowned, “I’m not sure if you could call it sleeping. Or dreaming. But it’s the closest I can place.” And then he smiled brightly, even if it was a bit forced considering he still felt unsettled. “You came back!”

Roy smiled, deciding that Edward would be okay now. “Of course I did. Work calls… and so do you.” Could he ever get used to that feeling of warmth and pride that spread through him when Edward was so happy just because of something simple. Even as simple as him being there? Probably not. And he didn’t want to.

“Did you go out whoring last night?” Edward asked him with narrowed eyes.

“Yes.” Roy answered honestly. “But don’t you worry, I didn’t bring her here.”

Edward smirked, “better not have. So, you prefer the women then?”

“Both.” Roy shrugged. “Healthy sexual appetite, remember?”

“Well, you look terrible.” Edward informed him matter of factly. “I can tell you didn’t sleep at all last
night.”

Roy chuckled and turned away. “Then I best get some sleep tonight. Come over here, I brought you some books and a chess set.”

Edward floated after him eagerly, nightmare forgotten. He was thrilled that Roy had remembered. He hadn’t had a book to read in years. The withdrawal was killing him. So to speak. He choked down a laugh and passed halfway through the desk so he could face Roy. “Seven?” He counted with glee.

“I have more at home.” Roy told him. “You tell me which ones you enjoy the most and I will bring more like them. Or go to the library for you.”

With a grin, Edward was already grabbing the first book underneath the chess set. “I’ll read them all, starting with this one.” And he beamed at Roy. “Thank you!”

Roy smiled, he was beyond trying to resist it when Edward was so happy with him. In the back of his mind he was questioning whether or not he should feel guilty, having such control over Edward’s happiness in this manner. But he told that part of him to shut it. “You’re welcome.”

Edward clasped the book to his chest with a grin and began to float towards his customary corner so he could read.

“Just be careful. If someone enters you can’t let them see a book hovering midair.” Roy cautioned the ghost, walking back towards his chair.

“Don’t worry.” Edward replied as he took to hovering and opened the book.

Roy was sitting down, watching the ghost, when he happened across a thought that made him frown. “Ed?”

Edward gave a loud “hmm?” in answer as a smile danced on his lips while his eyes flicked back and forth across words. Glorious words.

“How is it that you can touch inanimate objects, but you can pass through people when we’re wearing clothes? Are you trying not to touch the clothes?”

Edward actually was wrested from his reading by that question, and he looked over at Roy. Sinking down to the floor, he bent to set the book down before walking towards Roy. Even if his feet still didn’t quite touch the floor. “I’m really not sure.” He said as he approached.

Roy turned in his seat as Edward approached him from the side, his gaze curious.

Edward bent down, his hair falling past his shoulders in silent whispers. “It doesn’t ever matter whether I try to touch you here –” he reached out as if to take Roy’s hand, but it passed through as he’d anticipated, “– or here.” And he extended that same hand towards Roy’s cheek. But again, it passed through and he pulled away. “I can touch the clothes if they’re off of you. But as hard as I try, I can’t touch them if they’re on you.”

Had Roy not been so caught up in the little experiment Edward was demonstrating for him, he might have blushed. But as it was, the connotation that some of that explanation could take on was lost on him. “That’s very strange.”

Straightening with a shrug, Edward backed away a bit. “My only guess is that it has something to do with your… aliveness. That your life force must somehow leech into them enough when you’re wearing them that it makes it impossible for me to touch you.”
“Inconvenient.” Roy muttered to himself.

Edward gave him a strange look. “I’m used to such inconveniences.” And with that he turned to flounce off through the air back to collect the book and resume his reading.

Roy tried not to feel too confused. But mentally he was asking himself what had just happened. Clearing his throat he turned back to his doodles, and picked up his pen again. “Did they clean thoroughly last night?”

“Yes.” Edward replied distractedly. “Once I impressed upon them that they should.”

His pleasure at hearing the good news about the improved state of hygiene went to the back of his mind. And Roy looked up from where he was penning out a flamel. “You impressed upon them how?”

“They were going to skive off early, and I emptied all their cleaning materials out onto the floor.” And Edward took advantage of not being able to pass through the walls to lean back against one. “Back before that last person in here I used to play pranks on the cleaning staff. Being people of the night, they are eager to believe in ghosts and symbolism.”

Roy frowned, his concern chasing away his amusement. “And if they one day become afraid of you and try to banish you?” He wasn’t sure that he’d like Edward being gone anymore than Edward would like it when Roy eventually would be gone. And he certainly didn’t want such a thing to happen sooner than it was meant to.

Edward glanced away from the book to him, “as I said yesterday, I’m a good ghost. I do nothing dangerous to them. So they have no reason to fear me. If anything, they wish not to disturb me. Hence why they’re so quiet when they’re in here. I know the line I walk between coexisting while still being able to prank people, and disrupting that coexistence.”

“So they don’t tell you to walk into the light? Or ask what your unfinished business is?” Roy asked, inquisitively, but teasingly.

Edward snorted inelegantly and went back to his reading. “There’s no light to walk into. And I have no unfinished business. I succeeded in saving my brother. Business finished.”

Roy smiled, and bent his head to his doodling, pen flashing across the flamel to shade it. “Is the book interesting?”

“Yes.” Edward replied immediately, but still sounding distracted. “So shush. Get your work done so I can kick your ass at chess.”

Roy chuckled softly, and abandoned his doodling to pull the ominous stack of documents towards him. Another first, right there. Roy Mustang starting on his paperwork the day it was originally given to him. And before noon at that. But he couldn’t really find it in himself to feel bothered or self-conscious about it. Nor wonder as to how it was that Edward could so easily make him agreeable.

But maybe… perhaps… it was the idea slowly dawning on him that in a way, he was Edward’s entire world, and that was causing him to want to make the ghost happy.

It was really too soon though into their unorthodox relationship to begin examining the reasons why. So he contented himself with doing his work.

When Riza Hawkeye walked in to this sight, her jaw slackened in shock. Was Mustang actually working?! This wasn’t right. Unless…
She strode over to him quickly, pulling out her gun and aiming it at his head. He needn’t know the safety was on. “Who is it?”

Roy gave the gun a blank look, and set the pen down quite carefully. He then shifted his deadpan expression onto the blonde woman holding him at gunpoint and raised an eyebrow. “Pardon?”

“Who, Roy.” Riza demanded patiently.

“Me! That’s who.” Roy’s eyebrow rose even higher. “Look, see?” He picked up the pen again and waggled it in front of her. “I’m doing my work. Me. Not someone else. There’s no one in here besides us.”

Edward, who had recently taken to lounging stomach down on the carpet with the book open in front of him was watching the scene with interest. His chin was propped up on a hand while his legs swung back and forth through the air.

Hawkeye frowned at him. “No, who is it that you’re trying to hurry through all this for to run off and meet?”

“Yes, Roy, who?” Edward parroted with a wicked grin.

Roy barely managed to keep from shooting a scowl in the ghost’s direction as the little terror had the nerve to even laugh. He’d get the brat later… somehow. “I’m running off to meet no one. By the end of the day I’ll still be here, and you’ll be feeling silly.” He informed his Lieutenant.

“She’ll be thinking you’re the silly one, when you’re sitting there talking to yourself, calling yourself ‘Ed’.” Edward chortled.

“You’re doing it because…” Hawkeye trailed off suspiciously.

Roy cleared his throat, and pointedly kept his gaze away from his personal poltergeist. “I wanted to confuse you and cause you to become suspicious in a potentially violent way?” He suggested hopefully.

“Well don’t.” Riza holstered her gun, and cast him yet another suspicious look. “You’re sure there’s no one else in here?”

Roy waved a hand around. “Search away. But unless you let some surprise stripper in here before I arrived this morning, I am quite alone. Aside from your amiable presence, of course.”

“Sir, someone stripping for you lost its surprise factor years ago.” Hawkeye informed him blandly.

Edward half-choked and half-laughed.

Pretty sure he felt a muscle beneath his eye twitch, Roy grimaced. “I’ll take that as a ‘no’ then, pity…”

“– what do you mean ‘pity’?” Edward scolded him. “There’s to be no strippers here!”

Roy felt a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth as he continued. “– So you may be assured I am just doing this for the aforementioned reasons. Yet, if my memory serves me right, you don’t want me to? Shall I save these for the last minute?” He waved his pen-free hand at the documents.

“It’d be in your best interest not to.” Riza decided, though lately her superior and longtime friend’s actions were confusing at best. Maybe it was the stress of the transfer? Yes… that must be it.
Only once Riza had turned away with a proper salute did Roy whip his head over in the direction of the ghost and stick out his tongue.

Edward smirked at him. “Hi, Roy.”

Any expressional response Roy was about to make was quickly abandoned as Riza deviated from her course towards the door. And he eyed her with interest and some mild surprise as she walked over to where Edward was.

And Edward instantly lifted the hand that had been holding the book open off of the text as Riza stooped to grab it. “Tell her that’s mine.” Edward said as he instantly took to floating after the woman as she walked back over to Roy with the book in her hands.

Roy was trying his best not to laugh. And he was thankful he was so good at masking his emotions. For he had wanted to do nothing more than burst out laughing at the indignant expression on Edward’s face when Riza had taken away that book.

“Sir, you really shouldn’t leave books lying around.” She said, and snapped it closed.

Edward let out a pained noise.

Roy dug the heel of one of his boots into the toe of the other to help ward off the fit of laughter threatening to escape him. If Edward had been indignant before, now the ghost was outraged. “Thank you, Lieutenant. I forgot it dropped there.” He said as neutrally as possible, reaching out a hand to accept the book.

Riza handed it to him with a smile. “Sure.” And this time when she turned to leave, she actually left.

And Roy waited until the door had closed before turning to Edward who was at his side scowling. “Is this what you want?” He asked with a devious grin, waving the book to and fro.

“Gimme!” Edward ordered and lunged for it.

Roy finally let out his laughter as the book was snatched from his hands by Edward who somersaulted through the air from his lunge before righting himself somewhere near the ceiling. “Sorry…” he got out through his laughter, “your face… you looked so annoyed.”

Edward gave him a withering look, but secretly was smiling inside. “She lost my page.” He grumbled, and began flipping through them hurriedly.

Roy grinned at him as his laughter finally got back under control. “You’ll find it again, I have faith in you.”

Edward peeked over at him from over the top of the book and the pages he was frantically flipping, and his smile could no longer remain hidden. “This is the most fun I’ve had in ages.”

Roy chuckled softly, and turned back to his paperwork. “Me too.” He replied quietly.

So quietly that Edward nearly missed it, and would have if not for watching Roy’s lips form the syllables. His smile softened, and wordlessly he floated back over to where he’d been lying on the floor to resume his reading. As soon as Roy was done with his work, they could talk over a game of chess. And he was looking forward to that very much.

Roy only took a break to answer phone calls and have lunch, but otherwise he applied himself to his work in as diligent a way as any admirable Colonel would. And he was admirable if he were to give
his unbiased opinion. But his work ethic had nothing to do with that at all. And when he had signed
the last piece of paper requiring his signature, Roy set his pen aside and looked over to where
Edward was now reading while he aimlessly bobbed around through the air. “Ed.”

Edward hummed, and didn’t lift his eyes from the words he was absorbing with ravenous hunger.

“I’m done. And I have four hours left until I leave for the night.” Roy informed him, “would you like
to have that chess game?”

The book was dog-eared and closed in a series of fluid motions. “Definitely.” Edward said firmly as
he sank to the floor and walked across it to set the book on Roy’s desk.

Roy smiled, and grabbed the chess set towards him and took off the lid. “Is the book interesting?”

“Oh, yes!” Edward looked down at it. “Though I disagree with the author on some of the points
made.”

“That author is a genius.” Roy frowned at him, pausing in his pulling out of the chess board.

Edward snorted. “Not when they wrote that they weren’t.”

Roy gave him an odd look, and set the board upon his desk. “Right then. Well I’m glad it’s
interesting to you, and getting you so involved.”

Edward grinned, and took to hovering on the other side of the desk with his legs crossed underneath
him. And he steadied himself so he would be at eyelevel with Roy. “You wouldn’t really bring a
stripper in here, would you? Or these people on your team wouldn’t?”

Roy arched an eyebrow at him. “No. But why the aversion? Were you alive you’d be at an age
where you’d thoroughly enjoy such a thing.”

“I’m old fashioned.” Edward shrugged. “Perhaps it has to do with what I’ve seen in my time here. It
kind of put me off a few things. But were I alive, and seen what I have seen, I’d only want to be
seeing the person I love taking off their clothes.” And he looked at Roy sharply. “Don’t tease me. I
don’t share your definition of a healthy sexual appetite. Beyond the fact that I clearly am incapable of
having sex.”

Roy was setting up the pieces as he smiled a bit. “I’m not going to tease you. But don’t worry, I
don’t want to bring such things into your home.”

“Thank you.” Edward felt a relieved sigh rustling inside.

Roy finished setting up the pieces. “Do you want white or black?”

“Black.” Edward answered without a trace of hesitation.

Roy obliged, and took a white pawn in hand to move it forward two spaces. “Shall we take turn
asking each other questions?” He wondered as he propped his chin in one hand and dug that elbow
into the desk for support.

Edward moved a black pawn. “May I go first?”

“Please.” Another white pawn advanced.

Edward nudged one of his pawns up only one space. “How long does it take you to do your hair?”
Bewildered by the question, Roy blinked at him owlishly several times before he pulled it together. “A few seconds?” And he raised a hand up self-consciously to pat at his sleek hair. “I’ve heard it looks like I must spend a lot of time… and money on hair products. But that couldn’t be farther from the truth.”

“I’ll say.” Edward was impressed. Maybe Roy was only vain on one level.

“Why is it that you walk around even if you aren’t touching the floor?” Roy asked, seizing both his turn for a question and a chance to move in on cornering one of Edward’s knights.

Edward chuckled, “habit. And it’s one of the few things I do to try and remember that there was a time I was alive. Otherwise I fear one day it might only seem a dream.”

In a way, Roy supposed that made sense.

“What’s your favorite color?” Edward asked as he examined his options for moving a chess piece.

“Red.” Roy answered automatically. “Like fire… I love fire.”

Edward laughed at the admission. “So the rumors go of the Flame Alchemist.” And he finally moved a bishop forward across the board.

Roy tilted his head as he considered Edward. “What color did your hair used to be?”

“Not red.” Edward smiled faintly, and then met Roy’s inquiring look. “It doesn’t matter any longer anyway. Everything about me is silver now.”

Roy decided to let it drop, since Edward didn’t seem to want to answer the question. And it wasn’t as if he hadn’t gotten some kind of an answer. “Your turn then.” He said, and moved a rook to intercept the bishop that had just been moved.

“How old were you when you joined the military?” Edward asked, frowning as his bishop was nudged off the board.

“Sixteen.” Roy replied with something of a worried look on his face. “Foolish and young.”

Edward studied Roy’s expression carefully. He sensed there was a story there, but if Roy wasn’t forthcoming just yet, he wasn’t going to pry. And it wasn’t his turn for a question anyway.

“What was your favorite thing to do?”

Pausing to consider the question, Edward finally smiled. “Make things with my alchemy for my mother.” And he pointed a finger at Roy, even though he wasn’t looking at the man. “Not a word. I was a child last I was alive.”

Roy tried to control his smirk. “I was only going to say how cute that was of you.”

“I just bet you were.” Edward muttered through a smile, and moved his queen out of harm’s way.

They played three full games against each other. Conversation falling into poised and studious silence as each of them tried to plan out how to win. And by the time the third game ended with Roy as victor, it had been the second game the man had won.

Edward rolled his eyes at Roy’s gloating, and promptly lobbed a pawn at his forehead. “You suck as a winner.”
Roy laughed, and scrambled to retrieve the pawn as it bounced off him and down towards his lap. “Now, Ed,” he began in a diplomatic tone, “I am sure that if we had another round you would win.”

Edward rolled his eyes. “Yeah, so you say when you’re getting ready to leave me for the day.”

With a sympathetic look, Roy began to pack up the chess set. Even though he planned to leave it here with Edward. “I’ll be back tomorrow and we can play again.”

Edward was already going to hold him to that. “Just get some sleep tonight. You really do look like shit.”

“Never fear, Ed.” Roy smiled at him as he finished putting the chess set away and stood up. “I’m not going to any bars tonight. Though I have to protest that I look like shit.”

Edward smirked at him. “Protest away. But when you look in the mirror tonight, you’ll see I’m right.”

Roy rolled his eyes and walked around the desk to join Edward there. “If only to humor you.” And he tripped over what to say next. Will you be okay?… see you tomorrow?... they were stupid things to ask. So he settled for a smile, “until tomorrow.”

Edward nodded, and his smile wavered a bit as he watched Roy move off to leave. “Thank you… for being here with me. Just having you around… I’m not as lonely anymore.”

Roy paused and turned back to him, oddly warmed. “Goodnight, Edward.”

“Goodnight.” Edward echoed, his smile becoming a bit stronger as he watched Roy walk towards the door. And he met the gaze Roy turned back to him before the man closed the door behind him. Then Roy was gone, and Edward let out the sigh that had been building. With a wry shake of his head, he picked the book he’d been reading back up and found his place while sinking into Roy’s chair.
Edward didn’t venture to that world of sleep-that-wasn’t that night. He stayed up reading through three books fully and completely. Gradually he was picking up the speed he used to have. Because after all, he’d been out of practice for over a year. No one entered the office during the course of the night as the clock on the wall continued to tick away the time.

But as the hour hand neared the eight, Edward began to have trouble concentrating on his current book. Roy would be arriving soon.

**House of Roy Mustang**

Roy was beginning to think he should have gone straight to bed once he had arrived home last night. Even after a full seven hours of sleep he still felt like he was dragging. Perhaps going to the bar the previous night and getting laid hadn’t been such a good idea so soon after finishing with the move. But he dragged himself out of bed, hoping that he didn’t look as terrible as he felt.

The shower provided some relief from his bleary state of awareness, but it wasn’t until he was sitting downstairs with his coffee in one hand and a homemade cheddar cracker in the other that he began to feel normal. The coffee was helping exceptionally well.

As for the cracker…

Roy didn’t even flinch as a rust brown ball of fur jumped onto his shoulder. He angled the cracker up, and it was snatched away. “About time you stopped moping.” He said, and took another swig of his coffee.

The rust brown furball, a squirrel in fact, jumped down onto the table, the cracker in his teeth. And he sat down on his hind legs before transferring the cracker back to his small paws and beginning to nibble on it in true squirrel fashion.

“At least this time it took you less than a week.” Roy said as he watched his pet. The squirrel, named Hazel, always had had issues with moving around places. “You’re getting more ornery in your old age.”

Hazel paid no mind to the chatter of his human. He was far more interested in the food he’d been given.

Roy took another drink of his coffee, “you know it’s a shame Edward wouldn’t be able to touch you. I think he’d like having an animal around. And you’d probably like him.”

Hazel finished the cracker and began to groom his whiskers frantically with his paws, as if he only had a matter of seconds to clean them before they were soiled for good. Besides, he had no interest in getting to know another human. He liked his just fine.

Roy finished his coffee and got up to put the empty mug in the sink. And he walked back over to the table to pluck the squirrel up and set him on a shoulder. “Don’t drip crumbs on my clothes.” He instructed before walking over to pull a bag of trail mix he prepared especially for the squirrel whenever they weren’t at home.

But as he hadn’t had time to go get the food Hazel would normally eat while at home, this would
have to do. And he walked back to the laundry area with his companion still perched on a shoulder, cracker gone, and now chattering happily into his ear.

Finding the food and water dishes on a high shelf, Roy pulled them both down to check. The water level was fine, but he topped off the food dish. “Okay, Hazel, I’m going to work. You stay out of trouble, and remember, only chew on your toys.”

Hazel jumped down to where the fresh food now was and chattered up at his human happily, holding out both paws.

Roy smiled and reached out a hand to grasp them both. “Now see this is the other reason I never invite anyone to my place. Because you’re too cute, and I don’t want anyone to steal you away.” And he ruffled the squirrel’s fur with his gloved hand before turning to leave.

If he hurried he’d still be on time.

And he was just barely on time as he reached his office, bidding Hawkeye a quick good morning. He listened to her rattle off what she’d already put in his office to work on, and as well as the list of people he needed to call back. “All right.” He said, and turned to open his office door.

“Sir.” Riza called him back.

Roy turned, “yes?”

“You have crumbs in your hair.” She informed him with a smile.

Roy groaned. “Well I did tell him not to get crumbs on my clothes.” He said, and opened the door. “Thanks.” He called over his shoulder as he stepped inside and shut the door behind him. And he ruffled his hands through his hair to see the crumbs settle to the floor before he began to rake his fingers through it to try and tame the dark locks once again.

Edward frowned as he watched the man. “Are you okay?”

Roy chuckled and looked up to see Edward lounged in his chair. “Yeah, just had something in my hair. You’re not asleep?”

“I don’t sleep.” Edward replied, “I lose touch with whatever this existence of mine is. But no, I didn’t sleep last night. I stayed up and read.”

“Will I need to bring you more books soon?” Roy queried as he walked over as Edward floated up out of the chair.

Edward settled onto the edge of the desk. “By tomorrow.” And he looked Roy over as the man sat down. “You look better. Rested. No whoring last night?”

Roy smirked a bit, and met the penetrating silvery eyes. “No. I went home and had a nice dinner and then went to bed. Alone.”

“You look better if you do that.” Edward noted.

“Yes, well,” Roy chuckled under his breath, “other parts of me might begin to disagree.”

Edward’s gaze was utterly deadpan. “You’d survive. Eunuchs do.”

“There is little point in being Colonel Roy Mustang if I am a eunuch.” Roy argued, shuddering at the very thought. “The Flame Alchemist is someone who ignites the fires of passion, not an… observer
of them.”

With a chuckle, Edward slipped away through the air. “As you insist.”

“Oh, but I do, Edward. I do.” Roy winked at him and picked up the phone. “Now hold on while I call back this place. They’re the ones who will deliver the furniture. And I think they might be ready to drop it off today.”

An ear-to-ear smile instantly split Edward’s face. “Really? I’ll get my couches?”

“Yes. Hopefully today.” Roy smiled and finished dialing. “Now hush for a minute.”

Edward did hush, though he floated over so he could hover next to Roy’s ear where it was touching the phone so he might listen in.

Roy tried not to roll his eyes and chastise the ghost for eavesdropping. He only managed when the other line picked up. “Yes, this is Colonel Mustang.”

Edward grumbled darkly as he realized he couldn’t make out what the other person was saying. So he floated over to place himself on the edge of the desk to Roy’s right side.

“Very good.” Roy said, his eyes drifting over the near-translucent figure next to him. “Yes. Goodbye.” And he hung up the phone.

Edward’s eyes widened as Roy suddenly busied himself with a new stack of papers that Riza had brought it. Roy was ignoring him, and on purpose! “Hey!” He slammed his hands down on the papers, keeping Roy from shuffling through them anymore.

Roy blinked up at him innocently. “Hi.”

“Tell me!” He insisted, not quite registering the slight whine to his voice.

Roy, however, did register it. And he grinned in the human version of a cat who had stolen the cream. “Tell you what?” He asked back as innocently inquisitive as he could manage with such a smile on his face.

Edward growled, “what they said! And don’t say ‘words’, or something idiotically clever like that.”

Roy chuckled and lay his pen down. “They’ll be here with the new furniture after lunch.”

Edward promptly fell through the desk with an excited noise Roy couldn’t discern.

He scooted his chair back so he could see the ghost lying there on the floor with a grin. “Happy?” He guessed with a smirk.

Edward met his eyes, and chuckled. “I haven’t had a couch. Ever. Even when I was alive. And everyone before you always had chairs.”

“Silly.” Roy smiled, and righted himself so he could ascertain what madness Hawkeye had brought him this morning. And he quickly decided he’d rather not touch it. So he swiveled his chair around so he could look out through the windows.

The sun shone brightly, and there wasn’t a single trace of a cloud in the cerulean sky. Wisps of smoke from bakeries or restaurants were the only things that crossed that blue expanse. The gentle breeze stirred not only the trees, but called to those watching indoors to go outside and experience its touch.
Edward had sat up so that he was now sitting beside Roy’s leg. “What are you thinking?”

“Thinking?” Roy echoed, and tore his gaze away to look down at the silvery figure sitting at his side, staring at the wall. “I was actually wondering if you could blow away in the wind.”

Edward cracked a small smile at that. “Wind… I remember it used to sing, and it felt so nice against my skin. I’m not sure it could blow me away. I’m not sure if nature can touch me any longer with wind, or lightning. If I could touch it.” And he looked down towards the carpet. “Not that it matters anymore.”

Roy relaxed back into his chair and looked out the window once more. “Will you tell me about your childhood some?”

“What would you like to know?” Edward asked quietly.

“Anything… everything,” Roy admitted, and then a thought struck him. “Did you ever have a pet? Like a dog?”

What vibrated unreleased in his throat might have been best classified as a dark chuckle. “My mom never let us have pets. I remember the last time I tried… I’d found a kitten. Beautiful, soft thing. And she wouldn’t let me keep it. And so I abandoned it, just the way I’d found it, and I cried myself to sleep that night thinking of that poor cat.” Edward looked up briefly at Roy before glancing away. “Same thing happened with my brother. The only thing close to a pet that we ever had was Den, Winry’s dog.”

“I’m sure she had her reasons.”

“Oh, undoubtedly.” Edward tried not to feel bitter about it. He loved his mother. Enough to have tried to bring her back to life and subsequently lose his own. A lost pet or two wouldn’t change his love. But even so… most of his life had been spent doing things that he realized now were not the activities of a kid. Practicing alchemy obsessively, reading his estranged father’s large, ancient tomes, and so on. Very little of his time had been spent being a kid, playing with friends of his brother. In a lot of ways he felt as if he’d never been a child. Just this, in a child’s body. “And you? Did you have any pets?”

Roy shook his head, “no. But I took a pet in when I got promoted and had to take a desk job. I hate desk jobs, but it’s the quickest route for me to do what I need to to become the Fuhrer. At least it allowed me the luxury of being able to have a pet.”

“Dog?” Edward wondered aloud.

Roy laughed, and shook his head. “No. Not quite. I think I’ll save that little secret for later. Maybe I’ll bring him in and you can see for yourself.”

“I’d like that.” Edward admitted, he hadn’t seen an animal since his death. Speaking to Roy, and in general just having him here, he was beginning to recall just how displaced he was from the rest of the world. His entire life was contained in four walls of a building, and one that one day might be abandoned. Or torn down. And then what would become of him?

Such thoughts only made him soak up every moment with Roy even more.

As if sensing the dark shadow that had settled upon his companion, Roy slid down to the floor to sit with Edward. “You know,” he began as he looked at the ghost, “I’ll do whatever I can for you. You know that, right? I’ve never acted like this before, but no one else has needed me like you do. So if something’s bothering you, tell me.”
“I know I could.” Edward said, braving a smile as he looked at the man. “But there’s nothing anyone can do for such a thing as what weighs on my mind right now. Even you. But don’t think for a minute that I’m not happier than I’ve been in years. I’m happy because of you. I was so lonely… and then you came.”

Roy smiled back at him, “and I’ll do whatever I can to stay with you for as long as possible.”

Edward didn’t look away from that dark gaze, intrigued by their strange black color. He had seen people with dark brown eyes before, but these… these were black. And he was sure that this was how people had felt seeing his eyes… before they became silver. “I know.”

And the two of them sat there like that, eventually looking away, until there was a knock at the door.

Roy stood up, keeping himself from looking back down at the figure he knew was watching him. And he strode over to the door. He knew he could have just resumed his seat and called for the person to enter, but he felt a need to have some space all of a sudden. Not for anything bad, but because Edward… trying to figure the ghost out, and figure out his own place in this… it overwhelmed him.

The feeling that there was something more overwhelmed him.

Edward watched him leave, and stood up himself to lean up against the window panes. Gazing through them as if he could see what was there on the other side. Trying to picture a city skyline. Trying to see a flock of sparrows chasing each other through what he assumed was windy weather.

Roy opened the door, revealing a rather cheerful looking Fuery. “Yes?”

“We were all going to go out to grab something to eat, sir. Do you want to come? Or have us bring you something back?” He asked quickly.

“Go.” Edward said softly before Roy could answer. And he turned his head towards where Roy was now looking back at him, his posture that of a man in thought over the question. “You need to spend time with them as well. Otherwise they’re going to worry about you. And I won’t have your fall from what they deem as sanity on my conscious. I need you around, remember? Not in a mental institution.”

Roy said nothing to that. He couldn’t, not with Fuery still standing there. So he looked back to Fuery with a forced smile. “No, I’ll come.” And he glanced once back at Edward to see the ghost still watching him. And those silver eyes pierced his very soul until the moment the door blocked them from view.

Edward turned away with a sigh. He hadn’t meant to become so melancholy all of a sudden. But it had happened even so. He had these moments, they were understandable for someone in his position. “Clearly,” he whispered to the emptiness of the room, “I was wrong.”

Someone finally seeing him was not what it would ultimately take to break him free of his prison.

For not all meanings of the word ‘home’, came with definitions of happy freedom and domesticity.

And it wasn’t that he wanted to break free to stray around the world, away from Roy. He wanted to break free so that he could stay with Roy.

It was almost an hour before Roy returned.

By that time Edward had cheered up out of his dreary thoughts, and smiled as Roy walked in. “Did
you have fun?” He asked with true curiosity.

Roy smiled back as he walked over to take a seat on the edge of his desk, facing Edward who was floating up against the windows, legs bent up as if the ghost were sitting on a chair. “Yes, I did. I had your favorite.”

Edward’s expression was puzzled as he blinked at the man. His favorite? “I don’t understand.” He finally admitted. “My favorite what?”

“Thing to eat.” Roy expounded with a smile.

“Which was…?”

“A medium steak with a pepper-brandy sauce.” Roy said, a glint in his eye challenging the ghost to deny his claim.

Edward blinked again. “What makes you so sure? I died when I was eleven. Do you seriously think I’d have had steak at that age? Much less in a brandy sauce?”

“Pepper-brandy sauce.” Roy corrected.

Edward merely arched a silvery eyebrow.

Roy chuckled, and gave. “Because it’s my skill.” He explained. “I take all these men and women out on dates sometimes before I sleep with them. So I crafted the art of impressing them even further by honing my knack for guessing. And guessing correctly.”

“Roy,” Edward began with a smirk, “the only reason they say you guessed correctly is so that they seal their chance of getting into your pants. But I’m not looking to get into your pants, so I have no qualms about telling you that you’re incorrect.”

It was Roy’s turn to blink and look puzzled. “It wouldn’t matter… I’d still sleep with them.”

“And that’s because you’re the igniter of passionate flames.” Edward reached out as if to pat his cheek with a smacking stroke. “I know. But you see, the thing is… is that I always liked my steaks medium-rare with the pepper-brandy sauce.” And he flashed Roy a grin as the man’s eyes widened exponentially. “Which means you’re still wrong, by the way.”

Roy suddenly burst out laughing, “don’t ever make me panic like that again.”

“Why not? It’s funny.” Edward chuckled, and leaned back away from him. “No, Roy, you’ve yet to become proficient.”

“How about your favorite dessert?”

“Oh, yes.” Edward said, still laughing. “Pray tell, what used to be my favorite dessert?”

“Brownies, the ones with bits of hot fudge sauce still there as you bite into them as soon as you can get them out of the pan. Because of course, you never waited for them to finish cooling.” Roy said as he considered the ghost.

Edward hummed to himself, before smiling. “Those were very good.” And in the very instant Roy started to look victorious, said, “but they weren’t my favorite.”

“Ones without the fudge stuff?” Roy frowned, thrown. “Or perhaps you actually waited for them to finish cooling?”
“None of the above.” Edward’s smile turned devious. “Strike two for you with me. Now see, if this were a dinner date, your pants would be very empty afterwards. But go on, try for my drink. Now remember, as a child I wasn’t allowed to drink alcohol of any form. It only went into the cooking so the alcohol could cook off.”

Roy tapped a finger against his chin as he weighed his options. Few though they were. “Apple juice.”

Edward smirked at him. “Keep going…”

“The kind that is slushy with ice.” Roy finished confidently.

“Hmm…” Edward straightened from his sitting position. “One out of three. Congratulations. But your bed’s empty tonight.” And he swept past Roy to grab another book with a grin.

Roy scowled after him, but the scowl soon evaporated into a smile. And he made a thoughtful noise as he took his seat, feeling as if he’d just been enlightened. It was a very strange feeling indeed, and he kind of… liked it.

Edward was reading, and Roy was staring at his paperwork as if his glare could ignite it, when the knock they’d both been waiting for sounded at the office door. And in stepped Hawkeye.

“Sir, your furniture is here.”

Roy, who had scrambled for a pen before she opened the door, now laid it down with poise. As if he’d just not been in a frantic rush. Edward, who had been floating in his favorite corner, had plummeted to the floor so fast it was as if he had suddenly lost his ability to be in the air and fallen like a rock. But the book now lay unobtrusively on the floor.

…unless she should happen to spot it again. But it was better that Riza see a book lying there, than zooming through the air.

Edward would have loved though, to see Roy explain that.

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Roy smiled graciously as he stood.

Riza’s eyes gravitated to the stack of documents, and her eyes narrowed. “Sir, have you worked on that at all?”

“Enough chit-chat about work!” Roy announced grandly and strode around his desk. “We’ve got furniture to move so I can finish.”

Edward watched him with a smile playing on his lips while he lounged against the wall. Book beside him. “If she takes my book again, I’m throwing it at her when she turns to leave.”

Riza’s eyes narrowed, but she said nothing, instead retreating back to where the movers were. “Here they are. Instruct as you will.”

Roy gave Edward a pointed look, before he stepped out the door as well.

Edward took the hint. Grabbing the book he marked his place and quickly went over to place it with the others. Well out of Hawkeye’s reach of terror. He then took to floating up in his favorite corner of the ceiling so he was out of the way of people walking through him, and had a good view of the activity.
“Now all of this goes out. Into the courtyard out.” Roy said, picking up his stack of paperwork and letting it thump haphazardly into the cardboard box of his personal effects. He never saw a muscle near Hawkeye’s eye twitch. “It can stay there until after work, at which time I intend to incinerate it until it’s nothing more than fragile ash being swept away by the wind.”

“Dramatic.” Edward remarked, kicking one leg over the other as he leaned back against his corner.

And such began the process of furniture being moved out of the room, and new furniture being moved in. Roy gave directions on where he wanted everything placed. Everything except the couches. And when the movers went out of the office to get them and bring them in, he shot a look to the ghost. “Where?” He mouthed.

Edward sank to the floor and paced across the room, looking around as he did so. And finally he pointed. “Here and here. Bordering the table facing in, but move the table the other way.”

“But that completely negates the point of having a place to sit for people to face me.” Roy pointed out quietly, so as not to attract attention with the office door being open.

“No, not really.” Edward disagreed, looking over at him. “They expect and will want to face you. And when they can’t, it will throw everyone but the most confident off balance. Giving you more power.”

“I like power.” Roy mused, a hand worrying his chin as he considered the suggested layout.

Edward smirked, “and if that isn’t a convincing enough reason, look at it this way. It’ll save me the trouble of rearranging them myself after you leave tonight.”

That decided it, and Roy looked up as the movers came in, carrying a large black leather couch between two people. Followed by another two movers with the last one. “There and there. And then shift the table so it’s going the long way between them, and there will be leg room.”

Edward had floated over to sink into Roy’s new office chair. A sinfully indulgent leather creation that was much more fitted to curling up in. And he curled there, looking on as Roy finished handing out last minute instructions. Watched as people entered from and vanished into that white world beyond the door that he could not pass.

“Do you need help setting up in here, sir?” Riza asked as the movers started work on the work area for her and the rest of Roy’s team.

Roy shook his head. “No, you go make sure everything goes smoothly out there.” And as she departed, he closed the office door behind her. Only now that they were alone did he turn to Edward again. A smile he couldn’t help appeared on his face as he saw the ghost sitting curled up in his chair, looking as contented as a cat. “Is it nice?”

“Nicer than the other one.” Edward said as he relaxed back against it. “But like with everything else I touch, it’s just the same pressure. Always. I can’t feel anything but that pressure.” And he glanced at the chair cushioning him. “But I fit better into this one.”

Roy walked over to test out one of the couches, and a groan leaked from his lips. The leather cushioning wrapped around him, and was utterly the perfect medium between soft and firm. “Maybe I’ll have you pick out my home furniture as well. I’m sure I can find a reason to get new.”

Edward chuckled, and got out of the chair to pass through the desk and walk over to sink down beside Roy. “So you approve?”
“Absolutely.” Roy smiled over at him. “Are you happy with it?”

Edward looked around the room, and slowly nodded. “There’s just one thing missing.”

Roy’s eyes took on a curious glint. “And what’s that?”

“A picture.” Edward said softly as he continued looking around. “Do you have any pictures?”

Roy was about to answer that he didn’t, when a sudden thought came to him. “What do you want a picture of?”

Edward looked at him, puzzled. Did Roy intend to get him a picture of whatever he desired? Uncertain of Roy’s intentions, he answered. “A sunrise.” He answered softly.

Roy nodded, and filed away the information for later. Even if he wanted to race away to find Hughes and his damn camera right now. “Anything else?”

“…No” Edward replied after a moment. “Just that.”

After a few more minutes spent just sitting there on the couch with Edward, Roy stood up. “I better go get started on that paperwork. Then we can have another game of chess.”

And so Edward lounged on the couch with a book while Roy commenced the arduous task of signing his name to documents that required it. Every now and then Roy would ask if Edward had heard of a certain person, and if the ghost had, he’d share what he knew. But otherwise the office remained silent.

When Roy had finished, and set aside his pen, he began to pull his effects out of the cardboard box and set them where they belonged in his desk while Edward finished reading the page he was on. And by the time the ghost had, Roy was just beginning to set up the chess board.

“Black?” Roy guessed as he finished lining up the pawns in their orderly rows.

Edward nodded, and knelt in the air so that he could see over the top of the desk at a level that suited him. “It’ll be a cold day in that gate of hell when I choose white.”

“Perhaps that’s why you lost twice against me yesterday.” Roy smirked as he finished setting up the pieces. “You can’t stand the cold.”

“That doesn’t make as much sense as ‘you can’t stand the heat’.” Edward pointed out, and waited for Roy to move.

Roy chuckled in agreement. “Yes… but it wouldn’t have made any sense at all given the context. Now watch how masterfully I can kick your ass, and tell me why it’s slushy apple juice instead of chocolate milk like regular kids?”

Edward actually smiled, and moved forward one of his pawns following Roy’s first advancement. “I despise milk in all forms except sweets. I wasn’t about to give up cake. Chocolate milk never qualified as a “sweet” to me. And there was an orchard about a few miles down the road… I remember going there with Al and picking apples to bring back home to mom. She’d turn them into juice and set them out on the porch at night to chill. And in the morning they’d be slushy and wonderful.” His smile turned wistful. “I miss the mornings.”

“Is that why you asked for a picture of the sunrise?” Roy asked, unmindful that it wasn’t his turn for a question.
Edward didn’t catch the slip. “One of them.” He answered and moved forward another pawn. “And what of yourself? What drink do you like the most? Coffee? Hard liquors in vast quantities?”

“Neither.” Roy answered, and knew that if his few friends or acquaintances had heard him say that, they’d be doubtful. But it was the truth. “I like hot chocolate. With a cinnamon and peppermint stick… a bit of whipped cream sprinkled with cinnamon.”

Edward made a face at the mention of cream. “I’ve actually never had hot chocolate. Reminded me too much of chocolate milk to ever make me want to taste it.”

Roy smiled and moved one of his knights that was quickly taken by a clever move of a bishop. He hadn’t seen that one coming, but it was perfectly legal and logical now that he’d seen it done. “And how about this mystery favorite dessert of yours?” Roy ventured lazily, “my next guess is apple pie with caramel sauce. Am I right?”

“Not even close.” Edward smirked at him. At this rate, Roy was never going to guess it. And for some reason, that thought made him feel very pleased with himself.

“You’re joking.” Roy gaped at him.

“Not a bit.” Edward informed him, and moved a rook forward to intercept and annihilate yet another pawn. “Why is guessing it so important to you? It’s not like I can eat it anymore anyway.”

Roy shrugged, “can’t explain it myself. I’d say it’s a habit of mine, but it’s not. Not unless you’re on the other side of a dinner table.”

Edward scowled as his rook was removed by a simple pawn. “Perhaps that’s why you’re failing so miserably at guessing. Don’t be too hard on yourself.”

“Thanks for the ego stroking.” Roy laughed quietly, and contemplated Edward’s latest move.

“You are a Flame Alchemist. Must keep the fires fanned unless we want you to fizzle out.” Edward joked.

Roy could appreciate the humor there. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Black.” Edward said, waving an absent hand at the couches. “And not for any morbid or depressed reasons. I like a true black, the shiny one that’s so black it shines blue in the sun. I find it fascinating. Or, I did… when I could still see the sun.”

“So you like my hair then?” Roy grinned at him unabashedly.

Edward looked up from the chess board to give him a bland look. “Let’s not get too vain now. I’m no more attracted to you than I am to a vacuum cleaner.”

“You know, alchemically modified and used correctly, the suction-” Roy broke off with a yelp as a pawn hit him square in the forehead.

Edward sniffed in displeasure. “I don’t want to know what perverted ideas are in your head about vacuum cleaners.”

Roy retrieved the pawn with a bit of a laugh. “So is it the gender then?”

“I’m a ghost.” Edward glared at him. “And the gender isn’t an issue. It’s the fact that I’m a ghost, and you’re the exact opposite of what I’d want even if I were alive.”
“You mean some poor sod who ventures into that commitment thing?” Roy queried.

“Yes, a poor sod just like that.” Edward smirked, and raised an eyebrow at his companion. “Are you suggesting that I’d not be worth it?”

If Roy had ever felt thrown before, it didn’t compare at all to how he felt now.

Edward burst out laughing. “Don’t worry, I’m just playing with you. Your move.” And he grinned at what he’d managed with Roy only paying a fraction of attention to the game. “Oh and by the way, checkmate.”

Roy looked down, and swore.

Edward burst out laughing again.

By the time five o’clock came along, they were tied with wins and losses. And in Roy’s case, a little out of breath from laughing so much. But Edward’s eyes danced with the same laughter. And together they put away the chess set for tomorrow.

“I’ll be back in the morning with more books for you to read.” Roy promised, and began to court the thought of moving his entire home library here for Edward’s use.

Edward grinned at the prospect. “I still have two to keep me occupied tonight.”

Roy nodded, “I’ll see you tomorrow then.” And he walked to the door, taking what now felt like a habitual glance back at Edward as the ghost settled into his office chair. “Goodnight.”

Edward watched him with that piercing silver gaze. “Goodnight, Roy.”

As Roy walked out he went over to Maes who was getting his coat. “I have a favor to ask.” He said quietly. “Can I talk to you alone?”

Maes gave his best friend a curious look, but nodded. “Yeah, Roy.”

Roy nodded as well, and turned to walk with Maes out into the hallway. And they chatted about nothing of much consequence, and Maes showed a grudging Roy his latest pictures of Elysia. But when the picture show of torture was over, Roy pulled Maes aside so they could walk through the park. Empty for right now of the couples who would frequent it later, and the children who had rushed home minutes earlier for dinner. “This is going to sound strange, but it’s very important to me.”

Maes frowned at his friend, there was something up with the man. “Ask your favor. If it’s important to you, you know I’ll do what I can. You’re my best friend.”

Roy smiled. Yes, Maes was, even if he did manage to get on the nerves every now and then. But that was just part of Maes being Maes. “I need you to take a picture for me tomorrow morning of the sunrise. Have it blown up to about—” he motioned with his hands, “and framed. Bring it in to work. I don’t care how late you are, and I’ll put the cost on the business expenses.”

Whatever request Maes had been expecting, it sure wasn’t that. “You want me to take a picture of the sunrise, blow it up, and have it framed?”
“Yeah.” Roy scratched at the back of his neck, and looked over at his friend. “I know it sounds odd, but please? You’re the only one I know who’s good with a camera.”

Maes glowed at the flattery. “I’ll do it. You wouldn’t ask if it didn’t have a purpose. Just one thing, do you have a setting for this sunrise of yours? Facing away from the city, or with the skyline in it?”

Roy thought about that for a good minute. It was a problematic decision at best. On one hand, Edward had grown up in Risembool, which was countryside. So a sunrise with the open fields surrounding Central might be the most appealing. But on the other hand, Edward had never seen Central. He was locked in an office in Central, but had never seen the city he was captive in. “With the skyline.” He finally decided. A sunrise over fields could be shot anywhere, by any idiot with a camera. But he believed that Maes would be able to capture something far rarer.

“I’ll do that.” Maes promised. “Now why don’t you come over for dinner. Gracia is making lasagna, and we can never eat it all ourselves.”

Roy smiled at the offer, it had been too long since he’d been over to share dinner with them. “In that case I’d love to. Thanks.” And he fell in step with the man as they walked through the park.
Edward had stayed up reading the night away. And had finished the last book just recently. Now he was sprawled on one of the black leather couches, staring up at the ceiling. If he stared long enough, he could make out designs in the paint strokes left by a brush, instead of the roller he would have assumed would be used for the ceiling. One would have thought that by now he’d seen all that could be imagined from a ceiling. But he could never see the same thing from day to day.

So without a new book to read, and no Roy for another two hours—last he’d checked the clock on the wall—he resorted to staring at the ceiling. For he really dared not try and lost touch again with his fractured reality and happen across that nightmare.

He knew that based on previous experience, he wouldn’t have that nightmare of the gate again for at least a year… but like all the times before, he couldn’t close his eyes for days afterwards.

At the peripheral of his vision he saw the door to the office open. By now he expected Hawkeye to come in before Roy in order to drop off the work for the day. So he didn’t bat an eye at the movement. Only when he realized it wasn’t Hawkeye that passed by him on the way to Roy’s desk, did he jerk up to sit on the couch while peering around.

It was Roy’s best friends… Hughes, Maes Hughes, if he remembered correctly.

His curiosity was engaged when he saw the man lay a brown paper wrapped package on Roy’s desk. It was only about an inch thick, and approximately twenty-four inches wide by about twelve long.

“I’m never letting him live this down.” Maes was gloating to himself. “He called me good with a camera and commissioned one. I’m holding this over the head until the day he dies.” He rubbed his hands together and made his way back to the office door so he could leave.

Edward didn’t watch him go. He heard the door click shut, but otherwise he had swung his legs over the edge of the couch so he could stand and walk over to the package. He knew he shouldn’t open Roy’s things, but the twine ties seemed to beckon him like a siren call. His hands hesitated at first in reaching for it, fingertips brushing the packaging before he lowered them back to take the object into his hands.

Walking through the desk he sat in Roy’s desk chair and laid the package on his lap. His fingers plucked at the twine knots, causing them to loosen and then fall open. He let the twine pool onto Roy’s desk, and then carefully pulled back the brown paper. It crackled in the silence of the office, and when shed revealed the back matting and frame.

His metaphorical heart was somewhere in his throat as he gripped the edges. Surely it couldn’t be… could it? And he flipped it over.

From beneath the shiny glass, a morning sunrise shone up at him. The bottom of it broken by the dark shapes of buildings. Leading him to believe that this was the skyline of the city he was in. The city he’d never seen. But the sunrise… it was beautiful. Pinks, golds, reds and oranges. The sky nearest the top edges was a darker blue that gradually faded into a blue so light it was almost white by the time it reached the skyline of the city. And while the skyline itself was dark, it almost looked as if there was a glittery fog weaving between the shapes of what must be separate buildings.
Despite the fact he couldn’t technically breathe, Edward’s breath was lodged somewhere in his throat. And he drew ghostly fingers over the surface of the glass, touching the colors, lingering on the gold. “I’d forgotten how beautiful it is…” he whispered in a forlorn voice.

And he floated back over to the couch to be with his photograph of the sunrise. He turned so his back was against the arm of the couch, and his feet up on the cushion to angle his knees. And he laid it there against his thighs, holding the frame in one hand while the fingers of his other ghosted over the beautiful colors.

It was like that, that Roy found him.

Roy shut the door quietly upon seeing what Edward was doing. The ghost was by all appearances, totally engrossed in the picture on his lap. And he smiled, silently thanking Maes. He’d never seen such an expression on Edward’s face before, and it made him feel both happiness and sadness all at once. He set the new stack of books he’d brought for Edward down on the floor, and unnoticed by all accounts, he crossed the room to kneel beside Edward. And he met the ghost’s startled gaze with a kindly one of his own. “Will it do?”

Edward was frozen for several moments, before he nodded quickly. “It’s beautiful. I’d forgotten just how beautiful.”

Roy looked around at the picture now, and began to believe that Maes might just have a second job option. It was perfect. “It is.” He agreed, and looked back at Edward.

“You had him do this for me…” Edward stated softly, it was not a question in his mind. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Roy replied as he continued to kneel there beside the ghost. “Now when you’re ready we should get that up on the wall. And I brought more books for you.”

Edward’s eyes tracked over to where the books were piled on the floor, and a happy smile lit his face. Not unlike the smile that had appeared when he’d first laid eyes on his photograph of the sunrise. “Today is going to be great.” He said with conviction.

Roy grinned, and stood. “That’s the spirit, spirit.” He teased, earning himself a glower. And he walked over to his desk, a frown reaching his face as he spotted something missing. Something he couldn’t find under Edward’s abandoned wrappings from the picture. “Ed?”

Edward, who had left the framed photograph on the couch and was now rifling through the new books, looked over at him. “Yeah?” He asked back, and turned to examine a cover of one volume. “Has Riza been in here yet?”

“No. Just Maes Hughes, that’s his name, right?”

“Right…” Roy agreed distractedly. He hadn’t seen Riza on his way in either. But he’d not gotten any phone calls from her saying she was running late. Or was feeling ill. So where in the name of the Gate was that woman?

Not that he was complaining about not having his paperwork or anything. He still had most of yesterday’s left to finish going through. But it wasn’t like Hawkeye to just not be on time without telling anyone.

Edward walked the books over to set them on Roy’s desk, taking one into his hands. “Is everything okay?”
Roy sank into his chair, looking up at the ghost. “It’s not like her to be late. I’m just a bit concerned. Even though I know she can take care of herself.”

Edward smiled, rather happy that Roy seemed to be so concerned anyway about a member of his team. It was rare for people in the military to be concerned about anyone but themselves, as he’d come to understand. “I’m sure she’s fine. She probably just lost track of time.”

Roy knew Edward was probably right, but still. Even so, he smiled back at him. “Did you stay up reading last night again?”

With a nod, Edward floated backwards to sink onto the couch. “With you bringing me books and such, I really don’t have any reason to go into my version of sleeping. It was always kind of a way to pass the time, more than anything. And no sleeping means I don’t have bad dreams, or nightmares again.”

“Bad dreams?” Roy echoed. He knew what Edward referred to when he said ‘nightmares’. He’d seen the effects of that nightmare first hand, and it hadn’t been pleasant to witness. But this was the first time he’d heard of just regular bad dreams.

“I only have ever had two dreams, if I dream at all.” Edward said as he opened the book, and then held up two silvery fingers. “Just two. That nightmare,” he bent one finger down, “and then my memory of the night my brother and I attempted the human transmutation. I always wake up from them at the same time.” His last finger bent and that hand returned to help keep the book open.

Roy couldn’t help but think that such a thing hardly seemed fair. Yet he refrained from putting his thoughts into words on that matter. “Do you want to talk about them at all? It may help.”

Edward shrugged. “Not much to tell. Not that I haven’t already alluded to. And if having the same ones over and over again hasn’t helped with me getting used to them, and not having the same reaction each time, than talking won’t do much good. No offense against whatever psychiatric skills you may have.”

Smirking a bit at that, Roy began to twirl his pen in one hand. Just to try and give himself something tactile to do to try and keep his mind off of being concerned about his missing Lieutenant. “I assure you, they are quite amazing. But okay.”

Edward gave a short laugh and flipped to the first page of this new book. “Have you ever used them on yourself?”

The pen stopped twirling as Roy tried to make sense of what it was Edward was actually trying to ask there. “Beg pardon?” Yes, he finally gave it up.

“Were you unloved as a child? Is that why you seek out so many different partners to share a bed with?” Edward asked in quite the conversational tone, as if all he was doing was remarking about the weather. Were he to actually know what the weather was like.

The pen resumed its twirling. “No.” Roy leaned back in his chair, casting his gaze off to the side back towards one of the windows. “My mother loved me very much, she still does. I seek out so many people because I happen to enjoy the nightly activities. And I dare not let it last more than one night.”

“So you want the physical connection to enjoy, but not an emotional one?” Edward pieced together, a slight frown beginning to appear. “Did someone break your heart?”

Roy felt as if he were staring off into nothingness, completely unaware of anything except Edward’s
voice floating to him through a sea of displacement. “No.” He replied, a bit more thoughtfully. “Not exactly.” How exactly did they manage to move from discussing Hawkeye and bad dreams to discussing his bedroom life? “I just don’t believe I’m capable of being a monogamous being. One person for the rest of my life? I’d cry my eyes out.”

Edward rolled his eyes at the declaration. “You’re a bit of a drama queen.”

“And you’re a bit of a runt.” Roy countered with an evil smile as he turned to see the ghost’s expression.

Edward glared up from the book. “I am not! I’m a scary, tall ghost! Not anything as puny sounding as a ‘runt’. And while we’re on the subject, you can stop wearing stilts.”

“Me and everyone else?” Roy grinned.

“Yes.” Edward scowled, and dared the man to deny that such was the case.

Roy chuckled under the scowl. Yes, his ghostly companion most definitely had concerns about his lack of height. “I’d show you my legs, but I won’t.”

“Please don’t.” Edward replied, scowl beginning to waver into something much like an amused smile. “It’s far too early in the morning for me to be seeing a bunch of hairy legs on stilts.”

Roy grinned at him. “You know, Ed, if you were still alive we could get you stilts.”

“I don’t need them!” Edward denied vehemently. “I’m not short, and I’m dead.”

Silently, Roy was glad that Edward was so accepting of being dead. For otherwise he could really do some damage. But as it was, Edward didn’t mind talking about it.

“Now let me read, you finish that work you left overnight, and then we can play chess again.” Edward said, flipping a page in his book. “Otherwise Riza is going to bring more in here, see that all of that is still not done, and who knows if I’ll get even one game of chess then.”

Roy groaned, but it was difficult to try and find it in himself to launch a protest against the ghost. Against anyone else, sure. But Edward held a certain sway over him already because of the circumstances of their acquaintance. It hadn’t even been a week, and Edward could get him to listen better than Hawkeye could. He was glad they’d never meet. So he turned his attention to the stack of paperwork, and put his pen to the task.

It was the moment that Roy touched pen to paper that the office door swung open. The pen remained firmly gripped as Roy let his gaze drift upward nonchalantly. The book Edward was reading slipped down through his legs as the ghost stopped trying to touch inanimate objects. However that subsequently meant he fell through the couch to the floor with a shriek. Roy wasn’t sure how he managed to keep from laughing.

Hawkeye strode in, a stack of papers and folders in her arms. But something was amiss with the stack. Something… added. And that added item could very well be the reason her face looked less than apologetic about being late. “Get them done today.” She said, letting them thump to the desk.

Riza snatched up the bouquet that Roy had chosen against trying to rescue, before the flowers fell to the floor. Not that it wasn’t a better place than Roy would probably put them. “These are for you.” She said, thrusting them at him.
Edward had gotten to his feet and padded over to look on. His eyes narrowed as they landed on the flowers.

Roy took them with a frown. “You got me flowers? That’s why you’re late?”

Hawkeye itched to pull her gun. However, as things were, she didn’t have it. But as soon as she was done here, she’d go get it back from whoever had it and shoot them in the foot. She’d been ambushed by the rest of the team, who upon seeing her face when she walked in, immediately had declared she needed hugs. And when *that* was over, she’d found the room suddenly empty, and her gun missing. “They’re not from me. Read the card.” She waved a hand at it.

Roy noticed the white card sticking out of the middle and pulled it free. Letting the flowers fall to the desk he opened it. “It must be from that girl a few nights ago. She wants to see me again.” He rolled his eyes. “I think I’ll pass. Strict policy.”

Riza rolled her eyes, now accustomed to her superior’s strange habits regarding those he slept with. But whatever she was about to say in response to it fell silent as her eyes landed on the other stack of paperwork. And now, more than before, she wished for her gun. “Sir,” she gritted out, “are those from *yesterday*?”

Roy looked down at them, then back up at her, and nodded. “They are, how astute of you, Lieutenant.”

Riza gaped at him. “Don’t get smart with me! You need to get that done! This is *Central*, what we’ve all been waiting for. Don’t screw it up.”

“I’ve already just been told to get it done.” Roy frowned at her, “I’m getting it done. Now go on, shoo. I can handle this. I know sometimes you think I can’t, but I’m not where I am for nothing.”

“Was Maes in here and got on your case about it for me?” Riza folded her arms across her chest. Roy snorted, “it’s just as bad as having my mother here.”

“Hey!” Edward protested.

Riza rolled her eyes, “maybe she should be. You’d get it done faster.”

“You call her, and I’m court marshaling you.” Roy warned her severely.

Normally she might call it an empty threat, but… when it came down to Roy and his mother, Riza was more willing to believe such a threat. “Just get it done. And tell the people you screw from now on not to stop me on my way to work and force their flowers for you onto me.” With that, she turned and left.

The office door closed sharply behind her.

“She’s in a bad mood.” Edward mumbled quietly as he stared after her retreat.

Roy chuckled softly and looked over at him. “Just a bit. But this isn’t the first time something like this has happened to her. She’s actually a lot more tame than she was the first time.”

Edward looked over at him curiously. “Does she have a crush on you or something?”

“No.” Roy glanced towards the door she’d disappeared behind. “A lot of people have thought so over the years, but no. We’re more like friends in the brotherly-sisterly way. I could never think of
Turning to the flowers, Edward picked them up to examine them critically through once more narrowed eyes. He didn’t like these flowers. At all. Whoever this girl was, she clearly had no sense of what was pretty. “Why not send you something useful? Like chocolates? Since she clearly can’t choose flowers to save her miserable puppy-love love life.”

“I’d not eat chocolates from them even if they were sent.” Roy replied, and chucked the card into the trash bin without further ado. “I’d be worried about them being poisoned somehow. Some of the people I’ve…” he gave a wry smirk, “well, let’s just say they weren’t too happy to wake up and find me gone.”

Edward hummed to himself, and couldn’t find fault in that. “Well I’m glad you’re not going back to this one. She sent you weeds.” And he offered them back to Roy.

Roy took them, only to toss them up into the air and snap his fingers. There was only a single spark of warning before the entire bouquet burst into flames. There weren’t even ashes left when the fire just vanished into thin air. “And that takes care of that.” And he picked up his pen again. “Time to work.”

Edward’s jaw was hanging, he knew it was, and he let it. “Wow.”

Roy looked up, curiosity exchanging for secret delight and obvious smugness as he caught sight of Edward’s face. “Not seen anything like that before?”

Edward shut his jaw as he saw the smug look Roy was fixing him with. “No. Do you do that to all the flowers that get sent to you?”

“Every single one.” Roy said with conviction. “Now maybe you understand why people are afraid of me. I can incinerate a single person in less than a minute. Reduce them to ash… or nothing at all. It’s not an easy alchemy to control, so that makes me unique. Valuable. And it makes me a threat, which is why my superiors can sometimes be convinced to go out of their way for me. They don’t know I want to become Fuhrer though.”

“Not like I’m going to tell them.” Edward replied, and settled onto the edge of the desk. “But I think I understand now…”

Roy smiled at him. “Don’t worry, ghost. Even if my alchemy could touch you, I’d never let it. I don’t want you to ever be afraid of me.”

Edward sniggered at that, “ghosts aren’t scared of anything but a certain Gate.” And he nodded to Roy’s paperwork. “Best get started on that. You have twice as much now.”

How he wished it wasn’t true. But nevertheless Roy turned to the papers with a silent sigh. “And depending on how bad her mood is, she just might find more stuff for me to do. Just for spite.”

Edward smiled, and slipped off Roy’s desk to float back over to the couch where he’d left his book. “So about your mother?”

“Hmm?” Roy didn’t bother giving form to his answer.

“Do you like her?” Edward asked, recalling how Roy hadn’t seemed to want his mother to be dragged into anything. And how he’d implied it was a bad thing that he was being “mothered” into doing his work.
Roy smiled faintly, though he’d have denied he had should the question be brought up. Luckily the ghost couldn’t tell anyone, and probably couldn’t see thanks to the angle his head was bent at. “I love my mother very much. That’s why I don’t want her involved in my work here. Even if she’d gladly do so, she’s always pushing me to do better. But I don’t want her involved, because I care for her. And the closer I get to my goals, the better it is that until I’m Fuhrer, she remain absent from the conscious minds of my superiors.”

“Oh. I’m glad…” Edward was, too. He’d want to protect his mother if he could. Not that it mattered now. “What’s she like? Besides pushy?”

Roy smiled a bit more, and signed his name once again. “Very nice, but very strong-willed. She won’t let people push her around because she is nice. I think, besides Maes, she’s the one person who might believe me about you without believing that I’ve gone insane.”

Edward looked up at his book. “You’re planning to try telling them about me?”

“No.” Roy shook his head, “I won’t take the chance that I’m wrong. So you’re my little secret for the rest of my life.”

“Little?” Edward arched a silvery eyebrow, a finger tapping at the pages of the book.

Roy smiled up at him now. “You know how I mean it. Quit being difficult, you’ll ruin the moment.”

Edward was about to ask what moment, when he decided to drop it. And he turned back to reading with a smile, and Roy got back to his paperwork. If only he would be able to be with Roy for the rest of the man’s life. If only he could get out of this office. Then he’d never have to be lonely again.

They passed the hours of Roy working much as they had before. Roy filling out the paperwork, occasionally asking Edward about something he believed the ghost might know about, and Edward reading from the books Roy had brought him.

Near to the lunch hour Roy had finished with the first stack, and he stood while stretching. “Come on, I need a break. Where do you want that picture hung?”

Edward set his book aside after marking his place, and looked about the office. “I suppose I can’t very well insist it be fastened to the ceiling.”

Roy chuckled with a shake of his head. “That I have to say no to. Sorry.”

Floating to his feet Edward began to revolve slowly in place as he took in his options. Finally he floated over to a section of wall to the right side of the door. “Here.” He said, making a general sweeping motion with his hand to indicate the area. “I am usually on that couch… so if it’s here I can see it easiest.”

Roy nodded, and walked over to pick up the photograph from the couch and bring it over. “Up, down, or good?” He queried as he held the frame up to the wall while looking over his shoulder at Edward.

The ghost tried to ignore Roy’s amused look. So he’d floated up to be at the same height as him, it wasn’t that amusing! “Up a bit more.” And he watched as Roy slowly crept the picture up the wall. “There.”

“Right or left? Good?”

“It’s fine there.” Edward said, and took over holding the photograph up while Roy fetched a hammer.
and a nail from the world beyond the office door.

And after several ringing blows of a hammer later, the nail was secure in the wall, and the photograph was hung. They both stepped back to admire it.

“He really does shoot a good picture.” Roy mused as he fiddled with the hammer.

Edward smiled in agreement, and looked over at Roy. “Thank you. And thank him for me as well… somehow.”

“I’ll figure something out.” Roy promised him, and turned away to go return the hammer and leave Edward to stare at the picture of the sunrise he’d been missing for so long. He slipped it into the box, before deciding to ask why all the men looked so scared and Riza looked so pleased with herself. “Did something happen?” He asked, glancing over the nervous figures of Falman, Breda, Havoc, and Fuery.

Riza ran a slender finger along the barrel of her newly found gun. “Just a disciplinary exercise.”

Roy decided he didn’t want further explanation. “So who’s getting lunch today? Or are we going out? And where is Maes?”

Falman found his tongue first. “He went to go get the food. Since he isn’t in… trouble.” He practically whispered the last word.

No… he really didn’t want to know. “I see. Well have him bring mine in to me, not one of you. I need to speak to him.”

And with that he went back inside the office.

Edward was still staring at the photograph, sitting cross-legged in the air as he gazed straight ahead at it. “The buildings… is that Central?”

Roy nodded and came over to stand beside him. “A part of it, yes. I thought you’d like to see a bit of the place you live now.”

“Yes… very much.” Edward agreed softly.

Roy wasn’t quite sure of how long he stood there with Edward before he turned to let the ghost have some time to look on his own. And he went back to his desk to continue with the paperwork, knowing that Edward still wanted to play some chess today.

When there was a knock on the office door, and Maes poked his head in, Edward was still over by the photograph, and Roy looked up from his paperwork. “Hey, Hughes.”

Hughes grinned and entered, bearing with him a plastic bag of takeout. “So, you wanted to talk?” He asked as he looked around. He spotted the picture already hanging and grinned. “I guess you liked it then.”

Roy smiled. “It was perfect. But yes, I want to talk. Thank you, more than anything.”

Edward, who at Maes’s arrival, had turned away from his picture-gazing, now floated after the man. Quite close behind. “Does he have more pictures?” He asked in a verging on giddy voice. He hadn’t seen pictures in a long time. And having that photograph had reawakened the want to view such things.
Roy believed that such a white lie as to say no to such a question might be a good thing.

Maes plopped the takeout on Roy’s desk. “You’re welcome. Mind if I ask though why the sudden desire to actually have one of my pictures?”

“It’s complicated.” Roy rolled his eyes. And knew now that there would be no tricking Edward into thinking Maes might not have more. “Let’s just leave it at that and have you know that I am eternally grateful.”

“Now you’re eternally grateful?” Maes blinked at him. “Talk about complicated, you’re acting weird lately. I mean, even not going out every night since we’ve been back and painting the town. I know Hazel is great and all, but are you okay? This isn’t some kind of bucket list thing, is it? Give in and actually ask Maes for a picture?”

Roy snorted at the idea that his squirrel might be a better companion than a one night stand. “Hazel is a damn alarm clock is what he is. But I’m fine, perfectly healthy. I just had a bit of a wakeup call I guess…” and he glanced Edward’s way, meeting those silver eyes that once again had taken on that look that made it feel as if Edward were seeing straight to his soul. “But I really would rather not talk about it.”

Hughes frowned, but decided it was best not pursued just yet. Though he wasn’t planning on letting Roy slip by so easily with news like that. What sort of wakeup call could someone like his best friend receive that was so quickly influencing him? “You do realize I won’t drop this?”

“You’re my best friend, I’d be offended if you did.” Roy smiled at him, and pulled his lunch across his desk. “Just remember you may ask, and I may not tell.”

Edward snorted softly. “You won’t tell him. The chances that he’d admit you to a psychiatric ward may be slim, but it’s enough to cause you to refrain. Because you know I don’t want to lose you.”

Roy let his gaze rest on the ghost, even as Maes spoke.

“I’d be offended if it were any different.” Maes smirked, “well if that’s all, I have a certain general to go keep watch over like you asked me to after dinner.”

Roy nodded, he remembered. He’d asked Maes before leaving that night he’d been invited over for dinner to keep an eye on Basque Grand. He had told his friend that he had his suspicions about what the man was secretly up to. Yet when Hughes had asked for his source, and he’d not given it, there’d been no argument. “Thank you. And yes, that is all for now.”

Hughes nodded, and departed with a half-assed salute that looked more like a wave.

Edward watched Maes go with a small smile, glad that Roy had someone like that man for a best friend. But when the door to the office clicked shut, he turned back to Roy to see the man’s eyes on him yet again. “What?”

“Do you think that’s the only reason I refrain?” He asked, eyes sparkling in humor as he watched the ghost.

“From telling him?”

“Yes.”

Edward shrugged, “seems like a pretty good reason to me.”
Roy began to open his takeout containers of food. “It is.” But he wasn’t sure that just yet he should admit what he was only beginning to realize himself. That he didn’t want to be parted from Edward either. He enjoyed having Edward to come to work to everyday, it made it more bearable. And so far he had enjoyed the time they’d spent together.

Edward gave him an odd look, but floated back over to the couch to settle back down onto his back and pick up the book again. Finding where he’d left off, he continued his reading. Only pausing to say: “I’m glad you have Hughes keeping an eye on that snake. Happier that it’s not you.”

Roy looked up from collecting another bite of chow mien on his chopsticks to smile a bit. He could only see the top of Edward’s head, his feet, and the ghostly arms holding the book up in the air. “I know when to use which chess pieces.”

Which left Edward attempting to keep reading, but truthfully, he was trying to figure out if Roy meant that as a jab to his chess playing skills. Either way, he planned to school Roy around the board this afternoon.

The hours passed in a steady progression of papers being signed, and pages being flipped. Until at last Roy was carrying out the large stack of paperwork to hand it off to Hawkeye. He’d left Edward to set up the chess board, and was not surprised to come back and see that the ghost had positioned himself with the black pieces.

“My turn first to ask?” Edward propositioned as Roy sat across from him.

Roy moved a white pawn forward without delay. “Go ahead.”

Edward did, with both a black pawn and his question. “Who is Hazel?”

Roy grinned at the question, thinking fondly of his rust-brown ball of fluff. “My pet.” And knowing that such a simple answer would be wanting clarification, he made a decision. “He should be adjusted enough that if I brought him with me tomorrow it would be okay. And you could see him.”

“You can bring your pets to work?” Edward asked in amazement. He’d never heard of such a thing, and certainly never seen it done before.

Roy shook his head. “Only if they’re dogs, and trained for military type duties. Like guarding. So I’ll have to sneak Hazel in, but none of my team will say anything. They enjoy him far too much to want to get me into trouble.”

“What is Hazel, exactly?” Edward frowned.

“You’ll see tomorrow. Secret, remember?” And Roy moved one of his knights forward.

“Your turn.” Edward said in way of agreement, and contemplated his next maneuver.

Roy thought for a moment on what he wanted to ask. “Why haven’t you asked me yet whether or not I ever found your father?”

The innocent pawn in Edward’s grasp was subjected to a stranglehold and a less than nice placement back to the board. “Because I don’t care about the bastard anymore. I can only hope he met a painful end for what he put us all through. Just abandoning us one day… and then mom was sick. We were left all alone when she died. And where was he?” Edward scowled. “If you did ever find him, I hope you put those flames of yours to the same use as you turned on those weeds.”

“I never did.” Roy finally said after getting over his initial shock of Edward actually showing signs
of true anger. Not that brought on by calling him short, or anything else. But a true anger that he felt
was deep-seated. “I looked for him though. Not just for you and your brother, but because he is a
very powerful alchemist. And at that time…” a shadow passed through his black eyes, “well, the
military could have used his help. Not that we didn’t cause enough damage on our own.”

Edward stared darkly at the chess board. “I can only hope he’s just as much a part of this world as I
am. Not that I’d wish entrapment such as mine on anyone, but he’d deserve it.” And he captured one
of Roy’s bishops cleanly. “The Ishval war was going on around that time… or had been. Right?”

“That’s the one.” Roy agreed in a level tone that did not betray his feelings on the matter.

“Maybe he got killed in battle. And no one ever found the body.” Edward mused, the idea had its
delightful merits.

Roy moved a rook across the board to knock off one of Edward’s pawns that had been steadily
creeping unchecked into his territory. “What do you know of the war?”

“Just what I’ve overheard from brief conversations.” Edward shrugged, “they never talked about it
much in this office. And my mother never talked about it. No one did, really. I know my friend
Winry’s parents were killed in it. They were doctors. But that’s the way wars go. People die, good
and bad.”

Roy was glad for his mask, lest Edward see what effect those words had really wrought. He still
hadn’t made peace with his part to play in that whole fiasco. And he wasn’t sure that he wanted to.
Because it was the memory of those awful days that pushed him to become Fuhrer. So he need never
take such orders again. “It’s not a popular subject.” He replied. “I think if the Fuhrer could cover it
up, he would. But there’s no chance of that ever happening now.”

“Would you try to cover it up? If it were possible?” Edward finally asked. “I know you want to be
Fuhrer.”

Roy shook his head without having to think about it. “No. I despise government cover-ups.”

“What do you like to do besides come to work, alchemy, and various people that let you get them on
their back?” Edward asked, shooting for a more light-hearted topic.

Roy smirked at that last part. “I enjoy the theater, and good food and wine. Oh, and the one my
mother would kill me for if she knew… but I have a motorcycle. I like to go on drives. You know,
just lose myself for a while.”

“She’d kill you for having a motorcycle, but not for bedding anything on two legs that walked and
hadn’t been touched yet?” Edward grinned at him.

Roy considered the question, and then nodded abruptly. “Yep. That’s my mom.”

“That’s terrible, but I must say I agree with her. Those things are dangerous.” Edward gave him a
severe look. “You best be careful, else I’ll be upset with you if you come back to work all banged
up.”

Roy smiled at him. “Don’t worry. I always am careful. Have a helmet and everything. And besides
that, it’s all in the reflexes. I never drive faster than I can see.”

Edward snickered, though he knew he probably shouldn’t.

Roy grinned, and the game recommenced with vengeance. They both were keen to win, and neither
was about to give the other any breathing room. And for the first time ever, one game lasted up until it was almost time for Roy to leave, and they were down to just their kings.

And they were stalking each other around the board.

“Oh come on, Roy!” Edward complained as he moved after the retreating king once again. “Show some balls, or have you used them so much over the past that they can no longer function? Kind of like a dead battery.”

Roy scoffed. “I’m doing no differently than what you were. Except this time you’re the one backing me into the corners.”

“And doing a wonderful job of it.” Edward congratulated himself.

Ten minutes later, and two minutes past the end of the workday, Edward captured the ball-less king at last. And with much glee.

“I’m getting you for that tomorrow.” Roy promised as he packed the chess set away so he could leave.

Edward grinned. “I look forward to it. And don’t forget to bring Hazel with you. I want to see him.”

Roy smiled back in return. “Don’t worry.” And once the chess set was put away, he moved over to the door, sharing that last look back with Edward. “I’ll see you tomorrow. You’re all okay for the night?”

Edward nodded, giving him a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry about me, I’ll be fine. You go get some sleep tonight.”

Roy snorted. “Doubtful. I’m feeling rested again, and there’s a bar not too far away.”

Edward rolled his eyes. “You’ll come in tomorrow looking terrible again.”

Roy laughed and winked at him. “Then good thing I’m bringing Hazel to help keep you entertained and me awake.” And he opened the door at last. “Goodnight, Ed.”

“Goodnight.” Edward called after him, and turned to find a book as Roy moved out the door. He was feeling rather pleased that he’d made Roy run late leaving. And rather pleased he’d won that chess game. But lost in his thoughts about it, and in grabbing a book to go float over to Roy’s desk chair and curl up, he never saw that white world flicker and jump again, before the door snapped closed.
The familiar feeling of paws running through his hair caused a still sleepy Roy to groan and reach back in an attempt to fend off his furry alarm clock. Instead said furry alarm clock was suddenly clinging to his forearm, long bushy tail wrapped around and cold nose nuzzling into his wrist. “Agh!” Roy jolted awake and whipped his arm forward so he could open tired eyes to glare at Hazel who was running his cold nose back and forth along his wrist. “Stop that.”

Hazel only clung tighter and began to lick at his human’s wrist.

“I can’t be time to get up yet. Go hide an acorn or something.”

Roy listened for all of three seconds before he interrupted. “Okay! Okay, I’m awake.” And he used his free arm to push himself up so he was sitting up in his bed, the covers falling around his waist. “See?”

Hazel hopped off of his human’s arm to sit nestled in the hollow formed by his legs under the blanket, and held up his front paws while fluffing his tail out behind him and chirping demurely.

Roy snorted, a smile he couldn’t help sneaking onto his face. “Cute little terror of an alarm clock.”

Roy smirched and reached a hand up to stroke the rust-colored fur. “Don’t worry. It is Friday, I’ll be able to sleep over the weekend as much as I need.” And he tossed the bedcovers aside with one hand so he could ease himself out and up. He waivered unsteadily for only a moment before padding towards the bathroom. “Go get some food or something so I can pee in peace.”

Hazel knew the sound of a dismissal when he heard one, and with his human awake and out of bed, he would obey this one. So he hopped from Roy’s shoulder and bounded off down the hallway.

“Friday…” Roy frowned to himself as he took care of his bladder business. And that single word hung like a metaphorical cloud of concern over him as he waited for the shower water to warm.

By the time Roy was ready to go to work, missing only his breakfast and coffee and a certain squirrel, he still hadn’t really shed that cloud. But there really was nothing he could do. Right? They both knew the length of a work week.

Pouring himself a cup of coffee from yesterday’s pot, he reheated it with a snap of his fingers. It wasn’t as good as fresh, but it was passable. And he sipped on it as he rummaged for some food. He
came up with a bagel and marmalade. He ate it in all of a minute, and washed it down with the remainder of his cup of coffee. He wasn’t running late to work, per se. But he wanted to get there just a bit early considering that he would be sneaking in Hazel for Edward to see.

So he cleaned up after himself, grabbed another bag of trail mix, and then began to walk over to the front door while unbuttoning the first few buttons on his uniform coat. “Hazel!” He called out, and set the bag of trail mix on the floor as the rust-colored ball of fur streaked towards him. In the middle of straightening up, Hazel had jumped and clung to his shoulder. Now he reached around to take the squirrel in hand.

“There’s someone who wants to see you.” Roy told him. “I don’t know if the rumors are true… that animals can see ghosts as well… but he can see you at least.”

Hazel began to chatter happily, tail bouncing in his excitement. He knew he was about to go with his owner somewhere.

Roy smiled, and tucked the squirrel into his jacket carefully before redoing the buttons. “Just stay very still and quiet until I let you out.” He cautioned, and bent to retrieve the bag of trail mix.

And so Roy left his house, knowing he was not only about to break the rule barring him from taking Hazel to work – again – but also his rule of not showing Hazel to anyone that wasn’t of his team or their immediate family. But he supposed the argument could be made that in some unorthodox way Edward actually was part of his team now. For all the ghost was there and present every day.

Edward was awake and still pouring over a book when he heard the office door open a second time. And he looked up immediately, not even caring that he hadn’t finished the sentence he was on. “Roy!” He greeted cheerfully, and the book was set aside so he could float over to the man.

Roy smiled back at him. “Good morning, Ed.”

“You look terrible.” Edward noted matter-of-factly as he looked the man over.

Roy snorted, and held out the bag of trail mix which Edward took without question. “I had fun last night, so I’ll live with the repercussions. All I need is a bit more sleep and I’ll be fine again.”

Edward pursed his lips. “If you say so.” And he looked down at the bag he held. “What is this, anyway?”

“Food, for Hazel.” Roy said, and began to unbutton his coat. “Do you know if animals can see you? I know it’s a rumor that they can.”

Edward shook his head. “I’ve not seen an animal since I died. So I wouldn’t know.” And he watched curiously as Roy reached inside his jacket.

Roy grasped Hazel around the middle, and hoisted the squirrel carefully out. And once Hazel was free of the jacket, he turned the squirrel to face Edward. “Meet my Hazel.”

Edward’s face lit up in delight. “A squirrel! Oh he’s cute!”

Roy laughed, “you sound just like a girl.”

“Shut up!” Edward glowered at him, and raised a hand as if to touch the animal. As he did so that awe coming back onto his face. “I can’t believe you have a squirrel.”

“Sometimes I can’t either.” Roy admitted, and peered round at Hazel. “But he and I get along.”
“Where did you find him?” Edward asked and moved his hand around in front of Hazel’s face.

“Plucked him out of a storm drain a few years back. Since then he’s never tried to leave me.” Roy said, and suddenly was forced to let Hazel go as the squirrel struggled from his grasp. Only to have him leap in Edward’s direction.

Edward watched, startled, as the squirrel passed right through him. And he turned to see the small creature land on the other side of him looking very perplexed. “I don’t think he can see me… but I think he can sense me.”

Roy was believing he had to agree. Hazel had done nothing when Edward had his hand near him. Didn’t follow it like would have been expected. But Hazel’s leap had definitely implied the squirrel thought something was there. “Odd. See if you can’t get him to follow you or something.”

Hazel was rubbing at his whiskers in his confusion, self-consciously trying to act as if he hadn’t leapt and missed. But then it was there again. He stopped pawing at himself, and stared straight ahead. His nose worked overtime to try and pick up a scent, but he couldn’t. Yet… he scampered forward as the presence faded backwards… there was something here. Something he couldn’t see.

Edward was slowly beginning to grin as he got Hazel to chase him all the way to Roy’s desk. “He definitely can sense me. But he can’t see me. He’s looking through me. His eyes don’t focus on me like yours do, even if he is only staring at my legs right now.”

Roy smiled, chuckling as an idea came to him. “We could always throw a sheet over you. It’s inanimate. And then you’d have some sort of form again.”

“Oh yes, that would work really well. I’d love to see you explain that to whoever walked in and saw a sheet floating around on its own.” Edward snickered to himself. “I wouldn’t be able to see out of it. And Hazel would still pass through me.”

“I’d just accuse them of being the insane party.” Roy smirked and walked over to where Edward had stopped at his desk. “But at the risk of you not being able to see, we’ll forego that idea.”

Edward grinned, and floated over towards Roy more. “So, can I play with him?”

“Of course. You have his food too still.” Roy nodded at the bag.

Edward let the bag thump onto the floor, and immediately engaged the squirrel in some strange version of tag that no one would ever win. But he was having fun. And he floated off as fast as he could around the office while Hazel bounded after his presence eagerly.

Roy sat down in his office chair to begin to work, laughing quietly as he watched the two playing together. It was one of the most childish things he was sure he ever had seen, but it was endearing all the same. It was hard to focus on his work, but he did his best in between sneaking looks at his two companions.

When Hazel had begun to tire of racing around after him, Edward swiped a piece of paper from Roy’s desk to ball it up. And he sat on the floor, tossing the paper ball out and letting Hazel go get it and bring it back to him to do over again. It was less strenuous of an activity, and Hazel was more than happy to engage in dog-like activities.

“As long as he can sense you, I suppose it doesn’t matter that he can’t see you.” Roy said quietly to himself as he watched Hazel bound back with the paper ball to drop it in front of Edward’s left knee. “Animals aren’t as easily ruled by just what they can see.”
Edward threw the ball again, and looked over at Roy, feeling the eyes on him. “What?” He asked with a smile. “Want to play fetch too? I can make a ball for you.”

Roy chuckled, “I think I’ll pass, but thank you for the offer.” And he continued to meet that silvery gaze, neither of them noticing that Hazel had brought the ball back again. “I was just thinking… I’m really glad you’re happy. Still lonely?”

“No.” Edward said after a moment, “I don’t believe I am.” And his smile grew more thoughtful. “I’m happier now, thanks to you.”

Roy wanted to act nonchalant, maybe wave a dismissive hand, or tell the ghost it was nothing. But it wasn’t any of that. And around certain individuals, like Edward, when they were alone his mask was gone. “I’m glad. I want you to be happy.” And he meant it.

Edward flashed him a grin, and turned to Hazel with a conspiratorial chuckle. “Your owner is a softie at heart. Feared Flame Alchemist my ass. He has a cute squirrel and wants me to be happy.”

Roy snorted, and balled up another paper to toss it at Edward’s head. Knowing it would just pass right through. “Shush, you.”

Edward smiled as Hazel chased after the thrown paper ball, and looked back at Roy. “Books and chess, even squirrels, they’re not… it’s you… never mind.” He looked away and picked up one of the balls Hazel had brought him. “Thanks for doing all this for me.”

Roy frowned. It didn’t take a genius to realize he was missing something. And he thought about it for a moment as he watched Edward return to his games with Hazel. Until it dawned on him. “Edward, you can tell me that I make you happy. I won’t take it the wrong way.”

“You make me happy.” Edward smiled, and tossed the ball for Hazel again. “And I still think you’re a softie.”

Roy smiled and turned back to his work. Yes, he had a soft side. So sue him. But it was a side few ever discovered. A side he’d given Edward since the very first, something he’d done to no one but his mother.

And so Edward continued to play with Hazel while Roy worked, until the squirrel finally curled up in front of Edward looking ready to fall asleep. But Edward didn’t mind. He merely left the squirrel to it while he floated over to sit on the edge of Roy’s desk. “What’s the weather like today?”

Roy gave a small grunt to show he’d heard, finished what he was doing, and then turned to look out the window. “Right now it’s sunny. Which is frustrating, because I honestly thought when I went home last night we’d have come cloud cover.”

Edward looked over at him, raising an eyebrow in disbelief. “You actually went home before midnight?”

“I didn’t mean last night literally.” Roy faced him with a smirk. “I got maybe three hours of sleep this morning. I was busy way past midnight.”

“Spare me the details.” Edward shuddered, and looked over to where the picture of the sunrise was framed and mounted to the wall.

Roy tapped a finger on his desk curiously. “Ed? Did the previous occupants of this office do stuff like that in here?”
“I was forced to grow up rather fast.” Edward made a face, and looked back at him. “Between that and other things. But yes, they did. And while it wasn’t as bad as it could have been, considering I clearly do not have the tendency to like to watch, it was still enough to make me ask you not to continue that routine. Because I didn’t know them, not really.” And his silver eyes searched the black ones watching him. “But I know you. And I just don’t even want to have to go back to that with you.”

“I promised I wouldn’t, and I won’t.” Roy reassured him, “but for what it’s worth, I’m sorry about that stuff you had to see at such a young age.”

Edward shrugged, “I’m fine. It’s not like it damaged me or anything. I’ve just grown up a lot being here, even if I am relatively sheltered.”

Roy wanted nothing more than to rest a hand on that knee, but knowing he couldn’t, he kept his hands where they were. “If only you’d had a choice of what to be sheltered from.” He replied as he tilted his head a bit to consider the ghost.

Edward pondered that, nearly about to agree, but then he frowned. “No… not exactly.”

Roy’s expression grew instantly curious, and a little confused. “No?”

“It would be nice, nicer than I can probably explain to you, to have been able to be free of this office for these seven years. To have my freedom to go where I would. Keep an eye over my brother if I wished. To leave when I didn’t want to see or hear any longer.” Edward was speaking rather quickly now, but he didn’t care. “But then I wonder if that might not have been even lonelier.” And he stared deeply into Roy’s eyes. “All the space and people in the world, yet completely alone. At least here the loneliness is more limited. And if I had been free in that world, how am I to know that I would have ever found you on my own?”

Now Roy understood.

“I think I’d rather this place, and you, for however long you’re able to remain with me. That’s worth a lot more to me than my freedom of choice. And I believe a lot easier to bear over the course of eternity.” If only he could stay with Roy. His only want to leave this place now rested firmly on the reason the man sitting with him symbolized. But however long or short a time they could stay together, he truly was beginning to believe it was best this way.

While Roy understood, how was one supposed to answer such an admission? He wasn’t sure that while he understood, he could ever fully comprehend Edward’s situation. Ever fully appreciate it. “You’re the most surprising individual I believe I have ever met.”

Edward winked at him. “Being a ghost has its merits. Including that we can sometimes see our fates differently.”

“Do you like being a ghost?” Roy asked, knowing that it could be termed a stupid question. But where Edward was concerned, one could never tell.

Edward shrugged, “as I said, it has its merits. I may not prefer being dead, but the Gate doesn’t seem to be one to listen to my preferences. There are worse fates than my own, Roy Mustang.” And he slipped off the desk.

Roy watched as Edward began to pace through the air. “Did I upset you?” He asked gently.

“Upset me?” Edward turned to him with a frown. “About…? Oh! No.” And he gave Roy a wry smile. “You can’t upset me about my death. I’ve accepted and come to terms with it.”
“Then why are you pacing?” Roy pressed.

“Because Hazel is asleep,” Edward began to tick off on his fingers, “you really should get back to work, I feel too energized to sit quietly and read, and there’s nothing else to do.” But he smiled at Roy. “Don’t worry though, I’m perfectly fine.”

Roy pulled open one of his desk drawers, “I think I’ve got a few extra pens and pencils. Do you want to draw or anything? Write?”


With a smile, Roy pulled free an extra pen. Edward already knew where the paper was. “Sometimes the truth is a lot more fascinating. But you could draw too… alchemy circles or whatnot. Blueprints for bridges, sheep, a self portrait, my portrait.”

Edward laughed, “neither active enough for me right now. But thank you for the ideas. Don’t worry, I’m fine just pacing around for a bit until I settle down. However, if you don’t finish your work at a decent hour so we can play chess I will be most displeased.”

Roy grabbed his pen up again. “Dually noted. Carry on.”

Edward smiled as he watched Roy quickly begin his work again. And he resumed his pacing as he waited for either Hazel to wake up, or Roy to be done. He’d really worn the squirrel out, and as for Roy… well, Roy had been worn out last night and was now moving at a barely respectable pace with those documents. He might be pacing a while.

As it turned out, Hazel was awake before Roy finished. And the squirrel cleaned his whiskers frantically before scampering around the office to first seek out disturbing his owner’s papers before bounding away once he caught that strange invisible presence again. The one that played with him like another squirrel.

“How sweet of you, Hazel.” Roy ground out with a roll of his eyes as he tried to salvage the scattered documents on his desk.

Edward laughed, and floated up to be on eye level with the squirrel who was now perched atop the shelf that had been installed and recently started to be filled with books. But there was still room enough for the squirrel.

“How sweet of you, Hazel.” Roy ground out with a roll of his eyes as he tried to salvage the scattered documents on his desk.

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Edward laughed, knowing Roy hardly could mean he’d been so close. He got the feeling that Roy loved his pet very much indeed. “You can’t fool me.”

“No? Damn.” Roy chuckled and turned back to his work. “Just try to keep him from coming over here again. Else the chess game will be pushed back again.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Edward promised, and floated down to the floor where the paper balls were. Hazel soon bounded after him to resume playing.

And Edward happily continued tossing the paper balls for the squirrel. He’d never had a pet before.
Not that this was his pet. But Roy had brought Hazel here for him to meet. And he was filled with an odd contentment to be wanted unconditionally by an animal. Even if just for play. It was nice to retreat into a more childish side of himself, a side of himself that had been lost a long time ago.

It was nearing four o’clock in the afternoon, an hour until the workday was over, when Roy finally finished his work. And he gathered it up in his arms so he could take it out to Hawkeye. “Ed?”

Edward looked up from where he’d been laughing over Hazel cleaning himself after eating some of the trail mix. “Yes?”

Roy stepped around the desk, paperwork in his arms. “I’m done, just need to drop these with Hawkeye. Would you like to set up the game?”

Edward immediately floated to his feet. “Yeah!” And he zoomed past Roy eagerly, somersaulting through the air to halt himself abruptly and whirl around to grab the chess game from where Roy kept it stashed.

Roy chuckled as he turned away and let himself out the door. He didn’t believe he’d ever tire of seeing Edward happy with something he’d caused to happen. Even if that little shred of doubt in his mind still lingered, questioning whether or not he should have so much control over Edward’s happiness. It wasn’t like he’d rather that the ghost were upset and unhappy with him all the time. “Here you are.”

Riza looked up in surprise as Roy set the stack on her desk. The entire one. “I realize we were only here a few days this week, but you having all your work completed by the end of it is very odd. Are you sure you have the stamina to keep this up?”

Roy quirked an eyebrow at her. “Do I have a choice?”

“Do I have a choice between life and death.” Riza informed him sweetly.

Roy frowned, “I wouldn’t speak so lightly of those two ultimatums if I were you.” And leaving Riza to blink after him in surprise, turned to go back to his office.

Hazel immediately jumped up onto his human’s shoulder as Roy reentered the office. Deciding that his human needed some cleaning to he began to paw through Roy’s hair fastidiously.

Roy smiled faintly, and reached back to caress Hazel’s head in affection. “You’re a good squirrel.” He whispered and slipped a smile into place as he walked over to join Edward.

The white side was facing his desk chair, as was now expected.

“Are you okay?” Edward asked as he looked at Roy sharply. He’d had plenty of experience observing people, and something was off about his companion.

Roy shrugged as he sat down. “I’m fine. Let’s just say that being around you has had an effect on me that I didn’t realize until just now.” And he moved a white pawn forward. “But it’s unimportant.”

Edward wasn’t quite sure of that, but he let it drop. “I think it’s your turn to ask me a question now.” And he moved one of his own black pawns forward.

Roy felt Hazel settle in to drape over his shoulder, tail curled around his neck as an anchor. “Lemon bars?” He asked casually, feeling certain this time. Both about his guess and his next chess move.

Edward blinked, and it took him just a moment to understand what Roy was referring to. And when
he did, he grinned. “No. But I do love lemons. Not as a dessert though.”

Roy groaned, and gave the ghost a suspicious look. “You’re not yanking my chain, are you?”

“I didn’t know you had a collar.” Edward replied back sweetly.

“Not one of my kinks.” Roy grinned back just as sweetly.

Edward laughed, and rolled his eyes. “On that note, my question will not be about what your kinks are.” He said through his laugh, and ignored Roy’s disappointed noise. “Instead I’d like to know if one of the rumors I once heard about you is true.”

“Oh?” That had Roy’s interest.

“Well, of the Flame Alchemist.” Edward corrected needlessly. “I didn’t know it was you until you told me, but anyway,” he ignored Roy’s smirk, “did you once run naked around some park singing a song about fairies?”

Roy snorted from pure shock, and then with a wicked grin he kicked one leg over the other haughtily. “It was not about fairies. But yes. I did once streak through a city park while singing. I’ll have you know that I blame Hughes for that one, he never should have let me get that drunk.”

Overcome by laughter he was trying to stifle, Edward took a goodly minute to pull himself together enough to move another pawn, much less be able to speak without cracking up midway through. “I wouldn’t think you’d want such a thing on your reputation and known to the public.”

Roy’s wicked grin only grew in strength. “I have no shame of that night. But they will if they ever mention it to my face. It may be known, but it hardly affects my reputation. Seeing as how that’s the only form of blackmail they have on me… and it’s elementary at best.”

“And what wouldn’t be elementary blackmail?” Edward grinned.

Moving a rook forward to capture one of the black pawns, he replied with a smile. “That I speak to myself and call myself Edward.” And he glanced up to meet Edward’s silvery eyes. “I believe with all my heart that very few people would be willing to believe me about you. Even with a demonstration on your part that you exist. The janitors are a special case.”

“I’m flattered.” Edward smiled, deciding that he’d trust Roy to his earlier word that he’d not give anyone any reason to admit him to a psychiatric facility.

“You should be.” Roy toasted him with the newly captured pawn, wagging it around a bit. “Not everyone can claim they’re my greatest strength or weakness in regards to my job.”

“I carry the honor proudly.” Edward tried not to glare at the brandished pawn.

Roy smiled and set the pawn aside. “Now then… my turn.” He thought for a moment as Edward considered his next move. “What’s your favorite way to have chocolate?”

Edward smirked, not at all about to fall for that. “On my lover.” And was rewarded with the choke he’d been hoping for. “Oh pull it together, you know I’ve never.”

Roy spent the majority of the rest of the game trying to recover from that, even if he didn’t give any outward sign. It was coming to his attention very swiftly that prying for hints wouldn’t come easily. Edward was a close-mouthed minx. Emphasis on minx.
By their third game, and increasingly becoming the last one of the day, Edward had won the previous two and was going for his straight third. And Roy was becoming increasingly adamant that he wouldn’t lose a third straight game against a ghost.

“I’m getting much better. Soon you won’t even have three pawns moved out onto the board and I’ll have trapped you in a checkmate.” Edward informed him cockily.

Roy sniggered, “that’s logistically impossible. But keep dreaming.”

“Oh it’s not a dream, it’s a coming reality.” Edward promised.

“Just like me kicking your incorporeal ass this round is a coming reality.” Was his return promise as Roy moved a knight in for the metaphorical kill. “Check.”

“Until the check is mated don’t celebrate.” Edward chided with a smile, and moved his king out of danger.

“Oh I’ll mate that check.” Roy grinned and moved a rook in to try and prevent further escaping on Edward’s part.

Edward snorted as he considered the board. “Yeah, good luck with that.” And he moved his remaining bishop to dispatch the rook.

In five more plays, Roy’s check did mate, and he celebrated whilst Edward groaned.

“Well, at least this means my little coming reality will occur.” Edward sighed as he leaned back in the air as if reclining.

Roy shot him a deadpan look as he packed the set away. “Can you manage it without cheating somehow using your ghostly powers?”

Edward flashed him a grin. “My ghostly powers? I have no idea what you mean.”

Chuckling, Roy didn’t believe him for a snowball’s second in a volcano. “Listen, I need to talk to you before I leave…” and he slid the game where it belonged before looking over at the curious Edward. “Do you know what today is?”

Edward’s mouth opened in a silent ‘ah’ of understanding, and he smiled serenely. “I can guess. Don’t worry about it. I’ll be fine. I have books and all. I’ve spent a lot longer a time alone with less than that before and just fine.”

It didn’t do much to banish the shadow of guilt that was tapping about inside his head. But if Edward was fine, he wasn’t going to press the issue and cause something out of nothing. So Roy nodded. “Okay. I’ll bring more books back to you.”

Floating over to Roy, Edward quickly moved as if he were going to place his hand over the man’s mouth. But his fingers never quite touched. “I understand.” He said quietly with a tilt of his head.

Roy smiled at him reluctantly, but nodded. “I’ll see you on Monday then.”

Edward smiled back, and moved his hand to move it over Hazel’s fur as if he could actually pet the animal. “Softie.” And he flashed Roy another smile before floating away. “Sleep well tonight, Roy.”

Roy finished tucking Hazel away into his jacket, and grabbed up the bag of trail mix. “I plan to. Since I have the whole weekend ahead of me to have fun, and Sunday night to catch up on sleep.”
“Manwhore.” Edward muttered under his breath, not really caring if Roy overheard him.

Stepping over to the door, Roy caught Edward’s gaze as he laid a hand on the handle. Yet this one lasted longer than those before it. And finally he eased open the door a crack. “Goodnight, Ed.”

Edward’s hand twitched as if he wanted to lift it in a gesture of goodbye, but was uncertain anymore as to the movement. “Goodnight.” And he watched as Roy eased the door open, and turned to step into that white world.

The next thing he knew he had plummeted to land hard on the floor, clutching at his head as he stared after Roy. Roy and that white world… the one that was jerking violently in front of his eyes like a movie reel gone bad. “Roy!”

Roy startled at his name being called out like that in such a panic, and he looked around to see Edward there on the floor. “What the-”

“Sir?” Hawkeye frowned, “everything okay?”

“Yeah.” Roy said hurriedly. “You all go on ahead. I forgot I had a last minute phone call to make.” And without further waste of breath, he had closed himself back in the office, locking the door for good measure before he hurried over to Edward’s side. Kneeling down beside him he realized he had no clue what to do with his hands. Not being able to touch the ghost was infuriating right now. “Ed! What’s wrong?”

Edward slowly lowered his hands as his breath came to him shakily. “It felt like I was being split apart.” He whispered as he stared at his hands.

“What?” Roy frowned, and reached for Edward anyway. Towards his shoulder to try and gesture the ghost to look at him. “By what?”

Edward looked at him, and then pointed towards the door. “By that. When you opened the door… do you remember that white world I told you about? The one I can’t penetrate?”

Roy nodded quickly. “It was doing something? Something that caused you pain?”

“Yes.” Edward nodded, and sat back to bring his knees up closer to his chest in an unconscious protective gesture. “It knocked me down it was so painful. But it was so strange… it kept flickering, spastically. I could see lines of color in it.”

“I take it this has never happened before.” Roy observed in concern.

Edward shook his head. “If it had, you wouldn’t catch me looking anywhere near that door. It hurt.” And he studied the look of genuine concern on Roy’s face. “I think… will you try something for me?”

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Roy’s acceptance was without hesitation. “Anything.”

Edward snorted, “careful of promising ‘anything’ to anyone.”

“You wouldn’t bring me any harm. I trust in that.” Roy argued lightly. “So I repeat, anything.”

Edward worried his bottom lip between his teeth for a moment before he looked towards the door again. “Open it back up again. But this time… ask me to come with you.” And catching Roy’s expression out of the corner of his eye quickly added, “no questions.”
Roy slowly stood. “You’re sure? The pain?”

“I’m sure. Now no more questions. If what I am thinking will happen does, or even if it doesn’t, I’ll explain at that time.” Edward said as he stared at the door, unwilling to get off the floor again until he knew for sure. It wasn’t a fun feeling, falling like a rock to the ground when you were supposed to be able to hover with effortless ease. He’d only known that nightmare of the Gate to do it to him, and he didn’t like it one bit.

Roy walked over to the door, intending to shut it again the instant Edward looked even the least bit in pain. Flipping the lock he pulled the door open a crack to see that everyone else was gone and the lights out before he turned back to the ghost. “Okay…” and he took a deep breath before stepping aside so he could ease the door open wider. “Edward, will you come with me?”
“...will you come with me?”

Edward had been staring directly into Roy’s eyes the entire time, and without averting them, he answered. “Yes.” And only the instant the backdrop he’d barely seen of that white world vanished, as if it had never been, did he look away.

“Edward?” Roy asked softly.

The ghost in question had floated up to his feet looking very much like he’d seen a ghost himself.

Roy frowned, the ghost didn’t appear to be in pain. “Ed? Is it white again?”

“It’s...” Edward floated to Roy, his hands reaching out to hover just over the man’s shoulder, a shoulder he continued to stare over. “It’s gone.”

Roy tilted his head, and looked over his shoulder as well before looking back to the ghost. “The thing that caused you pain? Or the whiteness?”

“All of it.” Edward’s voice was gripped in disbelief, and was beginning to shake. “I can see... a large table, and a desk, right?”

“Right.” Roy’s face broke into a sudden grin as he watched the stunned uncertainly wage with delight on the ghost’s face. “Can you pass through the doorway though, is the question.”

The ghost floated down until his feet touched the firm floor. And it was firm, he couldn’t pass down under it. Such knowledge caused him to gulp in hesitation. He could see out the door now, a glance behind him told him he still couldn’t see out the windows, and while this was a bracing hope of change that he could see out the door... could he really bear it if he couldn’t pass? Before, he was just blocked off, couldn’t see what lay beyond, what he was missing. But now that he could see, if he were blocked from it, cruelty was no longer so limited.

“Edward.” Roy called softly, and as the ghost’s silvery eyes flickered up to his, filled with uncertainty, he stepped back through the doorway and into the other office. All the while keeping the ghost’s gaze locked with his. “Even if you can’t pass through, it’s okay. You’ve come this far after seven years. And I’m inclined without ego to believe that it’s because I’m here. You asked me to ask you to come with me for a reason. So you must believe on some level that it’s something to do with me. The sudden jolting of that whiteness. And now that I’ve asked you to come with me, and you’ve told me yes, you can see unhindered. Things do not change so rapidly without reason.” He told the ghost gently, trying to set some ease into those eyes. And stepping back once more he held out his hand.

Edward felt himself smile, or, it was a true attempt at a smile. Roy’s words had had their intended effect upon him. He could feel the uncertainty begin to ebb. Because Roy was here, and Roy was waiting for him patiently. There was no hurry, they’d keep trying even if he couldn’t pass through tonight. Because Roy wouldn’t give up on him. “You realize what happens if I can?” He suddenly asked.

Roy smiled, “I do.”
“And you don’t mind, really?” Edward asked with a slight frown. He wasn’t sure why he felt the need to ask, but he asked it all the same.

“Come with me, Edward.” Roy merely answered in reply, and he stretched out his extended hand a bit farther.

Edward looked down at it, back to the world-not-so-white beyond the door, and then turned his gaze to meet Roy’s. He padded over slowly until he was right by the doorway, the place he was normally blocked if he tried to move even a millimeter farther. And never taking his gaze from Roy’s, he reached out for Roy’s hand.

What he was met with was not a blocking force, nor even a repelling force. It was a force thick like the honey he remembered. Sticky, thick, and capable of trapping those not strong enough to get free.

It was terrifying at the same time it was heartening, and Edward was suddenly fighting to push through. Never taking his eyes from Roy’s, neither of them dared look down or away from each other. And he believed that even if they’d wanted to it would have been impossible. An intangible force seemed to hum between them, keeping them fixated on each other.

The notion of not trying too hard, lest you fail, had fled Edward’s mind. If he was going to get hurt because he couldn’t pass, he was going to get hurt without reservation. He wanted to go with Roy as truthfully as Roy wanted him to come. And for the first time in seven years, he had something resembling choice.

He was trying to reach out and take it, with everything he had.

Time seemed to warp around them. The resistance Edward was being met with seemed to slow time to a wounded crawl. The absence of time for Roy as he willed Edward to him. It was an energy to dwarf alchemy that neither of them felt. Nothing but each other was in their eyes, nothing but each other in their wills. And they strained for it in their own ways.

Neither of them saw the moment that Edward’s hand finally reached Roy’s. But they felt it. The spell that seemed to have fallen over them shattered, and Edward toppled forward with the remaining momentum he’d been trying to push through with, and Roy could suddenly feel the strain he’d been under.

But neither of them paid those trifles any attention.

For Edward was on his hands and knees on the floor, next to Roy’s legs and shaking. And Roy was dropping to his own knees in worry.

“Ed!” Roy called softly, “are you okay?”

Edward was sucking in deep breaths from behind the concealing silver curtain his hair made. “I… did I…?”

Roy suddenly smiled, worry fading from him as he rocked back to sit on his heels. “Look around.”

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Edward closed his eyes briefly, hands clenching at the floor underneath them. He felt a silly, stupid urge to refuse to look. But he fought it away, and raised his head. His silvery hair fell back out of his face, and he looked around as he sat back with his legs angled out to either side. “I can’t believe it… I’m finally free.” And he turned to Roy, amazement shining in his eyes. “You set me free.”

Roy chuckled softly, beginning to feel the effects of the events of the night. For lasting relatively a short time, he sure felt exhausted. Almost as if he’d run a marathon underneath the water. “You
suspected I could, didn’t you.”

“I had hoped…” Edward smiled a bit shyly. “I always thought that I could be set free if someone were to ever see me. But that didn’t happen.”

“But if I wanted you to come with me?” Roy asked.

The ghost nodded, “and you meant it.”

Roy chuckled again. “I did mean it. I don’t like the thought of you being alone. Now, of course we’ll need to talk about this in more detail. But for tonight, let’s just get you out of this place for once in your afterlife.”

The smile Roy received had a brilliance to it that nearly made him stop breathing.

“Thank you.” Edward beamed at him, only now daring to let himself feel the rush of success that brought a feeling of intense joy with it. He was free! And to him, that didn’t mean free to go around and haunt the world. That meant free to stay with the only person who could see him. He could stay with Roy no matter what. And that was the most precious freedom of all.

Roy smiled and stood up. “Come on, ghost.” He beckoned, “I think it’s time I show you your world.”

Edward looked up at him, and then floated up off the floor to hover mid-air once more. “Is the world still big?”

“The world seems unending as a child.” Roy replied gently. “You’ve not seen it since you were a child. So this may be a bit of a shock for you, especially seeing a city. But stay close to me, I promise you’ll be fine. You’re a ghost after all, nothing can harm you.”

Edward wasn’t too sure about that last part. But he nodded. “I don’t plan on straying far.”

Roy turned to begin walking towards the door to the hallway, still watching the ghost over his shoulder. “The world just has more in it.”

Edward floated after him eagerly, still smiling as if he could never stop. As long as the world had Roy in it, he was good. But he’d never tell the man that. It wasn’t as if he could die from embarrassment, but it would certainly be a close call. “I feel like a stray you fed and now I get to follow you home.”

Roy laughed, and passed through the doorway into the hall. He stopped there, and turned back to make sure Edward actually got through. “You’re better than a stray, you don’t have fleas.”

“That’s what you think.” Edward scoffed and paused at the doorway to the hallway.

Roy frowned a bit. “Can you see past? Or do I need to ask you through again?”

Edward worried his bottom lip between his teeth for a moment before he shook his head. “I can see… I’m just nervous.” He mumbled the last word.

That was understandable, but Roy refused to believe that after all that – whatever all that had been – Edward wouldn’t be able to come any farther. It just didn’t make any sense. He refused to believe that they would come this far if they weren’t allowed to stay this way. “Don’t think about it, just come to me.” And when Edward still hesitated, he held out his hand. “Please?”
Edward looked at Roy’s hand, the silliness of such a gesture as lost on him now as it had been minutes earlier. And he slowly reached out towards him. When he was met with no resistance at all, he took heart and floated through all the way. Though his hand still hovered just against Roy’s, not passing through. And he smiled up at the man, relieved with his success. “I think I’ll be okay now.”

“You will.” Roy agreed and let his hand fall away. “So come along, I’m not leaving you behind anymore.”

With a quick pirouette in which he made a noise that although indecipherable, sounded joyful, Edward floated down the hallway looking back at Roy. “Now who’s leaving who behind?” He taunted.

Roy chuckled at the ghost’s sudden delighted antics. Edward could make the most childish of acts seem all too endearing. “Well wait up, I can’t even run as fast as you can zoom through the air.” He chided and started after the apparition.

Edward came to a mid-air halt, bubbling over with happiness that was bringing him ever nearer to laughter. “I can’t believe it. I’m free!” And he spun again. “I can be with you longer. Even if you one day change offices. I can still see you.”

“Tha’t right.” Roy laughed some more. How could he not? Edward was so happy, and he loved that. Seven years of seclusion, the ghost needed this. Even if Edward had said that the loneliness was easier to bear trapped, he believed that the star having just this freedom with him would be an even better option. Better than having been originally allowed to roam free from the beginning and leave it to chance that they might meet. Better than remaining trapped in that office with only company five days a week for eight hours, for however long that lasted. This was the third choice, and Roy believed that it was the best one for the ghost. But… “Are you sure you’ll be okay? When I eventually die?”

Edward’s smile did not fade, but it did mellow into something reminiscent of a soft, understanding sadness. And he settled down to the floor to stand there as Roy walked up to him. “It will be lonely.” He admitted without reservation. “And I will miss you very much. But I’ll have the memories of our time together. Memories of more than just us being together at the office. And that is what will make it bearable. I may be alone, in a whole wide world. But only physically alone.” And he smiled up at Roy. “I’ll remember you for eternity.”

Roy returned the smile. Yes, this was the best choice. He realized he was sacrificing a part of his life to being there for Edward – but it didn’t feel like a sacrifice. They’d make this work. He knew they would. “In case I ever forget to tell you,” he began, “I’m glad that it’s me.”

“Me too.” Edward smiled up at him. Even if at first he wouldn’t have chosen Roy to see him, now he knew he wouldn’t change it. Roy was kind to him, wanted to know him, and he got the feeling that it was a side of Roy that he was privileged and among very few to know.

Roy’s expression was surprised, and then relieved in turn. “It’s never taken me so long to get out of a workplace before.” He realized with a laugh, and started walking again.

Edward watched him walk away with a thoughtful smile, and then ran after him. There was no way he was letting Roy out of his sight. “It’s a Friday, and you’re supposed to be recovering tonight from your manwhoring of earlier. So you really have no reason to complain.”

“I was not manwhoring!” Roy protested. “Healthy sexual appetite.”

Edward laughed as he fell in step with Roy. “Keep telling yourself that.”
They were nearly out of the building – it had taken near an hour because Edward had wanted to examine even the staircases with fascination – and just about to enter the main foyer, when Edward stopped. And he floated backward almost uncertainly as he gazed off to the right. He was sure it was another hallway, but it remained white. That white world he’d grown so used to seeing. And he felt as if ice had gripped him.

“What’s wrong?” Roy asked, having stopped and turned around when he’d noticed Edward was no longer beside him. “You okay?”

Edward fidgeted and shook his head. “What’s over there?” And he pointed to the whiteness.

Roy frowned, and looked in the direction the ghost was pointing. “Just the hallway that leads to the general secretarial offices. Phone receptionists and such. Why?”

The silvery eyes had flown open the moment Roy had turned, and the ghost had completely phased out whatever it was Roy had said. He was too in shock. The instant Roy had turned, that whiteness had vanished. And now he could clearly see a dark corridor lit only by the dim lights of the security lighting. “When you turned and looked at it…” Edward turned his head to look at Roy, confusion in his still-wide eyes. “It was like before, in the office. Just that white sort of world I wasn’t able to penetrate. And it was there, but when you looked at it, it just vanished.”

Roy frowned, and looked from the ghost, to that corridor, and back to the ghost. “There was no pain?”

Edward shook his head mutely.

“Strange.” A hand moved to Roy’s chin as he pondered the anomaly. Although… maybe not such an anomaly. “Though a lot about you defies many things. But I wonder… I think I have a theory, just work with me on this and whatever you do, don’t panic. You trust me, right?”

“Of course I trust you.” Edward frowned. “But what are you going to do?”

Roy smiled and beckoned the ghost to follow. “I have an idea. Simple really, but I need you to help me test it.” And he walked to the main doors, placing a hand on one of the handles and looking back at Edward. “After I step outside, follow, and tell me if there’s any more of this white world of yours lingering.”

Edward nodded, that sounded simple enough. But he was unsure of what Roy was getting at here. Yet he waited patiently as Roy opened the door and stepped outside into darkness. He could vaguely still see Roy standing there waiting for him, so he hurried forward. He passed through the doorway without trouble, pulling the door closed behind him.

Now in the outside world, for the first time since his death.

He looked around, seeing the vague outlines of trees, the darkness of grass, the dull grey of concrete sidewalk bathed in the yellow lamplight. Could hear the rustle of a slight wind through the leaves, and the sleepy noises of fowl in the trees trying to sleep. A world he’d never thought he’d see again. A world he’d begun to forget. Even in darkness of night, it was magical.

“Edward?” Roy prompted with a smile as he watched the ghost look around in the sort of awe that implied the ghost could hardly dare to believe what he was seeing. And how could Roy blame him? The ghost had spent seven years in captivity, never even being able to see out a window. He wasn’t sure he could understand just how overwhelmed and in what ways Edward felt. But seeing him like this now… he knew that the ghost was in a place of peace that had been long denied.
“It’s… so beautiful.” Edward replied after a moment, hazily having heard Roy. And hesitantly he floated up off the ground and out a few feet while looking every which way. “I’d forgotten.”

Roy walked after him, letting Edward drink it all in. He stayed quiet for nearly a minute before he softly cleared his throat. “Go around to the corner of the building. Tell me if you can see this—” he waved a hand around, “—or that white world that trapped you.”

Edward cast him a look that still said he wasn’t sure what Roy was trying to figure out here, but he nodded. “Okay.” And throwing himself into the flight over, he zoomed through the air towards the corner. Upon reaching it, skidding himself to a stop.

A very confused stop filled with blinking of the eyes and floating backwards just a bit.

“Thought so.” Roy smiled, and walked after the ghost. Once he had joined the confused spirit, he smiled up at him. “I’m going to look around the corner. And you tell me what happens.” And without allowing time for questions, he did as he’d planned.

A poorly stifled gasp slipped past Edward’s lips as again, that whiteness vanished. Instead showing him a large expanse of sidewalk, bushes, and bike racks shaded by trees. “It’s… gone.”

“And no pain?” Roy queried as he looked back at Edward.

“No.” Edward floated down to stand on the grass next to Roy. “I don’t get it…”

“I think I do.” Roy said, and turned about. “I’ll explain as we walk. Come on, or else I’m never getting out of here tonight.” And as the ghost followed along beside him, he began. “It’s my theory that somehow you’re reliant on me for more than just having gotten you out of the office. As we were going down the hallways to get out, I was looking everywhere just to be sure no one was about. Until we got to the foyer. Where you first noticed that the impassable whiteness was back.”

Edward listened intently, even as he marveled at the grass.

“When I looked at it, it vanished.” Roy paused for a moment. “And when I went outside I looked everywhere I could see, even up. But I didn’t go over to the side of the building and look around the corners. It’s my belief, and I think you proved it tonight, that you can’t see any place I yet haven’t. And that you are blocked from it.”

“So I’m entirely reliant upon what you see, to shape my world?” Edward was fairly certain he was following along properly.

Roy hummed his agreement. “Yes, I believe so. Of course we can further experiment, but I am willing to place money that that is what it is.”

“My link to you is my freedom.” Edward mulled this over to himself. “I’m still trapped by that world. I just have a bigger cage.”

“Yes.” Roy wished that weren’t the case, for when put like that it sounded cruel. But he was determined to make this work. “But listen, I’ll open up as much of the world for you as I can. I promise you that.”

Edward smiled up at him. “I’ll hold you to that promise.” And he suddenly threw himself up into the air and backwards so he was floating on his back. Crossing his arms behind his head as his hair cascaded down he looked up at the night sky.

He’d forgotten what it truly looked like. His hazy memory had been dots of white against a canvas of
black. But now those dots of light were gleaming silver, like himself. And the canvas was not so black, for it was splashed with dark purples and blues of the universe beyond. Even some of the stars didn’t shine silver, they were pale blue, or with a gleam of red. The sky at night was beautiful.

Roy looked over at him with a smile, and then up to the stars as well. “Just follow my voice, silly.”

Edward chuckled softly, and did so. Using Roy’s voice to navigate him along while he continued to soak in the stars. It was the most beautiful sight he’d seen. He floated this way until the un-obscured sky began to be blocked out by the tops of buildings. And he straightened to float along next to Roy rather close as he looked around at them all in a mixture of fascination and uncertainty.

He’d never been in a city before. And the buildings were so much bigger than the ones he remembered in Risembool. There were paved streets, and cars parked along the curb of some of them. Every now and then they encountered people, but Roy never lingered near them for long. For which Edward was very grateful. He was too occupied looking around to be very successful at dodging crowds.

Roy waited until they were on an empty side-road before he spoke again. “Are you okay so far? I’ve been looking around and taking some detours, just so you can see more.”

“I’m fine.” Edward smiled over at him. “Thank you. I just have never seen a city before. And I’d forgotten what the night sky looked like.” And he looked around at it all again. “It’s overwhelming… but I want more. I want to keep seeing it until I’m not overwhelmed. It’s a bit of a culture shock for someone who spent their childhood in a rural area and then most of their teenage years locked in an office.”

“Well you’re handling it well.” Roy praised him with a smile.

Edward chuckled, “never let them see you bleed. Even if I can’t bleed. But I think I’m too happy to be scared right now.”

Roy could see the reasoning in that. “Well, we’re nearly to my house. That’ll be a bit more closed in for you if you wish. Of course, that being said and with you being a ghost, I don’t mind if you leave the house. I mean, technically you should be able to walk through the walls as long as you’ve seen what’s on the other side.”

“I would think.” Edward agreed. “I guess we’ll soon see.”

The rest of the walk to Roy’s house sent them past bars and nightclubs – the latter thrumming with music, the former raucous with drunken revelries – and Edward was far more annoyed at all the noise than alarmed. They walked through a park in which Edward had joyfully explored all the plant and animal life he could find as they passed through, including hovering over someone who was walking their dog until said dog felt his presence and in the urge to get to the ghost, had run a circle around its owner causing the lady to become tangled in the leash and fall over.

Roy had tried not to laugh too much at that one, and quickly fled for it with an Edward who was less concerned about being overheard.

They walked past closed down business, and finally into one of the residential districts. Here the noise was more mellow, more family oriented. And Edward would float around looking in every which direction he would see without Roy climbing a fence or breaking into a house so he could glimpse farther. He accepted there were some places he’d never go. In some yards he marveled over the bought toys of children, explaining to an amused Roy that he’d always had to make his own toys as a kid.
“Well I’ll buy you a tricycle one day.” Roy teased the ghost as they rounded the corner to the street where Roy’s own home was.

Edward snorted. “A tricycle? When you have a motorcycle hidden somewhere?”

“You’re not using my motorcycle.” Roy informed him with an amused grin, and stuffed his hands into his pockets.

“Why not?” Was the protest, almost close to sounding like a whine. “I can’t be damaged by one.”

Roy rolled his eyes. “I know you can’t. But you’re a ghost who never learned to ride a bike, as you informed me earlier. Even one with training wheels. I am not letting you on a motorcycle.”

Edward crossed his arms in a pout, a pout that was harder pulled off when he was smiling. “So then get me a bike to practice on? I don’t even need training wheels. I can’t get hurt if I fall down, I’d just let it pass through me and pick it back up again.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Roy decided to promise instead. But he knew he really wouldn’t find the heart to deny Edward learning the things he should have before his death. And honestly he would rather Edward learn while he was around. He couldn’t pass up the hilarity promised with such situations.

“So if I learn to ride a bike and stay balanced can I ride your motorcycle?” Edward asked pleadingly.

Roy chuckled at the ghost’s persistence. “Ask me after you learn.” And he pointed to the house that was next on their left. “That’s where I live.”

Edward immediately sped off to investigate. He passed through the fences and entered the yard to circle and sweep around looking. Roy’s yard was empty of toys and such, but it was evident the man needed to cut the grass soon. Soon he was walking up the pathway to the front door. It was a normal looking house, quaint. A small porch, windows on either side of the front door, two story. Made of wood.

He found it somehow ironic that the Flame Alchemist lived in a wooden house.

Stepping up to the front door he rested his hands up against it, letting the contact happen, before trying to push through. He was unable.

“I’m afraid I haven’t finished unpacking yet.” Roy said as he stepped up beside Edward and slipped a heavy silver key into the lock. “I didn’t expect to have company so soon.”

Edward snorted, “you think I care? I used to live exclusively in an office.”

Roy smirked and shoved the door open. He stepped inside first and flipped on the lights. “Point taken.”

Edward floated in after him, and immediately began to look around as Roy took off his boots. And as soon as the man was done he was led into the living room, since the hallway wasn’t much special. There was furniture already set up, but boxes still packed up along one wall. And Edward floated around to examine everything as Roy watched. “Wow…”

Roy heard the whispered word from where he’d been looking back out into the hallway and unbuttoning his jacket. “Oh, that.” He said as he saw what Edward was standing in front of. And he finished unbuttoning his jacket so he could hook a hand around Hazel’s middle and hoist the sleepy squirrel out. Setting the drowsy animal on the back of the couch to either fall back asleep or wake up,
Roy walked over to join Edward while slipping off his jacket. “Do you like them?”

Edward had one hand against the glass pane that formed the door of the wooden cabinet. Inside on shelves were all different types of glass statues. Either with form, or without. “They’re beautiful.” He murmured, mesmerized by the colors he could see in some of them. Left by the heat?

“Thank you.” Roy smiled, and felt Edward’s sudden look. But he didn’t look away from the glass works. “One of the places my team and I used to be stationed had a lot of sand. When it is met with intense heat, it melts and turns to glass.”

“So, you made these?” Edward asked in awe, looking back at them.

Roy half-nodded, half shook his head. It was a rather odd movement to be sure. “The ones that have form, like the swan.” He let his gaze flick over it, slender neck that could break with the slightest pressure to the delicate arch, the flared wings. “The others are what was a result of lightning striking the sand.”

Edward gazed at them, and suddenly made a vow never to touch the beautiful things. “They’re all so pretty. I promise I won’t touch them. I’d be too afraid I’d break them.”

Roy smiled over at him. “I can repair them with alchemy.”

“I’m still not going to touch them.” Edward insisted adamantly.

Roy chuckled and turned away, “come on, I’ll show you the rest of the house and take you out into the backyard.”

Edward turned to follow him, and soon they were touring the laundry room, opening the doors to all closets and other such things, and exploring the kitchen. Then in order came the backyard. And Edward immediately realized that the only non-boring thing out in Roy’s yard was something he found tucked between the fence and a tool shed.

“Look what I found!” Edward called out in a sing-song voice, and slipped into the space to sit himself on the seat of the motorcycle underneath the heavy tarp.

Roy groaned and walked over to be sure Edward wasn’t getting up to anything with the bike. He made a mental note to keep the keys on him at all times, just in case. Because he was fairly sure that Edward shouldn’t know how to hotwire a motorcycle. He came over to lean on the fence and smile as he locked eyes with the silvery ghost who was beaming up at him from the seat of the motorcycle with a cunning grin. “Behave now.”

Edward smirked at him. “So your mom doesn’t know… does Hughes know?”

Roy laughed softly. “Oh believe me, he knows. And his wife, Gracia, does too. Sometimes they let me take their daughter out on it. I’m very safe, even if you choose not to believe me yet.”

Edward gaped at him. “How old is their daughter?”

“Right now she’s around four… five… maybe six.” Roy shrugged and grinned as Edward laughed. “She loves it. A future motorcycle owner, that girl.”

“Good thing you won’t ever have children.” Edward rolled his eyes, and then narrowed them at Roy. “You don’t, do you? I mean, all those one-night stands… surely-”

Roy paled a bit, and then shook his head. “No. No children. I use protection.”
Edward let out a burst of laughter. “Well, at least you have the foresight for that in your ever-going quest to pillage every virgin you can find.”

“Why thank you.” Roy smirked at him and drew away from the fence. “Come on. It’s getting late, I still need dinner, and I still need to show you the rest of the house.”

Edward nodded and floated off after Roy. And he followed the man into the kitchen where he sat on the kitchen table to watch as Roy began bustling about the kitchen making dinner. “So it’s just you here then? You and Hazel? No roommate?”

“That’s right.” Roy agreed as he began to slice the vegetables for his stir-fry. “And you now. Of course now you have a lot more room at your disposal, so if you wanted to go elsewhere whenever you liked you could.”

Either he was imagining it, or Edward believed he could hear a hint of nervousness in Roy’s voice. “I won’t leave you.” He said quietly, and when Roy paused in his chopping at the words, before beginning a moment later, he continued. “I’d rather have some semblance of a normal life again. But when you go off to have your romp sessions in other beds, believe me you will find me waiting here for you to drag your sleepy ass back through the door.”

Roy was glad that Edward at least had that all planned out. Because he wasn’t about to stop. “I usually come back around two or three in the morning at the latest.”

It was when Roy had finished making and eating his dinner, and they were going through the upper floor of the house, when he finally asked the one question of the night that had been bothering him. And he approached that question as he let himself into his bedroom. “Was tonight the first time you’ve felt pain since you died?”

Edward startled at the question, and floated over to settle down onto Roy’s bed as his gaze darkened and shifted to the floor. “Yes.” And he carded a hand back through his silvery fringe. “I’ve only known one thing before that which would cause me to lose my ability to hover, cause me to fall. And that was that nightmare you saw me wake up from.”

Roy crossed the room, pajamas in hand, and sat on the bed next to the ghost. “The one of the Gate?”

“Right.” Edward agreed, and looked over at him in confusion. “But it’s never caused me pain before. I haven’t felt pain for seven years. Just that one time tonight. And it was pain. I think if I’d felt that while alive I would have passed out. It felt like I was being torn in two.”

That was confusing, and Roy settled back more on the bed while watching the ghost. “Do you have any idea why seeing the distortion caused you pain? Not that I’m saying ghosts should be incapable of it, but it is odd.”

Edward shifted so he was facing Roy now. “Not an idea that makes me feel comfortable.”

“Tell me.” Roy prompted.

“The Gate.” Edward said simply at first, and then expounded. “The only thing I know of that can make me fall like a rock is the Gate. First that nightmare… and now who’s to say it wasn’t the Gate this time as well? Except I’m also beginning to believe that the Gate was behind my imprisonment all along. And still is behind what remains of it. Tonight you allowed me to break free of it, so perhaps breaking free came at the price of pain on my part.”

Roy could see the similarities, now that Edward pointed them out. But there was still that question of why all of this had happened as it had. And why it was he who could see Edward. “Hopefully that’s
the last time you’ll experience it.”

Edward silently agreed. “I don’t like falling. It… scares me.” And he slipped off the bed. “I’ll leave so you can get changed and go to sleep.”

Roy could barely form a protest if he’d wanted to before Edward had floated through the bedroom door and vanished. Lowering the hand he’d raised, he heaved out a sigh. It had been a long day. Long night. Standing up he quickly did get changed, but he didn’t go to bed.

Instead he went in search of Edward.

He found the ghost downstairs on the couch watching a sleeping Hazel. “Edward.”

Edward looked up at the voice, not having heard or seen Roy come in. “Roy?”

“Are you okay?” Roy asked in concern, walking over to him.

“Sort of.” Edward admitted and looked away. “I just feel a bit out of sorts. Everything is so familiar, yet not. And there’s so much to take in. So much to think about.”

Roy smiled, “well, if you need me tonight you can wake me up. I’m sure you could figure out a way.”

Edward looked up at him again with a smile, and nodded. “Thank you, Roy.”

“You’re welcome.” Roy replied, and turned around to head back for his bedroom. “Entertain yourself as you will. But I’m here if you need me.”

“Goodnight!” Edward called after him, and heard an echo of his goodnight float back to him in Roy’s voice.

Upstairs Roy had finally fallen asleep, after thinking long and hard about the drastic turn his life had just taken. He’d need to talk with Edward at length tomorrow morning about some things. But it could wait until then. They’d both had an eventful night already. But whatever his feelings were on the fact that Edward was now with him to stay at his side, none of his feelings involved regret.

He fell asleep before he could see Edward slip back into his room and sit on the other side of the bed facing the window, watching the night sky and listening to Roy breathing.
Chapter 8

Edward sat there on the edge of Roy’s bed for the entire night and well into most of the morning. He
only rose from his perch when the sky began to turn dove grey, the coming light of dawn creeping
ever closer. Turning his head to look over his shoulder at Roy, he smiled faintly before floating up
towards, and through the ceiling until he came up onto the roof. There he settled down onto it, facing
the eastern horizon and waiting.

Yes, he had been reminded what the sunrise looked like by that picture. And it was a beautiful
picture that he was eternally grateful for. But right now he wanted to see the real thing. For the first
time in seven years, he wanted to see the sun rise. And now he could.

In the back of his mind he was grateful that Roy had looked around as much as the man must have
during their walk to his house. For his view of the horizon was not at all obstructed by that damnable
whiteness. Yes, there were quite a few parts of the sky that he couldn’t see, and much of the city. It
was like a jigsaw puzzle that hadn’t yet acquired all its pieces. But what he could see was far more
than he ever had before. It was large, and intimidating. Yet up here on the roof, with dawn creeping
ever closer, he was calm.

When the first threads of light began to spill over the horizon, his mind went blank with wonder.
And he watched in silent awe as dark blues and purples began to gradually become lighter and
spread across the sky bringing with them splashes of pink. And then the sun was rising, a yellow and
gold ball of light that made something inside him clench at the forgotten beauty of that shining mass.
The familiarity of it. A hand strayed to tangle fingers in a lock of his silvery hair as he gazed at that
rich gold and yellow, a flicker of melancholy in his silver eyes.

He stayed there on the roof watching the sunrise in contentment. Watched the colors chase each
other across the sky until the darkness of the night before had fled entirely to give way to a pale blue
morning with the faintest hints of pink and orange remaining in the few clouds that floated freely. He
knew he could go to the clouds, see them up close and watch the colors dance in them. But he stayed
where he was. Just watching… and deep down scared to touch.

Beneath the roof where Edward sat watching the sky, Roy was finally stirring awake.

It was not Hazel who woke him though, on weekends he kept his door firmly closed and locked.
The little bugger of a squirrel had figured out how to open doors if they weren’t locked, so on the
times he didn’t need an alarm clock, he locked said alarm clock out.

No, this morning Roy was awaking from his own volition after having an entire night of sleep – as
well as the fact that the sunlight had hit him directly across the face. Now normally he might have
gone back to sleep after turning over, maybe piling a few pillows over his head. But not this
morning. Not when he remembered that there was someone else besides Hazel living with him now.

And he sat up in bed quickly, looking around just in case and pushing off the covers. He wasn’t sure
where the ghost was, but he planned to find Edward. The thought that Edward coming home with
him had been a dream didn’t cross his mind as something plausible. He knew with complete certainty
that Edward was now free of that office.

Somewhere…
Roy got out of bed, and not bothering to shower or properly dress before going on his search for the ghost, he pulled his bathrobe on over his pajamas and began his search of his house. Yet he couldn’t turn up the ghost.

“He must not be inside.” Roy muttered to himself, and let himself out the backdoor to see if Edward was messing around with the motorcycle. He sincerely hoped not. Edward may not get hurt if the bike were to crash, but he wasn’t looking forward to repairing the bike itself in the event of a crash. He wasn’t great shakes at alchemy that fixed… alchemy that destroyed or had the potential for destruction was more his forte.

As messed up and cruel that such a reality was.

But he’d given up on redemption a year and ten bottles of various hard alcohols ago. There were just some things you had to accept about yourself. And the fact that he was a better killer than a savior was one such thing. The sooner he became Fuhrer the better…

Shaking his head he shoved away those darker thoughts. It was too early to be thinking about the skeletons in his closet. And a Saturday at that. Dusting off skeletons in the closet was more a Wednesday thing.

He walked around to where the motorcycle was kept, but it showed him no sign of Edward. Frowning he tugged his bathrobe a bit closer and looked around. Just where had the ghost run off to? “Guess he’ll show up sooner or later.” And turning to walk back to the house, he stopped short, doing a double-take at his roof.

There, sitting atop the shingles, was the ghost. Just sitting there and staring off into the distance.

Opening his mouth to call out to him, Roy thought better of it. Instead he walked over to the back door of the house. And using the window ledges as footing and places to grasp, he began to climb up the side of the house. Sure, he had a ladder, but this was quicker. And just a bit more fun. As a child his mother had often found him asleep in trees. The woman claimed that he was climbing the damn things before he even learned how to walk properly.

Which he found just ridiculous.

But it was little task to scale the side of the house. Getting onto the roof presented a bit of a tricky angle and a lot of guts, but guts he had. And there were trees back home that had more awkward angles than this that he’d scaled as a toddler.

If one were to believe his mother.

And with a last heave of effort, Roy was kneeling just on the edge of the roof. He breathed a sigh of accomplishment, and carefully edged away before getting to his feet and walking across the shingles quietly. It didn’t seem that Edward knew he was there, the ghost was still staring off at the skyline. A skyline he kept his eyes averted from, lest he remove any whiteness the ghost was seeing and alert the apparition to his presence.

He walked over to just behind Edward, before stepping to the ghost’s right and settling down quickly next to him. He smiled over at the ghost as Edward whipped his head around, shock and surprise clearly reflected in the silver eyes. “Good morning.”

Edward began to relax after being caught off guard, and he smiled. “Morning.”

Roy looked off at the horizon now, letting his eyes sweep it all slowly. “Were you watching the sunrise?”
Edward knew Roy was trying to fill in any gaps of white still lingering on the horizon, the man’s head was doing as best an imitation of an owl as it could. And he felt warm gratitude for the gesture. “Yes.”

“And,” Roy looked at Edward again, “was it beautiful?”

Edward nodded a slight amount. “I’d forgotten how beautiful. The picture was gorgeous… but seeing it again in person?” He let out a contented sigh. “I never thought I would again. I’d forgotten the sun… how it shines.”

Roy glanced up at it for only a second before he looked away, blinking. “It’s definitely shining.” He chuckled and rubbed at his eyes.

A small whisper of laughter slipped past Edward’s lips. “Silly mortal. It can’t hurt my eyes if I stare at it. Don’t go blind trying to see if I’m right about it shining.”

Roy grinned and placed his hands back on the shingles to lean back and look up at the pale blue sky, the sun barely in his peripheral. “I wish I could though.” He admitted, “not that I wish I were dead so I could. But I wish I could stare at it for hours.”

“Why?” Edward frowned, and looked back up at the sun.

“Because it’s beautiful.” Roy explained fondly. “The color, the light it gives off. The intensity of heat I know it has.” He raised and looked down at one of his gloveless hands. “It’s like… the divine side of fire. The side I can’t create. Heaven’s fire is up there… I’m down here creating hellfire.”

Edward frowned, discarding everything Roy had said but that last part about fire. And suddenly he moved so that he was sitting in front of Roy, practically commanding attention as he said, quite sternly, “you’re stupid.”

Feeling flustered not just from those final sounding words, Roy gulped as he met those silver eyes. He couldn’t look away from them, even if again it felt like they were piercing into him. As if Edward could see straight through flesh and blood, and to intangible but real things like his soul. And it unnerved him that possibly Edward could see into his soul. “Why am I stupid?” He finally asked upon getting his wits a bit more together. There was something about being chastised and stared down by a ghost that left one feeling off balance.

“First off, there’s no such thing as heaven or hell.” Edward started off, and a narrow-eyed look silenced Roy. “If there was, why the – pardon the necessary pun – hell am I here? I’m a ghost. Not a demon. Not an angel. To think that neither would claim me is an insult. Especially hell, I committed the greatest sin one could ever commit, and if that doesn’t grant me entrance to hell, then none of those two extremes exist.”

“You’re an atheist.” Roy managed to get in edgewise.

“You’re so clever.” Edward snarked at him. “Now shut up and listen to me.” And Roy did shut up. “You are not creating any such thing as hellfire. We’ve all used our alchemy for something we wish we hadn’t. Myself included. Anyone who says otherwise is clearly deluded. Yes, fire can destroy, it can kill. But it can also bring life. Just like the sun. The sun can give life, or it can take it away. So don’t continue going through your life believing that you wield only the dark side of the flames.”

When Roy finally got his thoughts together, Edward was again sitting next to him and staring serenely at the sky. He came to the conclusion that the ghost was the most confusing and yet intriguing being he’d ever met. “But it’s not like I used my flames for a forest fire or something.
Where everything would grow back again anew and for the better of it. I killed many, many innocent people. Tell me, what is the bright side in that?”

Edward looked over, still sporting that serene expression even as he gave a faint smile. “That it made you you. People have died who should have lived. And people have lived who should have died. Now all you can do is decide where you go from here. You can’t change the past, Roy. Just your future. And from what it sounds like, your intended future does not include more killing of innocent people because of what I’m assuming were military orders. Sounds more like an intention for using the fire to bring life, instead of death, to me.”

Roy studied him in silence for some time, their gazes never shifting from each other. As strange as it was, he was beginning to believe the ghost might be right. But he needed some more time… some more Wednesdays… it wasn’t exactly easy to shift such hard-hammered views of oneself in the space of a morning rooftoptalk. “You’re a very kind person, you know. I’m not sure I could be as nice as you are after spending seven years in isolation.”

Edward laughed at that, causing Roy to startle. “I’m just honest. If the perceived nice part of my honesty is freaking you out a bit I can always tell you what I think of your hair.”

Roy’s hands immediately flew to his hair, patting it down and carding fingers through it in a flurry of fastidious motions that sent Edward into more laughter. “Don’t laugh!” He admonished ineffectually. “What if a virgin sees me up here and they decide to write me off because of my hair?!”

Edward’s laughs turned into evil sounding snickers. “If that’s the deal breaker, I shudder to think how lacking you are.”

Roy scowled at the pleased-with-himself ghost. “I happen to take great pride in my hair.” And after a few more frantic actions with it, he felt it settle down out of its bed-mussed state. He’d been telling the truth when he told Edward it only took him a few seconds to do his hair. It only took a bit longer right now since he hadn’t had a comb or brush on him. “And for your information the only deal breaker that might, and I repeat, might, ever happen, is the person sees me on my roof talking to myself.”

“So what you’re saying is that even if you were mentally unstable you’d still be worth getting into bed?” Edward queried with a positively wicked smile.

“Yes.” And Roy dared Edward to comment about it.

Edward ignored the silent dare. “Well, for what my opinion is worth, when your hair is in disarray from just getting out of bed you have this “just been thoroughly shagged” look.”

Roy grinned, and ruffled a hand through his hair to set it in disarray again. “You like?”

Edward snorted, and sincerely wished he could shove the man. But as it was… “No!” He said through his laughter.

“Oh well.” Roy lamented with an exaggerated sigh and corrected his hair back to a state of order. “Never would have worked out between us anyway. I’d never be able to ditch you.”

“You’re such an impossible idiot.” Edward accused him in a fond sort of tone, even as he continued to laugh.

Roy laughed and cleared his throat. “Welcome to being with me away from work. It tends to make me, as Hughes likes to term loosely, carefree. I’m sorry, I won’t fluster you any more.”
Edward grinned at him happily. “Oh, trust me, Roy, I can take you.”

“Can you now?” Roy waggled an eyebrow.

“Kill me.” Edward joked, and began to float slowly down through the roof. “I am leaving now, before your atrocious attempts at obvious flirting make me want to find an exorcist.”

“Right! Right.” Roy held up a hand. “Come back up here.” Edward’s head was one of the few body parts remaining above the roof.

Edward immediately popped back through the roof to reclaim his original seat. “And you thought I was bad with the references to liking chocolate on my lover.”

Roy glowered sidelong at him.

Edward smirked. He knew Roy hadn’t been serious with the flirting, it had been far too obvious. And far too obvious it had been done to amuse him. Which it certainly had. But he also couldn’t let Roy get too out of hand.

“So,” Roy finally said, breaking the comfortable if not still amused silence between them, “I’m going inside to make myself some breakfast.” And he unfolded himself with a bit of a yawn to stand up.

Edward floated up as well. “I’ll come with you then.” And to Edward’s unending amusement, he watched Roy climb back down the side of the house clad only in his robe and pajamas. It was rather interesting to say the least. The man was a squirrel himself. “I now see why you and Hazel get along so well.” He remarked once Roy finally hopped down to the grass.

Roy chuckled and walked over to the backdoor to open it and let himself inside. “Maybe you’ve a point there.” And to Edward’s unending amusement, he watched Roy climb back down the side of the house clad only in his robe and pajamas. It was rather interesting to say the least. The man was a squirrel himself. “I now see why you and Hazel get along so well.” He remarked once Roy finally hopped down to the grass.

Roy chuckled and walked over to the backdoor to open it and let himself inside. “Maybe you’ve a point there.” And though he knew Edward could pass through the door if he closed it, he held it open until the ghost had walked through. Something he couldn’t do all the time obviously, but when he could he preferred if he might treat Edward as any other living person.

“What are you going to make?” Asked Edward as he followed Roy into the kitchen.

Roy hummed thoughtfully as he opened the fridge and took a quick inventory of his choices. Or lack of. However you chose to view a fridge in desperate need of stocking. He hadn’t had a chance to shop for food since he’d moved, and the food he’d packed in an ice chest and brought with him had dwindled into a carton of orange juice, some apples and an acorn squash, some bacon, and a few remaining tortillas. “Not looking promising.” He muttered.

Edward floated over to see, but as Roy was in the way and he didn’t want to touch the man he came in from the side and poked his head through the side of the fridge, ignoring Roy’s startled curse. “What are you, a bird?”

“Hardly.” Roy coughed, and grabbed out an apple for now. “I just need to go shopping at the market to get some food. But before I do that, we need to talk.”

Edward pulled out of the fridge and floated after Roy. “I’ll behave.” He said as he joined Roy at the table. “I won’t knock down displays or anything.”

Roy smiled around the bite of apple he was chewing. And once he swallowed he shook his head. “It’s not behavior I’m worried about. It’s how we should interact in public. Because I don’t plan on ignoring you, but I also don’t want to be taken for some crazy man.”

“Too late to worry about that.” Edward muttered, and grinned as Roy gave him a reproachful look.
"Sorry."

Roy chuckled, his eyes twinkling a bit. The ghost sure was happy. Oh how he loved it when Edward was happy. "Brat of a ghost." He murmured, and then raised his voice to a normal level. "So basically this is what I’m thinking we do. You of course don’t need to worry about anything, so you can talk to me whenever. However, in my case… I think we need to stick to a simple system of a head nod or shake. It’s nothing anyone would get concerned over, I could just be thinking to myself. And if we actually need to talk, we’ll go somewhere private. When we’re alone of course, or there’s enough distance between us and other people, I’ll talk to you."

Edward nodded and waved a hand through the air. “I’ll plan on being the dominator of our conversations in public then.” He smirked belatedly at the thought.

“Don’t go overboard.” Roy warned him suspiciously. “And as for your behavior, don’t do anything unless it’s absolutely essential that you do. You don’t seem like you’d prank anyone without cause, let’s keep it that way.”

“No worries over that.” Edward remarked blandly. “No use people getting suspicious. And if strange things happen too often when you’re around… well, I don’t want to cause you problems.”

Roy nodded, grateful for that. “And as for you getting shown more of the city at least for a start, I’ll try to take you at least one new place a night until we’ve seen them all. After that, we’ll worry about the rest of the world.”

“I have an idea.” Edward ventured with a sudden flash of a smile. “Be my personal tour guide! Screw the military.”

“Or just carve out my eyes and carry them around with you.” Roy joked back.

“Where’s the knife?” Edward asked conversationally.

“You’ll have to find it, ghost.” Roy claimed and began nibbling around the exposed core of the apple to remove the sweeter bits of flesh there.

Edward rubbed his hands together with a smirk. “Oh goody, something to do tonight while you’re asleep.”

Roy rolled his eyes and stood up to walk the apple core to the trash bin. “I plan to go out tonight, should give you plenty of time to find it without you worrying about creating a racket rattling around through my possessions.”

Edward frowned just a bit, but bit his tongue against what he wanted to say. Instead he floated up off the chair. “And until then?”

“Well,” Roy stretched languidly, arms high up over his head, “I need to take a shower. Then we’ll go shopping at the market. After that if you’re feeling comfortable being exposed to all of the stuff waiting out there for you we can wander around. I’ll take you around the city some and we can just go from there. But if you have had enough by the time we’re done at the market we can stay home. I still have some unpacking to do.”

“I’ll see how I feel.” Edward told him, with not the least bit of embarrassment. He knew that there was no reason for him to feel shame over the fact that being exposed to something quite larger than that office after seven years was intimidating. A culture shock. And truthfully he felt he’d braved it quite well so far. A less brave ghost might have been a shaking mess.
Roy nodded, he expected no less. And he turned with an “I’ll take my shower now”, to head back to the hallway.

“Roy?” Edward called after him.

Roy paused and looked over his shoulder to see those silver eyes staring at him in an assessing way he’d not really noticed before. “Yes?”

“You really don’t mind this?”

Ah, so that was it. Roy smiled, and shook his head. “You have somehow in a matter of days wormed yourself into my life in a way that only my mother could duplicate. But I’d not once wish to be rid of the commitments that come with it. I asked you to come with me for a reason, and as you said last night, I had to mean it. So perhaps now the question isn’t ‘will you come with me’, but ‘will you stay with me’.”

Edward smiled at him. “Yes, of course.” And when Roy flashed him a cunning sort of grin he rolled his eyes. “Go take a shower. Maybe take a crap, you’re too full of yourself.”

Roy sauntered off with laughter floating in his wake

While Edward waited for Roy to shower and dress, he floated up the stairs to sit in the hallway where he could hear the water of the shower running at first. And then later the sound of dresser drawers opening and closing. It wasn’t that he was trying to listen in on Roy. But that he wanted to know Roy was still nearby. Spare him thoughts of ‘so cute’, and other such drivel. He was just a bit nervous still about being left alone in the world without anyone to hear or see him.

He only fell down through the floor of the hallway and floated his way into the living room when he heard Roy’s footsteps nearing the bedroom door. And he floated around the room, tossing a sleeping Hazel glances every so often.

“Ready?”

Edward looked over at Roy’s voice, and smiled. “Yeah.” And he floated over with a hand on his chin that rubbed thoughtfully. “Huh, did you put on a corset or something?”

Roy blinked at him, unsure if Edward was being funny or not. “Pardon?”

“A corset.” Edward repeated slowly. “You know, to make yourself skinnier.”

Roy frowned. “Why do you ask? Wait, do I want to know?”

“Oh, I was just thinking that you look skinnier in this.” This being a pair of dark blue-almost-black denims and a dove gray t-shirt. The color reminded him of the sky just before dawn. And the general way the shirt clung to every muscle and bulge of a bicep made Edward think if maybe Roy couldn’t wash his laundry properly. Clearly the wash was shrinking.

Roy got it now, and he shrugged as he stuffed his ignition cloth gloves in a front pocket. “The uniforms aren’t meant to be flattering. I think they make everyone look about three sizes too large in all the wrong areas.”

Edward frowned, and pointed at the shirt. “So are you compensating by wearing shirts three sizes too small?”

“It is not too small, it fits!” Roy protested as he put his hands on his hips while glaring at the ghost
who was now smiling far too happily.

“It’s a corset.” Edward grinned, and danced away even though he knew Roy couldn’t touch him.

Roy swatted his way anyway, and stepped over towards the front door. “Be glad I’m not wearing jeans that you think are three sizes too small.”

“I am.” Edward admitted with fervor, and followed Roy out the door.

Together they walked to the nearest market, Edward sticking close by Roy even as he looked around and dodged people on the sidewalks who couldn’t see him. If he spotted a place he couldn’t yet see that Roy could do some temporary fixing to, he pointed it out. But for the most part he didn’t speak. Even when they were alone on the streets. You could never really know who was watching from a window during the day.

When they reached the market, Roy began to peruse the selections of fruits and vegetables. It was rather crowded on a Saturday morning, so Edward stuck close beside Roy, if not hovering up in the air by the man’s head.

“So many people.” He said to himself as he looked around.

“So glad it’s not a Sunday.” Roy answered, an innocent seeming proclamation to make to oneself amid such a multitude of fellow shoppers.

Edward interpreted that to mean that Sunday was even worse. So he filed that away. And he returned to his looking around at all the different sights. People milling everywhere, bartering back and forth, haggling loudly over prices. Live animals in their coops added to the general din with their clucks, bleats, quacks, and other noises that included the banging of their cages when an animal was selected by a potential buyer. So many colors. So many sounds. So many people, animals, and things moving. Even past the market. It was all so much to take in after his seclusion.

He was to a degree unsettled by it all. Culture shock for sure.

Casting a look towards Roy who was picking through husked corn, he decided to hell with it. There wasn’t anyone bustling around near to him, so he sank to the ground and stood quite close to Roy. Discovering as he did so that the man was humming something softly to himself, and off key at that, but he focused on that one sound and held onto it like a lifeline until he calmed from this overload of sight and sound.

Roy saw the ghost move in close to him, but he didn’t question it, didn’t try to put any space between them. He had no problems anymore with Edward being in what was loosely termed by people as “personal space” or a “bubble”. Edward wouldn’t hurt him, and he didn’t mind the proximity. Anyone else, sure. But the ghost defied all ways in which he would normally deal with others. Besides, he knew why Edward had sought out being a bit closer to him. He hadn’t the heart nor want to tell Edward to move away.

He moved away slowly from the corn now, Edward following along beside him like a second shadow. He knew if the ghost was too overwhelmed he’d have asked to leave. So for now he continued to hum and let Edward stick to him like the incorporeal shadow he currently was.

By the time they reached the meat sections, both already slaughtered and live, Edward had calmed down again. And there weren’t very many people over here at the moment. The animals were still loud, but he didn’t mind them so much. And as Roy looked at steaks he floated over to peer at a goose.
“Roy, he kind of reminds me of you.” He remarked as he watched the goose preen himself with a
haughty air.

Roy looked up at the goose, and looked back at the steaks with a smirk.

Edward grinned back at him, and looked at a rooster now. A rooster who was crowing in puffed up
glory at several hens in another cage next to his. “This one *is* you.” He decided mildly.

Roy looked up again, saw the rooster, and snickered. Shaking his head he began to haggle for the
price of the steaks he had selected.

Edward moved on from the rooster and his biddies to float back over to where Roy was now
haggling over the price of a side of pig. “How are you going to carry all this anyway?” He asked as
he looked down at the side of pig, and what Roy had already bought that was piled in paper bags.
“Why do you need a side of pig?”

When Roy walked away with more expensive cuts of chops and more bacon for a lesser price,
Edward was even more confused.

“I really don’t get this haggling thing. How’d you get away with things that should have cost you
more than that side of pig for less money?” Edward frowned, thoroughly confused.

Roy led them down a virtually empty portion of the market while sporting a pleased with himself
smirk. “An upside of military training, convincing people that what they’d rather not do is actually
the best option.”

“Are you done shopping?” Edward frowned as he looked at the four full bags Roy was carrying. “I
swear you’ve enough to feed your own regiment in there.”

Roy snickered, “I like to be well stocked. You won’t help me carry the bags?”

Edward held out his hands. “Sure, they won’t weigh anything to me. But do you really want to
explain a bunch of floating bags to everyone?”

Roy shook his head, and walked back out onto the sidewalk. No, that was one thing he’d really
rather not explain. He had a feeling that down the road some explanations, very elaborate ones with
lots of big words so as to entice confusion and attention away from whatever occurred, would be
needed. But until he crossed that street, he didn’t want to go there.

“I’m thinking one of the first places I want to see is the library. Every single corner of it.” Edward
said as he walked with Roy down the street. Or rather, Roy walked on the sidewalk and he walked
on the actual street. Cars parked along the curb were no impediment for him.

Roy chuckled at that, he might have known. And he waited until they’d turned another corner onto
an empty street where there were not so many buildings as lots for companies dealing in things like
lumber and steel to answer. It was more secluded here, less windows, and Edward needed to see this
area as well still. “Okay, library. We’ll get that done. And then where?”

“Well,” Edward began with a thoughtful look, “I don’t really know. I mean, besides walking around
everywhere I might want to go on the streets. And out past the city. But I grew up in a rural area with
practically nothing around. I don’t know if times have changed Risembool, but this is the first time
I’ve ever been in a city. Besides a library, I really don’t know what cities have that would interest
me.”

“Then I’ll introduce you to what you’ve been missing.” Roy reassured him, and then smirked.
“Might find some more one-nighters that way, walking around the city.”

Edward gave him a deadpan look. “I have this great urge to trip you. Damn that I can’t.”

Roy merely laughed and kept walking.

They made it back to Roy’s house just in time to keep the meat from spoiling, as according to Roy, it was a bit of a warm day. And as Roy set the bags on the counter Edward floated over to begin helping with pulling things out and setting them in easy reach for Roy.

“Are we still having our chess game tonight?” Edward asked, even though it wasn’t even close to being noon yet.

Roy glanced over at him from where he was ducked inside the fridge putting away the extra bacon he’d bought. “If you like. I don’t have any other plans. I won’t hit the bars until after six.”

“I would like.” Edward said firmly, and passed the whole chicken – already cleaned, plucked, and packaged – to the man when Roy beckoned for it. “I’m getting better. I want to keep practicing.”

“Then how about at three we start playing?” Roy proposed. “I do have an extra set in one of the boxes. It’s a bit more battered than the one at the office, but all the pieces are still there.”

Edward planned to watch the clock, and finished emptying the last of the bags. “Roy, where do you buy condoms?”

There was a rather painful sounding bang that issued from inside the fridge, followed immediately by a sharp yelp, and the sound of muffled swearing.

“Roy?”

Roy emerged looking bewildered and rubbing at his head tenderly. “What?”

“I asked where you buy condoms.” Edward said, and smirked at the man’s expression. “Not for me!”

“I know that!” Roy spluttered. “Why do you want to know?”

Edward motioned at what was still on the counter after being emptied from the bags. “You didn’t buy any. I thought that surely you’d need more by now considering your rabbit-esque activities.”

“I still have plenty. I buy in bulk from the pharmacy.” Roy explained with a hint of red staining his cheeks.

“Ah. Okay.” Edward chuckled and shrugged. “Just making sure.”

Roy grabbed the jar of peanut butter to stick up in a cupboard. “I love how you look out for my welfare.”

“Hey, you’re the only one I have around who can see or hear me.” Edward passed him a package of dried pasta that was motioned for. “Kind of implies I should look out for you.”

“Well at least when I’m old and crotchety I won’t need to go into a nursing home.” Roy threw an overzealous smile at Edward. “You can change my bedpans for me!”

“Eww! No!” Edward gagged, and threw a dishrag at Roy’s face. “I’ll never be that attached to you.”
Roy laughed and caught the dishrag easily before tossing it back where the ghost had snatched it from. “Come on now, help me. I want to make myself a proper breakfast. Do you want to go out afterwards?”

Edward resumed his helping, and thought seriously about it for a moment before shaking his head. “Tomorrow, but not today. I think I’ve had all I can take for a few hours. So we may as well just stay inside. I’ll help you unpack.”

Roy nodded in understanding. “Whenever you’re ready. There’s no rush. I’m proud of how well you handled the market. Even though you definitely were starting to… is panic even the right word to use with a ghost?” Roy asked with true curiosity. “Do you panic?”

“Yes.” Edward answered calmly. “But not because of that. That is more unsettling than panic worthy. I panic at the ends of my dreams.”

Accepting the explanation, Roy with Edward’s help finished putting away the groceries. The ghost put the paper bags in the bin labeled ‘for a bad day’ that was in the laundry room, and Roy started cooking himself a proper breakfast.

Edward floated back in to hover over a counter off to the side and watch as Roy began to systematically churn out waffle after waffle while still cooking sausages at the same time. “Are you going to eat all of this by yourself?” He asked eventually when he couldn’t stave off the curiosity any longer.

“Healthy appetite.” Roy explained, and patted against his muscular and toned abdomen. “But I do work it off. I don’t have this body for no reason.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Edward decided with a roll of his eyes. “So it’s not just a healthy sexual appetite, but just in general you’re insatiable?”

Roy paused to think, and then nodded. “Yep, that’s pretty much it. I have my days or nights where I don’t need it. But when I have it, I may as well have as much as I like.”

Reflecting on the night Roy seemingly had planned for himself, Edward could suddenly see the need for lots of food. “Your sausage is about to burn.” He said, pointing at one in particular that was sizzling quite ominously.

“Hm? Oh!” Roy jerked himself out of his personal moment and quickly tended to the endangered link.

Edward grinned and shook his head. Only settling in a bit farther back on the counter to pull his legs up to his chest and watch. He was beginning to wonder if Roy might actually need help cooking. But he’d save that offer for a moment when it best suited his chances for being amused.

Roy managed to finish cooking his breakfast without setting anything ablaze. And to Edward’s great entertainment, he ate an entire stack of waffles, plus fourteen sausages. All slathered in maple syrup.

Only afterwards did they depart to tackle the remaining packed boxes sitting in the living room.
Roy tried not to smile as Edward immediately went for the box labeled ‘Books’. There were still a few in the stack, and the one Edward had seized had been the one he’d been pulling from during the week to give the ghost things to read.

“I figure you’ll be reading them more often than I do.” Roy said as he knelt down onto the floor and pulled a box labeled ‘Kitchen’ to him. He still was missing about half his cookware, and from the weight of the box as he slid it across the carpet, this was where they were. “I’ll leave putting them on the bookshelves to you.”

Edward glanced towards the bookshelves placed against the wall in the living room. “Do you need any room on them for anything else?”

Roy finished opening the flaps on the box, revealing his missing cookware. “No. Just don’t cram them together. There’s plenty of room.”

The ghost nodded and grabbed the box of books to float over to the bookshelves. He started on the highest one first, balancing the box between a hand and a raised thigh while he plucked book after book out with his other. Each one went through a preliminary inspection of contents, author, and a quick glance at the date of publication before it was placed onto the shelf.

He was exceedingly interested however when he got to the bottom of the box of books where the books changed from actual books to leather-bound research documents that were easily several hundred pages thick. There were five in total in the bottom of the box, each stamped on the leather cover with an alchemy symbol. He didn’t have to ask to know, but he did anyway as he stared at it. “The only thing missing is the actual circle but… Roy, are these yours?” He held one of them up as he looked over his shoulder at the man.

Roy glanced up from where he was wiping a small amount of traveling dust off of a roasting pan. “Oh,” he blinked as he saw the leather-bound book. So that’s where they’d ended up. He knew he’d packed them, but he’d thought he’d put them in a different box entirely. “Yes. They’re my personal research on the flame alchemy. I’m always trying to figure out some new way to control it, use it. Those books are full of the details of my trials and errors.” And he gave a short laugh. “And what successes there were.”

“Were there more successes than errors?” Edward asked curiously and began to set the books on one of the shelves, off to the side, stacked together, where he’d easily remember where they were. He wanted to read them. Wanted to read them now, as it were. But he’d restrain himself.

“Can’t recall.” Was Roy’s answer. “That’s why I keep those. One of the books though… it’s entirely on my efforts to insert a combination array into the transmutation circle already stitched onto my gloves that would allow me the freedom of non-flame alchemy without the use of chalk. Still snap, but cause something else to happen.”

“And how’s that working for you?” Edward asked as he finished setting them onto the shelf and began to float back over with the now empty box.

Roy smiled faintly. “I’m getting closer. It’s difficult to explain, the stage I’m at. But I suppose to put it in simple terms… if something has the ability of generating heat, I’m able to manipulate it. But
anything else rather turns out, shall we say, unstable. I tried to fix a broken window once, and while it can theoretically conduct heat… well, let’s just say that it ended up more broken than before and I blamed it on Hawkeye who I had to dodge a week’s worth of bullets from.”

Edward set the empty box aside. “So do you want that one somewhere else? Where you can easily write in it again?”

“No.” Roy shook his head and set the roasting pan aside. “It’s filled to the last page. I need to get a new one before I start trying again. The only reason I may need it is for reference, but until that time it can stay on the shelf.”

“How long has it been since you’ve not been researching it?” Edward asked as he found another box labeled as ‘Books’ and took it into his hands effortlessly.

Roy stiffly got up, wincing a bit as his legs began to yell at him for how he’d been sitting. “About a month now. With the plans to be transferred, and then the actual moving here, time got short for me. Now that I’m finally settled I’ll find more time for research again.”

“Even if this is the city you need to be to really work at becoming Fuhrer?” Edward asked as he opened up the box of books and began to pull them free and set them on the bookshelves.

Roy stretched and bent down to pick up one of the stacks of cookware that needed to be put away. “It’s easier to do it from here, but not necessary. I’ll find the time, I always have for my alchemy. I’ll be no good as a Fuhrer if I don’t maintain being the best. And-” he grinned, “I am the best.”

Edward snorted. “Surely not.”

“Well,” Roy amended, “there is one person I believe is alchemically more dangerous than I am. But seeing as how we both believe or wish he’s dead… that means the crown falls to me.”

“My father?” Edward frowned, silver eyes darkening.

Roy merely nodded, and turned to walk out of the living room with his armful of cookware.

Edward watched him go, and then turned back to his own task. He couldn’t help feeling that Roy knew more about his father than he did. And really, it wasn’t that hard to believe for him. Grownups learned about their alchemy rivals, surely. As a kid he’d only wanted to have ‘daddy’ around. Had daddy been around? …Not much. And in a way it hurt, that someone outside of the family might know more about his dad than he did. But his dad had abandoned them… family had not been what came first to his estranged father.

And now look at what had become of their family.

A dead mother, a possibly dead father of unknown location. One brother alive, and one brother dead in their pursuit to try and bring back their mother and regain a lost piece of their family. No child ever wanted to lose both parents. And never at that age.

“They were his books.” Edward said quietly, darkly, as Roy came back into the room at last. “My dad’s books, they had the recipe for the human transmutation. I chose to push my brother and I into doing the transmutation because I knew the recipe was there. The alchemy was there.”

Roy paused in his move to pick up the last pieces of cookware. “You blame him? For giving you access, albeit unknowingly, because if you’d never had access to such a thing, never known it existed, you’d never have thought to try it.”
Edward placed another book to the shelf. “Yes. I blame him. Very much for that. He left everything… everything. All those damn books… ideas. I suppose if that book had been on a high shelf it wouldn’t have mattered. I couldn’t reach those books and there were plenty lower down for me to reach. But no, he left that evil book sitting on his desk.” And he sighed heavily. “I don’t regret anything. I’ve come to terms with it all. But I still blame him.”

“You have every right.” Roy replied and finally stooped to pick up the last of the cookware. “He abandoned you, and you needed him. He had no sense of child-proofing anything. But whether he’s dead or alive I suppose really doesn’t matter anymore. He’s not here, and neither you nor I need him.”

Edward laughed shortly. “That’s for sure. I need no one but you.”

Roy grinned and turned to go back to the kitchen to finish putting the cookware away. He was suddenly feeling very pleased with himself. The ghost did need him… and he’d do his damn best to give Edward what he needed. And he was already forming a mental list.

At first, you wouldn’t think a ghost needed much. But he knew better now.

Kneeling down to set some things in a bottom cupboard he smiled over at Hazel who scampered to his side. “I brought your new friend home with me. He’s had a bit of a trying day, you should try and get him to play with you for a while.” And he flapped a hand at the squirrel, “go on, shoo.”

Hazel immediately turned and scampered away. He had no clue what his human was saying, but if he was being shooed, he was being shooed. And he bounded back to the sitting room where the furniture was set up perfectly for running and leaping onto. He went from couch, to display cabinet, to table, to back of an armchair, to a bookshelf before he nearly tumbled over himself stopping. He could sense it again!

Edward looked up at the noise and instantly grinned when he saw Hazel there peering over the top of the bookshelf at him and chattering excitedly. “You’re awake!” He grinned and floated up higher so the squirrel didn’t need to lean over. “I really need to ask Roy if he has proper toys for you.”

“Roy does have proper toys.” Roy chuckled as he walked back into the living room and turned his steps towards them. “Depends on for whom though.”

Edward looked at him blankly for a moment before his eyes widened. “For him! You heard me say ‘for you’.” And he added quickly, “and not in reference to you! You keep your toys to yourself.”

Roy snickered at the ghost’s distress and turned. “Set the box down and follow me. I’ll show you where Hazel’s toys are kept.”

Edward gave him a mistrustful look. “Coming from a pervert I’m not sure that’s a safe idea.” But he floated to the floor to set the box down anyway and run after Roy.

Hazel immediately leapt to follow the invisible presence he could sense before it got away.

“You don’t worry. If we’re talking my toys we’re not going to the laundry room.” Roy chuckled as he led the way. “Although, the dryer.”

“No!” Edward interjected almost frantically. “I don’t want to know.”

Roy’s chuckles gave way to full blown laughter that he only got under control when he entered the laundry room. Walking over to one of the shelves he reached up to pull down a plastic container with
Edward nodded and peered inside as Roy pulled the lid off. Hazel had jumped onto his owner’s shoulder to peer in as well, chattering excitedly. Inside the container were toys that covered every spectrum of the color world, in the brightest shade possible. Some of them looked to have glitter, and some did not. But it was easily the most colorful thing Edward had ever seen.

"Now aren’t you interested what my toy box looks like?" Roy grinned at the ghost wickedly.

"W-what?" Edward spluttered and floated back several feet to glare at him. “Absolutely not!”

“There’s not quite as much glitter.” Roy said mournfully and offered the box of squirrel toys out to Edward.

Edward took it from him with a roll of his eyes. “I wouldn’t think you as one for liking glittery things.”

Roy smirked, “we all have our little secrets.”

“Spare me some of your more secretive ones.” Edward grumbled and began to sort through the toys with interest.

Hazel, seeing the box he knew contained his toys floating in midair, immediately jumped for it. He could sense that invisible presence he couldn’t touch right beside the box, the presence he knew played with him like another squirrel. And he wanted to play some more!

The result was Roy suddenly lunging forward to grab Hazel in mid-leap around his middle and hauling him away from the box as the squirrel chattered angrily. “Hazel, patience is a virtue.”

“Not with toys it’s not.” Edward snickered and finally found a glittery pom-pom that was attached to a slender plastic rod by a string.

“Depends on the toy.” Roy grinned and set Hazel onto the floor.

“I get the feeling we’re talking about two different things.” Edward muttered and shoved the box back at Roy who took it.

Roy grinned and replaced the lid on it. “Sorry. I do recall that I promised not to fluster you.”

Edward’s look was utterly deadpan as he stared at the man. “And like I said, I can take it. I’m not flustered. Merely…” he looked Roy over with a smirk, “amused.” And with a snap of the slender plastic pole that the toy was attached to he made the pom-pom bounce in the air before taking to darting off through the air.

Hazel was hot on the trail.

Roy set the box of toys back up on the shelf, still chuckling and smiling to himself. He wouldn’t say such things to Edward to tease him if he felt the ghost was getting upset about it. But so far they were getting along very well. Normally he only joked around like this with Maes or Riza, when she was weaponless. But he rarely saw them after work these days, such were all of their schedules. And it was nice to have someone around again he could just relax and be himself with. It was the most
unorthodox friendship he’d ever known, what he had with Edward, but it was nice.

It was nice having someone here to talk to besides Hazel. You could only talk to your pets so many times before you began to question your sanity.

When he walked out to finish unpacking the boxes he grinned as he saw Edward floating up by the bookshelf, cardboard box of books balanced on his raised thighs, one hand putting the books away still, and the other dangling down the pom-pom for Hazel to chase across the carpet as his wrist flicked back and forth.

“Can you pass your own hand through your body?” Roy asked in sudden curiosity as he knelt down to grab another box to unpack.

Edward chuckled and slid another book onto a shelf. “No. I cannot contort my body in such a manner. I feel solid, to myself. If that makes sense.”

“So no Edward du Soleil performances?” Roy laughed and then groaned as he saw what was in the box. Pictures. He hated hanging pictures even on the best of days. With one exception. And it was currently hanging in his office at work.

“Pardon?” Edward blinked at him in confusion as he looked over his shoulder.

Roy looked up from the pictures. “It’s got to do with the circus. Have you ever been to a circus? Or a carnival when you were young?”

Oh! Now it made sense. Edward did know the general theme of circus. People and animals doing impossible looking feats with ease. But he could never fit in in such a place, even as a ghost. He could not pass his arm through his leg if he wanted, much less actually have people besides Roy see him do it if he could. “No.” He admitted, “whenever they were near Risembool I was never allowed to go. My mom didn’t like such places, or something. Something about strange people.”

“I think the next time one comes around I’ll take you.” Roy decided. “If you would like to go, of course. I’m the strangest person you’ll meet there.”

Edward laughed and shoved another book into place. “You’re the only person I’ll ever meet again, idiot.”

“So is that a yes?” Roy grinned as he sorted through the pictures to hang. Trying to mentally decide where to put them.

“Yes. I think I’d enjoy it.” Edward conceded.

Roy grinned, and between the two of them they managed to get through all but three of the remaining boxes before the clock struck three in the afternoon. At that point Edward abandoned both helping Roy with the boxes and tossing a lime green bouncy ball for Hazel.

“So, chess?” He asked eagerly as the last notes of the grandfather clock that was set propped between two walls forming a corner of the sitting room finished chiming.

Roy grinned and opened up another box. One that he had labeled ‘Elysia visits’. It contained the things that Gracia and Maes had gifted to him for the times he did babysit their daughter. As he had no children of his own, and thus no child appropriate toys. The motorcycle did not count. And he rummaged through it all before finding the battered chess set and pulling it free. It was one that had seen many uses by a little girl growing up. But it would work fine.
“Who is Elysia?” Edward asked as he spotted the label.

“Maes’s daughter.” Roy answered and rocked back on his heels to gain momentum and stand. “The one I take out on the motorcycle sometimes. Every now and then I babysit her for them so they can have an evening to themselves.”

Edward turned a saccharine smile on Roy. “Well whadda you know, you’ve a soft side for other people’s romances. I wouldn’t have thought you’d have time with all your manwhoring.”

“It’s not manwhoring!” Roy protested in exasperation. “Healthy sexual appetite!”

“Denial and redefining.” Edward grinned and snatched the chess set away. “Tell you what. I’ll shadow you for the night until you find whatever poor misled man or woman you plan to deflower in their own bed, and when you drag your ass back here before dawn I’ll tell you whether or not you were manwhoring.”

Roy arched an eyebrow. “You’d risk a bar? They can be a bit rowdy, rather loud.” He forewarned.

Edward floated over to the coffee table set in front of the couch and drifted to the floor to sit while he opened the chess set box. “I can find my own way back here if I need to.” He frowned, “or, I should. I’ll pay close attention when we leave.”

Roy shrugged and came to sit down across from him and help set up the chess set on the coffee table so they could begin.”If that’s what you want. So long as you understand that when I’m at the bar it’s time for me.”

“I understand.” Edward replied easily. “I get that I can’t monopolize your life. Besides, I get the amusement of watching you drag yourself back.”

Roy glowered over the chess board at him, and put the last piece onto the board before moving a pawn forward. “Just keep the lights off. It wouldn’t be the most fantastic thing to ever happen if people started getting suspicious of my lights going on or off at weird times when I’m not home. I’ll leave the one in here on, so you can read.”

“Don’t worry.” Edward smiled and moved one of his own pawns. “I’m a smart ghost. My father was Hohenheim after all.” He joked lightly.

Roy could only move a pawn for a while after that one. Had Edward just made a joke like that at the expense of the father he hated? Shaking his head in a bewildered fashion he decided that perhaps it might take a great deal of his life to understand the ghost. Not that they were short on time. He’d have his ghostly companion for life.

A daunting thought, yet not one to inspire nausea.

“Does anyone from your work join you in these nightly hunts?” Edward asked at last. “Maes is married… but anyone else?”

“Maes sometimes joins me for drinks. But not for the finding of bed warmers. He’s rather happy with his wife. As much as I do love his wife in the non-manwhoring,” he ignored the ghost’s laugh with a smile, “way, I still cannot fathom his reasoning behind getting married. I can only assume it has something to do with insanity.”

Edward smiled and knocked one of Roy’s pawns off the board with his knight. “I think it’s different if you find someone special.”
At such a thought, Roy shuddered. “I happen to think there’s something special about continuing to broaden my horizons.”

“Roy, your horizons have already intersected. There’s no more broadening to be done.” Edward rolled his eyes and frowned at Roy’s next move.

“Nonsense.” Roy declared, but gave no reason why it was. Instead he seized his opportunity for taking both one of Ed’s pawns and a question. “Could you feel the breeze today? I noticed it didn’t blow you away.”

Edward blinked, it must have been a very slight breeze, for he’d not even noticed Roy’s hair shifting in it. “No.” He replied, “couldn’t feel anything. So I doubt a breeze could blow me away. It doesn’t seem that nature affects me like it would you. My existence is limited in that respect.”

“Well at least don’t try messing around with lightning.”

“Oh don’t worry.” Edward snickered. “I may be a ghost, but as far as thought process goes regarding such things, I am still very much mortal in mind.” And he effectively removed one of Roy’s bishops from play. “I’ve heard you mention your mother, but what of your father?”

Roy rested his chin on his hand as he considered the board. “He died when I was three. I don’t really remember him too much anymore. My mother never remarried.” And he suddenly grinned. “I don’t think any man alive today could handle my mother. They’d be insane by the end of the week and fleeing for it.”

“That’s not nice.” The ghost scolded.

Roy snorted. “It’s the truth. And she’d say the same. Honestly I’m not sure how my father managed to get past that week marker, much less have a child with her and then make her a widow. As cruel as it all sounds, it is how it ended. But seriously, the man had some balls or a lack of awareness. Maybe both.”

Edward studied him plaintively. “I’d say your awareness outweighs any balls you have.”

“And why do you say that?” Roy asked conversationally.

“Because you can see a ghost. That’s a very aware thing for you to be capable of.” Edward chuckled softly.

Roy grinned, “well, I am in possession of some admirable genes.”

“Yeah, they’re not three sizes too small. Miracle.”

“Not those type of genes!” Roy corrected as Edward laughed. Rolling his eyes he completed his next move. “Fruit parfait?”

“Thank you, no. I’m on a seven year abstinence from food diet. Very radical new treatment.” Edward smirked in reply.

Roy pelted Edward with one of the pieces that had already been removed from the board. As expected, it passed straight through him. But he felt better for it.

They played chess for three hours. When the clock struck six p.m. they’d played a solid eight rounds. And along the way they’d lost track of who was in the lead for winning the most. Together they packed it up, but left the chess set on the table for tomorrow. With only the lid on, Roy felt sure that
Hazel would leave it alone. The squirrel had gotten into such things before, and learned fast that pooping out pawns was not pleasant.

That had not been a fun vet visit. And honestly the veterinarian had been amazed that Hazel had been able to pass it through instead of up and dying on the table.

“You mean you can’t go like that?” Edward asked as he floated up the stairs next to Roy.

Roy glanced down at himself. “No.”

“You’re not making the pants tighter and the shirt looser, are you?”

“No. Just grabbing a different shirt.”

Edward glanced at it. “I like this one though.”

Roy smirked at him. “Do you now?”

Edward met his smirk with a wicked smile. “Oh yes. It’s so form fitting. The corset look really will make them swoon.”

“I want to dress up just a little.” Roy explained as they entered his bedroom. “Something with lots of tiny buttons. It’s really amusing and quite erotic the various ways people deal with them so they can get my shirt off.”

Edward rolled his eyes, “you’ve got it down to a science, don’t you.” He decided.

Roy nodded absently as he rummaged through his wardrobe. “Yes. And before you make some snarky comment about it, no. People do not always go straight for the pants. But that’s why I’ll add a belt. Not only is it good for-”

“Roy!” Edward glared at him as the man laughed. “I’m hiding all your belts and your button-littered shirts as soon as you’re in bed tonight asleep. And then I’m finding that knife and carving out your eyes.”

Roy chuckled and pulled free a silk button-up dress shirt of a deep blood red color. He loved the way red looked on him, personally. And he was feeling lucky tonight. “Between you and Hazel, I’ll take my chances with you. I get a talking to from that squirrel some nights.”

Edward smiled at the thought of Roy being chastised for coming home late and bedraggled by a squirrel. “Are you saying a squirrel is more dangerous than I am?”

“Yeah.” Roy winked at him and drew his gray t-shirt up over his head and lobbed it into the laundry basket.

Edward let his eyes flick over the man’s exposed chest and abdomen thoughtfully. Roy was still flawlessly white, and his entire torso was a sculpted series of hard muscles. “Shame, I was hoping I’d have to see you do a few hundred push-ups to work off that breakfast you ate.”

Roy laughed and pulled on the red shirt to begin buttoning it up. “I have this body for a reason. It won’t go away instantly from one breakfast.”

“Belt.” Edward reminded him once Roy had finished. Apparently the man planned to leave the last four unbuttoned, exposing a rather large portion of skin and with it the hint of muscle. “At least this shirt fits you normally.”
“Can’t find dress shirts that would fit the other way. They don’t make the arms wide enough to fit my muscles without the seams ripping.” Roy shrugged as he fished out a belt.

Edward blinked at him. “Really. And that’s a problem for you when you go out to do this? You don’t want to rip seams and tell the virgins it’s because your arm muscles are too big? Too big to fit in a shirt that would leave nothing else to the imagination either?”

Roy burst out laughing and continued to do so as he fastened the belt. “They queue up anyway. No need to be an exhibitionist.”

“What exactly does your definition of ‘exhibitionist’ cover?” Edward wondered mostly to himself. But in realizing who he was dealing with, quickly added. “Don’t tell me. Was rhetorical.”

“Figured it was.” Roy smiled at him and checked to be sure his gloves were in his pocket before turning to head out for a lovely night out. “Sure you want to come?”

“Of course I’m sure. I want to be able to tell you in all seriousness having seen evidence, that you, Roy Mustang, are a manwhore.” Edward dropped down through the floor and passed through the walls to beat Roy to the front door. And he watched as the man came down the stairs. “Don’t worry about me. I know my limits, and I’ll remember how to get back here.”

Roy walked over to grab his coat. “Let’s go then.”

Together they left the house.

Roy hummed a bit as he walked down the sidewalk, the ghost beside him. He made sure to point out street signs with nods of his head and meaningful grunts. But otherwise their communication was null. There were quite a few people out tonight, most heading in the same general direction as they were.

When they got nearer to the bars, it became substantially more crowded. But Roy noticed that Edward stuck close by him, even if the ghost had taken to the air to avoid being walked through. And it seemed that so far the ghost was doing fine.

Edward watched as Roy chose a bar to walk into, but had to bide his time to enter when there weren’t people shoving through the doorway. The chatter coming out of it was loud, but luckily it seemed that the music wasn’t trying to outdo the patrons. Nervously he waited before he finally saw an opening and darted through the doorway.

Looking around he found that Roy must have already swept the bar with his eyes, and he spotted the man already sitting at a table with a mug of something foaming in hand. No one was with him yet at the table, but Edward didn’t go over to him. Unsure of whether or not he’d be welcome to. After all, this was Roy’s time. Yet when Roy met his eyes and nodded minutely towards an empty chair beside him, he immediately floated over. Unaware of the brilliant smile that had lit his face upon realizing he was welcome to be with the man.

Settling down into the chair he let his gaze glance over the room. “Are they always this crowded?” He asked as he watched people milling about with drinks, drinking alone, playing cards, and several groups of people who were doing things he quickly averted his eyes from.

Roy raised his glass to his lips to hide their movement. “No. But Friday and Saturday evenings around this time can get pretty busy.” And he took a sip of his beer. “It’ll get more crowded too.” He set the glass down with a chink of cheap glass on wood.

“I’ll leave when it gets to be too much for me.” Edward muttered as he put his arms around his
middle and grasped his elbows. The noise was loud, and grated on him, but it was better than this morning at the market. The culture shock was lessening bit by slow bit. “So what,” he asked, turning to Roy, “you just sit here and drink until they come to you?”

Roy smirked and nodded.

“That’s messed up.” Edward decided. “You’re not even trying. Well, aside from exposing a large section of chest. Lazy bastard.”

Roy grinned, but said nothing in reply. Only sipped on his beer again.

Edward rolled his eyes and sat back to wait and see what happened. “I bet you don’t get anyone tonight.”

“Think again.” Roy muttered under his breath as he used his glass to hide his lips once more. “Four o’clock from my seat.”

Edward blinked owlishly and turned to look. There was a man, maybe just a bit older than he was if he were alive, and this man was staring at Roy with lustful green eyes from beneath messy brown hair. “How can you even see him?”

“Glass.” Roy replied simply.

It was then that Edward noticed that the glass filled with that beer was indeed reflecting things like a mirror. “You are impossible.”

Roy chuckled softly.

Edward turned to look at the man Roy was waiting for again. “He’s the opposite of you, wearing jeans three sizes too small. Where’d he put it?”

“That’s for me to find out.”

“He’s coming over now.” Edward alerted and sat back to observe this. And his eyes continuously narrowed further as the man came nearer to where he was sitting.

“Excuse me,” the man said as he came over, stopping beside the chair Edward was sitting in. “Is this seat taken?”

“Yes!” Edward glared up at him.

Roy’s eyes twinkled mirthfully. “No, please.” He waved a hand at it while locking a wicked gaze on Edward.

Edward gasped at him, and squeaked as the chair was pulled back. “Roy!” He dove out of the way as his seat was commandeered. “That was not nice.” He chastised the man as he popped his head up from under the table to glare at him.

“Name’s Brad.” Brad winked at him. “And you are?”

“Available.” Roy said boldly, “at least for tonight.”

Edward snorted. “You’re disgusting. How is that a turn on? Listen to this guy, he sounds like he’s done this before. He’s not a virgin! He’s wearing pants tighter than your shirts!”

That got a smirk out of Roy, but he continued to ignore Edward.
“Your place or mine after we finish our… drinks?” Brad glanced at Roy’s thoughtfully. “You want another? Something stronger?”

“I’m fine.” Roy glanced at Edward pointedly. “Your place.”

Edward scowled but got the point. “Okay, leaving. I don’t want to see you two lose control in the alley.” He rolled his eyes, and with an evil smirk, knocked the drink Brad had left unattended on the table off with one good smack.

Brad jumped up with a startled yelp as his drink spilled on his lap, showering him with cold alcohol.

“Woops.” Edward grinned mischievously.

Roy gave the ghost an amused look and shook his head trying not to laugh before he turned to aiding his would be bed warmer for the night. “Oh dear, we best get you out of those so they can be washed. Wouldn’t want them to stain.”

“Hey! Don’t use my revenge for him stealing my chair as a pick-up line!” Edward chastised him, but smirked in a self-satisfied way. “Evidence obtained. I’ll see you in a few hours to laugh at you with Hazel.” And he turned to flee the noisy bar through the walls.

Roy watched the ghost go with a smile before turning to Brad. “I hope your place isn’t far-”

Meanwhile Edward had floated up high enough into the air so that the noise was not so great. And he floated back towards his new home feeling peaceful. If not just a bit lonely to be going back alone. At least he had Hazel there. And Roy… Roy would be back eventually.

And he could harass the man on how absolutely business-like he’d handled the whole thing. There hadn’t even been any flirting.

When he reached Roy’s house at last he paused as he was about to sink down through the roof. Hazel was inside… but after a moment he floated down to sit on the stoop in front of the front door and propped his head in both hands as he stared at the sidewalk beyond the fence, waiting for Roy to come shuffling back.
Chapter 10

Staring up at the ceiling of the unfamiliar bedroom, Roy continued to listen to the breathing of his partner. Waiting for it to even out into a true sleep. He wouldn’t make his escape until then. It prevented any awkward moments, or ones where he was forced to employ his alchemy to melt kitchen knives from the more persistent ones. And as he lay there feeling not quite sated enough yet he let his thoughts drift. Not very surprised when they ended up on Edward. He hoped that the ghost had gotten back home without any trouble.

Not like he needed to worry about the ghost. It wasn’t as if Edward could get hurt by anyone or anything. He was a ghost.

But on some levels he couldn’t deny or begin to lie to himself that he didn’t think of Edward as he might anyone else. Any living friend. There were just some things that apparently were universal regarding friends. Whether they were an apparition or not.

Eventually he tore his thoughts away from Edward. The breathing of the man beside him had finally evened out into a true sleep. So he slipped free of the bed and walked over to snatch his clothes from where they’d been scattered on the floor.

As he pulled on his pants and began on his belt he looked at the red digital numbers of the alarm clock on the bedside table. 10:46. He had time to go back to another bar and find someone else, he hadn’t expected to get lucky so quickly. Normally he stayed out past midnight.

And as Brad had finally fallen asleep, it was time to make his getaway, and find some more fun.

Leaving the apartment he began to retrace his steps towards where the majority of the bars were located. For being only a little after ten, things were as rowdy as if it were still around happy hour. Which definitely boded well for him and his untapped stamina. This time however, he chose a different bar in which to find someone.

Walking through the door of one of the more crowded looking establishments he walked over to the bar counter to request his glass of scotch, and then request it actually be topped off. He was not up for a night of light drinking and light rendezvous with willing virgins. He had come back for more after all. So sipping on his scotch he meandered his way through the crowds to find himself a strategic seat.

Plopping down into one such seat, he continued to sip on his scotch as he waited out the inevitable.

As it turned out, it took a good hour this time before he finished his third scotch in a second flat in order to accompany a rather eager woman back to her place.

It was creeping on two in the morning when he finally tired her out enough that she fell asleep. And he quickly dressed as soon as she had, looking at the clock as he did so. It was one of his later nights tonight, it was fortunate that it was a Sunday and he could sleep until noon if he pleased.

Because according to his scotch-hazy vision, he’d be needing that extra sleep. And that last scotch hadn’t yet made its decision of whether or not he’d be receiving a hangover.

Ruffling his hair that he supposed had that ‘just been thoroughly shagged’ look that Edward had commented on. And while he had been… he didn’t feel like blatantly broadcasting it at this ungodly
hour. So he fixed it before he left the small house of his last conquest for the night.

He was fighting back yawns, and distantly realized his gait was rather choppy and sluggish due to his inebriation. But he kept on walking home. He needed a shower and then bed. Yes… bed sounded nice right about now.

He knew it must have been pushing past two in the morning when he finally turned the corner to home. And what he expected when he got to the path leading up to his house was not what he found.

Edward was sitting on the stoop, leaning back against the front door as he stared up at the stars. Apparently completely mesmerized.

It actually made him pause.

Roy smiled softly, and a bit sadly. This was the second night in seven years the ghost had seen the night sky. He imagined it was an indescribable feeling. Both happy and sad. And as he closed the gate behind him and walked up the path as stably as he could, he watched the ghost.

Edward still hadn’t seemed to notice him.

It was in this darkness at this time, that Roy actually noticed how brightly Edward glowed. He’d always noticed that the ghost had some sort of silvery ethereal light emitting from him. Last night he hadn’t really taken the time to notice. But now? The alcohol had induced a relaxation that let him pick up on the details. Plural, for he’d also noticed for himself something the ghost had said. Edward was eighteen, and strangely, until tonight, he hadn’t noticed that Edward actually was an adult.

Perhaps it had been the ghost’s childish enthusiasm to finally having a larger world to belong to. And now that he thought about it, that was probably it.

But seeing Edward sitting there, glowing in ghostly light, and staring up at the fathomless ocean of stars, it hit him suddenly that this ghost was a man. Or would have been, were he still alive.

He had the oddest revelations when he was inebriated.

Sighing at himself he smiled as he walked over, still unnoticed somehow, and as he reached the stoop he turned stiffly and eased himself carefully down beside the ghost. “Have you been out here long?” He asked quietly, as if saying it louder would have been a sin.

Edward visibly jumped, his head jerking around to stare at Roy with wide silver eyes. “Roy!”

Roy smiled at him. Or, he believed he smiled. He wasn’t too sure of his facial functions right now.

“I lost track of time, I guess.” Edward muttered, and scratched at his head. “Good thing I can’t be mugged.”

“How long have you been out here?” Roy questioned again. Silently appreciating Edward’s unmugability as well.

“Since I came home from the bar.” Edward admitted without hesitation, though he didn’t wait for Roy’s surprised look to start feeling hesitant. “I didn’t feel… it’s hard to explain.”

Roy studied Edward as if he’d never seen the ghost before. Edward had been sitting out here for nearly nine hours? Sure, he wouldn’t have gotten sore from sitting on the stoop so long, or gotten chilled. But even so. “Were you waiting for me?” He asked, though he was half-afraid to know the
Edward shifted a bit, before nodding. “Don’t take this the wrong way. I know you need space and all. I know how much I might impose on your life. But right now I want to be out in the open unless you’re there inside with me. I guess in a way…” he trailed off with a discomfited look, “I’m afraid I’ll get stuck again. Though I know so far it would seem impossible.”

“I see.” Roy looked away with a small smile, feeling diminished with a bit of guilt that Edward had been waiting on him, even if they both understood it had been time for just Roy. “It’s okay, I understand.” And he turned back to Edward suddenly, with a thoughtful and almost cheerful light in his dark eyes. “It was nice to see you waiting for me. I suppose you shouldn’t take this the wrong way either… but it’s nice to feel wanted unconditionally. Be waited for. No one really does that for me anymore.” And with a wry look he chuckled before adding, “and the alcohol makes my tongue loose as hell around people like you, so don’t ever expect me to admit to any of that after I get some sleep.”

“People like me?” Edward queried with a raised eyebrow, even as he basked in the strange but present happiness he had felt at Roy’s words. He could understand the desire to feel wanted or needed, he understood feeling alone. That Roy didn’t mind, and actually liked the attachment he had towards the man because of his reliance on Roy made him feel… content.

Roy nodded sloppily. “Friends, people I trust. And you,” he tilted his head as he considered the silvery apparition, “you I trust unconditionally.”

Edward smiled at him, “because I am incapable of betraying you for the very reason I need you for companionship among other things?”

“Yeah.” Roy agreed, and shifted where he sat with a small groan. His body was not up for sitting on cold, hard places for extended periods of time after the route his evening activities had taken.

“Even if I weren’t a ghost, I doubt I would betray you. You’re a good person. Even if you have clear moral issues.” Edward chuckled and floated upwards. “Come on, you look terrible. You should get to bed.”

Roy yawned widely in agreement and staggered to his feet again. “I only had a beer and three scotches… or was it four?”

Edward floated through the front door to unlock and haul it open for the man. “Come on.” He urged from where he held the door to where Roy still stood on the stoop. “No doubt it was your exertions tonight coupled with the alcohol. I’m sure you’re very capable normally of holding copious amounts of liquor in your system.”

“I am.” Roy agreed automatically and stepped inside, enough so that Edward could shut the door before leaning against the wall and studying the ghost. “So what did you determine?”

Edward placed his hands on his hips, and gave the man a stern look. “You, Roy Mustang, are a manwhore. No arguments. You are. You picked that Brad man up like it was a business deal! I didn’t even see any real flirting. I’m surprised virgins who are probably wishing for a happily ever after would give themselves to you when all you do is eye and treat them like a piece of meat.”

“Those ones are easy to trick.” Roy yawned another wide yawn. “But seriously, manwhoring? That’s a bit extreme, don’t you think?”

“Not at all.” Edward jabbed one finger towards the staircase. “There’s a difference between having a
healthy sexual appetite, as you put it, and just plain having something wrong with you. Now get upstairs and shower. Then it’s to bed for you.”

Roy straightened up from the wall and meekly walked towards the staircase, not having the heart to argue with Edward about his accusations when the ghost had just spent nearly nine hours on a porch stoop waiting for him to come back home. “Believe me I need a shower.”

“I believe it.” Edward smirked, and floated after the man.

He followed Roy all the way up to the bedroom where he made sure the man didn’t cheat and fall in bed first. Once the shower water started, and he could hear the staccato pattern of it being broken by a body, he dove down through the floor and made his way through the walls into the kitchen.

It took him some searching before he found what he wanted, and he set the ingredients on the counter before finding a pan. Setting the pan on one of the burners of the stove he set it to heating as he measured out the cream and milk into the pan along with the chunks of chocolate. As it heated and the chunks of chocolate melted he began to mix the cocoa and sugar together. Once the liquid in the pan had heated and the chocolate had all melted he added some of it to the cocoa and sugar before scraping the whole thing back into the pan and mixing it until it was steaming nicely.

It was around the time he was filling a rather large mug with the hot chocolate that he noticed he was sporting a rather large smile. He hadn’t done anything in a kitchen for years, and even though he wouldn’t be able to taste it, and was incapable of eating or drinking, it was nice to be in a kitchen again.

Turning off the heat on the pan he moved it from the burner to cool before floating his way back upstairs. This time taking a normal route and not passing through anything. Even when he reached the bedroom door he opened it as normal, floating in just as Roy finished tying the drawstring on his pajama pants.

“What is that? More alcohol?” Roy asked with hope that was tainted by uncertainty at having more alcohol to add to his hangover come when he woke up.

Edward shook his head. “Get in bed. You look terrible, and you’ll need this, trust me. It’ll help.”

“Normally the ‘get in bed’ lines are mine.” Roy winked at him but walked over to the bed anyway, ignoring putting on a shirt. Even though it was a bit chilly, under the covers it would be warm. And he drew them back so he could climb in, pulling them about his waist as he sat there and held out a hand.

Edward rolled his eyes. “And this is why I’m not giving you more alcohol.” He said and floated over to sit on the edge of the bed, just across from Roy’s thighs and passed the steaming cup into the man’s waiting hand. “Should be hot, be careful.”

Roy took it in surprise. “You made me hot chocolate?” He asked in fascination as he stared into the cup.

“Yeah.” Edward admitted, and shifted self-consciously. “I may not like milk, but my mom used to give that to Alphonse when he’d had a rough night. It made him sleep, and he always felt better in the morning.”

Roy looked back up at Edward with a gentle smile. He didn’t even have it in him to say there was a difference between the two situations, and that he’d most likely still have a hangover come morning and look, as Edward put it, terrible. “Thank you, Ed.” And he raised it to his lips to take a tentative
drink, being aware of the steam rising.

Edward watched him anxiously, hoping it tasted all right. He was quite out of practice after all, and lacked the ability to test things on his own.

Roy’s eyes widened in surprise as he went from a tentative sip to drinking with curiosity, and then enjoyment. He drank at least half of the cup before he lowered it and looked at Edward in amazement. “This is wonderful. You didn’t use the premade mix stuff, did you?”

Edward shook his head with a bright smile. “I made it all myself. No mix.”

“And you’ve not cooked at all for seven years?”

“No.”

Roy chuckled and took another sip before turning a thoughtful gaze on the ghost. “Do you enjoy it?”

Edward turned so he could rest his feet up on the bedspread and pull his knees up against his chest. “I suppose. I used to help my mom a lot. Especially near… the end.” His silver eyes darkened momentarily.

“Well,” Roy began in an attempt to lighten the mood, “you make a very good hot chocolate. If I don’t sleep well tonight I’ll be very surprised.”

Edward smiled at him cheerfully then. “Good, I can’t imagine you like looking terrible.”

Roy smiled back before working on drinking the rest under Edward’s watchful gaze. All the while feeling a sense of contentment at Edward wanting to look after him. It was strange for sure, but nothing about Edward’s demeanor was hovering or accusing right now. Not like Maes or Riza, or even his mother would be right now. Although granted, his mother would probably be tending to him laughing her ass off and come upstairs in the morning with pots and pans.

When Roy lowered the finished cup from his lips, Edward reached out to take it and set it on the bedside table. “Go to sleep. You’ll feel better when you wake up.”

Roy doubted that, but it was a nice thought to court and act as if it were true. And he scooted down while pulling the covers up around him. “Goodnight, Ed.” He called after the ghost who had half-vanished through the floor.

Edward turned with a smile. “Night.” And he floated through the rest of the way.

It didn’t take Roy long at all to fall into the sleep of the dead, buried under warm covers, and feeling better for the hot chocolate.

Floating back into the kitchen, Edward put away the remainder of the hot chocolate and slid it into the fridge for Roy to find later. He was glad that Roy was back, and resting, and would feel better come morning. It wasn’t the thought of taking care of Roy that was on his mind, the man could take care of himself. But it was merely that he wanted to do nice things here and there for the man. After all, he’d completely turned Roy’s life upside down. It was the least he could do.

Once he was done downstairs he floated back into the sitting room where Hazel was sitting on the back of the couch cleaning himself. The squirrel perked up though as he floated over to sit beside him. “Slept through giving him a talking to?” Edward asked, knowing he’d not get an answer. But he asked anyway. “Come on, I still have a few more books to put away.”
Edward floated over to find where he’d stashed one of Hazel’s toys on a bookshelf – much to Roy’s ignorance. And as he finished with the last box of books he let Hazel chase after the pom-pom.

When he had finished with the books, and Hazel had run off to eat, Edward put the toy away where it belonged before floating back up to Roy’s bedroom. The man was still asleep, buried under covers and curled around a pillow.

“I wonder if you’re fooling yourself.” Edward murmured as he took a seat on the edge of Roy’s bed, facing the man. “You might say you don’t want commitment… but I can’t see what’s better about this.”

He stayed there at Roy’s side, just staring out the window as the hours drug on. Not really thinking of much. Not even noticing when the grandfather clock downstairs began to strike noon. He’d watched the sunrise from where he was, looking out the window. He’d watch it outside again another day. But from that point on he hadn’t noticed the passage of time. It was something he was used to.

The first thing Roy noticed when he stirred awake, was that the smashing headache he was expecting didn’t come. He had a twinge behind the eyes, and his head did hurt. But it wasn’t a hangover like he would have expected. The second thing he noticed was that he wasn’t alone.

Edward was sitting on the edge of the bed, seemingly staring off into space.

Now normally, Roy would have found this creepy. But there was nothing at all normal about Edward or his relationship with the ghost. So he turned over onto his back, tucking one arm behind his head as he watched the distracted ghost. “You okay?”

Edward jumped and swore, ignoring Roy’s hearty chuckle. Whirling in the air to face the man he scowled at him. “That’s twice you’ve scared me. Twice! I’m the ghost!”

Roy grinned as he laughed, though the pain in his head told him that laughing might not be a good idea. “You’re too harmless to be scary.” And was amused to see the ghost actually pout.

“Well… it’s not my fault!” Edward settled back down onto the bed. “I’ve never had a reason to be scary or mean. Seven years of being alone rather conditions you.”

Roy slowly eased himself up so that he was sitting. “You turned out okay.”

Edward shot him a mocking look, but smiled as he looked Roy over. The man looked a bit sleepy yet, and just a little dull, but it was a great improvement to how Roy had come to the office looking after a night spent with alcohol and one night stands. “So did you.” He decided. “You don’t look that bad this morning.”

“Sure it’s not one of my ‘just been thoroughly shagged’ looks that you find to be appealing?” Roy flashed him a coy smile as he ran his fingers back through his tousled hair.

Rolling his eyes, Edward drifted up off the bed. “I’m sure. And I never said they were appealing.”

Edward promptly yanked the covers off of Roy, delighting in the man’s indignant yelp as what must have been cool air assaulted him. “Time to get up!” He announced jovially.

Roy grumbled as he swung out of bed, adjusting his rumpled pajama pants about himself so they were straight again. “You’re lucky I was still wearing pants.”
“Nothing much to interest me then? Is that why you only choose virgins? Because they won’t notice any better?” Edward queried evilly.

Roy threw his pillow at the ghost, though he knew it’d do no good. And as he watched Edward dive down through the floor to both make his escape and dodge the pillow, he smirked. Apparently Edward was going to give back as good as he got whenever the opportunity arose. He was looking forward to this.

But for right now, he was looking forward to a hot shower to warm himself back up. And he trudged into the bathroom to look for a shower and something for the remainder of his headache.

Edward meanwhile was downstairs at the large window that shone light into the sitting room. Yet his eyes weren’t for how it refracted against the glass sculptures, making them dance with color. He was watching three children in a yard of the house directly across from Roy’s. He could see them playing beyond the fences. He remembered that jump roping game. Winry had always purposefully tripped him with the rope to make him fall. These children seemed to be far nicer with each other.

He was still watching them when Roy found him.

“You know, if you were visible to anyone else that would be rather creepy of you. People would call you a pedophile.” Roy smirked as he walked over to see what had Edward’s attention.

“Then it’s a good thing they can’t see me.” Edward replied with a melancholic smile. “I used to play that jump rope thing. With my brother and Winry. We’d use old bailing rope that she’d swipe from the hay fields when the farmers went on lunch break.”

“Ah, Edward Elric, former hooligan.”

Edward chuckled, “we always returned it.” And he turned to look at Roy questioningly. “You look even better now. See, a good night of sleep and that chocolate milk did you well. Do you have much of a headache?”

“No one that will bother me like a true hangover headache would.” Roy was relieved for that. “But even so, I think I’ll spend tonight in. Sunday nights are always a tough crowd.”

Edward smirked at him, “even for you? Well, for future reference, the next time you give someone my chair I’m not just spilling something in their lap. I’m kicking your chair out from under you.”

“I’ve always wanted to learn how to fly.” Roy flashed him a saucy grin. “Come on, I think I want to buy some lunch out. It is a Sunday after all, and I think I know just the place you might love to go. Though I mean no offense to your age.”

The look the ghost gave him was rightfully suspicious. “You’re not taking me to a nursing home or something, are you?”

Roy shook his head.

“Nursery?” Edward tried.

“Just come with me. You’ll see.” Roy smiled and retreated into the hallway to grab his coat. He transferred his ignition cloth gloves from his jeans to the coat pockets just as Edward appeared through the wall to join him.

“No one will be able to see your muscles that you can’t find a proper shirt to fit if you wear a coat.” Edward pointed out.
Roy turned the lock in the door. “You knowing I have the muscles is enough for me today.” He replied with a grin.

“I’m honored.” Edward grumbled, and followed Roy out the door. And he drifted down to the sidewalk to wait while the man locked up the house. Once Roy joined him he quickly followed beside him. “Can we play more chess tonight? Since you aren’t going to be running off anywhere without me?”

Roy shoved his hands in his coat pockets to keep them warm since he wasn’t wearing his gloves. It was a chilly day. It was barely autumn but it was colder than what he’d been used to in East Central, which was lower in altitude and nearer the desert. “Sure, if you like.” He said behind his hand that had come up as if to cover a yawn. Which it then had to do anyway as he yawned widely.

“I would like.” Edward agreed readily.

Roy was beginning to believe that by the time of his death, he’d be the greatest chess player to ever live. Because as far as he could see, he’d be playing chess every night for the rest of his life with this ghost. And for the life of him, he couldn’t mind.

Their walk was a silent one, but it was the companionable silence they were used to. But it was a short walk even so, Roy’s intended destination wasn’t far, and as he turned the corner, Edward was finally able to see their destination as it appeared out of the whiteness.

“Are you ever too old for this?” Edward asked with a growing smile.

Roy merely chuckled and walked a bit faster in order to keep up with Edward who had begun to float faster. He knew he didn’t really need to keep pace with the ghost, but he wanted to. And besides, the faster pace was warming him up.

“Were you ever too old to go to the park?”

He doubted it.

There was just something about the open space. The grass, the trees, patterned shade, and kamikaze birds that called to every person’s soul – dead or alive.

And he had a feeling that going to a place like this would do Edward some good. It got him out in the open, but it wasn’t as much of a culture shock because there was plenty of space. Even if there were quite a few children and their parents there at the time, along with the family dog. There was space enough that Edward could interact if he wished, but avoid as well.

As soon as they hit the actual grass of the park though, he could do little more than look around and then watch with a laugh as Edward bolted off through the air with a happy sort of noise that sounded charmingly like a squeal.

“Apparently you only act like an adult when you’re waiting for me.” Roy chuckled softly as he watched Edward practically dive onto a swing and begin to sway back and forth as he plopped down into it. “Or is this some sort of overdone ‘embrace your inner child’?” But he walked after the ghost.

Edward was swinging back and forth happily, with absolutely no sense of dignity. He’d thrown it to the wind. After spending seven years in seclusion, nothing at all to entertain him but an office and whatever happened to wander into it, he couldn’t abide by having dignity. Besides, only Roy could see him. What did he have to lose?

Laughingly, Roy realized that although Edward couldn’t be seen by anyone else, the children nearby
the swings were staring at the one Edward was in with a mixture of fascination and confusion. As far as they could tell, a singular swing was moving on its own, with no breeze, and no rider. He was still chuckling to himself as he walked over to the sandy surface the swings were mounted in, and crossed through it to sit on the empty once next to Edward with a bit more dignity.

“I haven’t sat in one of these in years.” Roy admitted softly as he kicked off the sand to get some momentum going.

Edward had looped his arms around the chains and smiled over at Roy as he swung back and forth. “You look good in one, you should do this more often.”

Roy started snickering again and looped his arms similarly as he started to gain altitude now. “I don’t know about that. You seem more suited to this type of thing.” And it was true, Edward looked absolutely perfect swinging back and forth, silver hair floating after him. Perfect, and childishly carefree.

“I’m just not worrying about my dignity or who may see me.” Edward replied casually.

“Well, no one but me may be able to see you, but,” Roy looked around, smiling when he saw that the swing beside him containing the ghost was still being stared at by children every so often, “everyone else just sees the swing moving on its own. It’s quite funny to watch their faces.”

Edward looked around as well to where there were some kids staring his way looking utterly perplexed. “Just tell them you have an invisible friend. They’re at the age they might still believe you. Though then again, they may just think you’re insane.”

Roy chuckled and bowed his head as he kicked off from the sand again. “Wouldn’t be the harshest of things ever to be said about me.” He admitted quietly, darkly.

Edward leaned back until he was nearly horizontal, gripping the chains with his hands to keep his balance. “For what it’s worth, I think you’re a good person. Even if you do have your flaws. And perhaps I’m biased because of my situation with you, but I still think you’re a good person. If you weren’t, I still like to think I’d call you on it.”

“So you calling me an idiot when we first met and now calling me a manwhore-”

“Moral flaw and...” Edward thought, “and as for you being an idiot, I have the rest of your life to cure you of any remaining idiocy you have. But I think you’re a good person. I can’t honestly say I’d rather anyone else to be tied to like I am to you.”

Roy looked back at him with a small smile. Edward truly saw no bad in him, and yet, he still feared those times that the ghost looked at him as if he could see into his soul. There were things there he didn’t want Edward to ever see, to know. And while he knew the reason why... he didn’t want to admit to it. To being afraid Edward might leave. For he had meant it when he asked if Edward would come with him...

…and he’d meant it when he’d asked if Edward would stay.

“We’ve all done bad things with alchemy before, remember.” Edward smiled at him almost fondly. “But they made you who you are. And I wouldn’t change you.”

“Except the manwhoring?” Roy asked lightly, with a more successful smile.

“Mmm...” Edward hummed to himself and straightened up to kick off the sand again and regain his momentum and some altitude. “Yeah... except that.”
Roy chuckled and looked up at the powder blue sky absently. “Thanks. It’s… nice, hearing it from someone other than Maes or my mother.”

“You’re welcome.” Was the soft reply.

They swung back and forth in silence. Every now and then watching the children who would run over to give the swing that was moving on its own a befuddled look before racing off yelling for mommy or daddy. But really, for the most part, they were left alone. The swings were a good distance away from the rest of the play equipment.

Roy was leaning partially to one side, up against one of the chains, staring at the sand as it rushed back and forth beneath him. Every now and then he’d drag the toe of a boot through it, watch the divot form in the sand. And for the first time since meeting Edward, he was actively restraining himself from making a comment as to the ghost being, well, a ghost. He wasn’t sure how it would be received, if he were to say the one flaw he saw in Edward.

That he was dead.

It was difficult to be friends with a ghost.

Finally Roy stopped swinging and got up. “I’m going to go buy myself something to eat from one of the stands. Do you want to come?”

Edward glanced over to where several food vendors had set up shop nearer the play area, catering to parents and children. “Sure.” And he turned to pass through the swing and join Roy as the man trudged through the sand. “When can I have a bike? Or do I need to sneak around on yours while you’re asleep?”

Roy startled at the out-of-the-blue question, but groaned at the thought of Edward learning to ride a bike by first starting with his motorcycle. He’d definitely rather Edward know how to keep his balance on something that you pedal before he let the ghost near the motorcycle. “Stay away from my motorcycle until I say otherwise. I’ll get you a bike sometime this week. I’ll probably need the laugh of watching you trying to ride it.”

And oh did he plan to laugh.

“I’ll be good at it!” Edward protested.

Roy merely grunted, rather in agreement or not, the ghost would never know. But he was smirking as he approached one of the carts and bought himself a cheap hamburger. It probably wasn’t even real beef. Some hospital food cardboard crap made out of cat meat for all he knew. But it would feed him, and it didn’t taste half bad smothered in ketchup.

Edward eyed the burger in disgust as Roy began to eat while they just began to meander around through the park, further away from the many children who the ghost had had to keep dodging so they didn’t run through him. “That looks gross.”

Roy licked a fleck of ketchup off his lips. “Tastes pretty gross, but it’s actually better than what the mess hall in East City served.”

“Well the food in the one here isn’t any better so I’ve heard and seen. It really will back you up for a month. And when it comes… well, let’s just say you’re glad the old furniture is gone.”

“Ugh!” Roy’s face twisted in horror, and he began to think twice about finishing his hamburger.
Edward smirked, “don’t ‘ugh’ me. You weren’t there for the actual event.”

“Might need a bit more ketchup.” Roy murmured as he considered the hamburger, and hesitantly took another bite.

The ghost rolled his eyes, but smiled. “Do these virgins ever see you like this when you take them out on those dinner dates? Where you cement your chance at nightly activities by guessing their favorite things to eat and drink?”

Roy chuckled through his mouthful and quickly swallowed. “Nope, can’t say they do. You’re the only virgin on this planet lucky enough to be seeing this.”

Edward eyed the wayward spot of ketchup along the corner of Roy’s mouth dryly. “Lucky me.”

“I need to fill up for dinner dates though.” Roy continued, took another bite, swallowed, and then kept going. “Bars are good for a while, but very left to chance. I need some solid scheduling.”

“For right now I’m going to pretend that you aren’t actually narrating your manwhore activity planning in front of me.” Edward deadpanned.

Roy took another bite of his hamburger as he tried not to laugh.

They continued walking along the grass and through the shade as Roy ate, and Edward tried not to smack the hamburger away for the birds who kept dive bombing the thing as it was trying to get some. The feathered creatures were fortunate that Roy’s gloves were still securely in his pocket, and that a certain ghost was glaring at him whenever Roy mentioned he might have roast pigeon for a snack.

It was around the time of another attempted hamburger swiping by a bird, that a throwing knife soared clean through Edward.

“AH!” The ghost yelped in shock as he ended up nearly six feet off the ground and shuddering.

Roy tried not to laugh as he looked from Edward, to the knife now buried in the tree, and then over to his left where it had come from. “Your aim sucks as much as ever.”

Maes grinned cheerfully as he strode over, a young girl trotting beside him as she laughed. “Just showing her how to keep away pedophiles.”

“Pedophile?!” Edward glared at Roy.

“Pedophile?” Roy glared at Maes. “I am no such thing.” And he turned his gaze down to Elysia. “Your dad is insane, don’t listen to him.”

Elysia giggled and ran over to launch herself at Roy for a hug, and was quickly swept up into his arms so she could do so. “Uncle Roy!”

“That’s right.” Roy grinned at her, bouncing the young girl in his arms. “And what is your dad?”

“Insane!” Elysia declared obediently.

Maes rolled his eyes but laughed as he walked over to wrench the throwing knife out of the tree and slip it away. This wasn’t the first time he’d done such a thing to Roy, just to show off. “I may never see the money changing hands, but I know you two have got a deal going on.”

Edward hid a smile, though it wasn’t necessary, as Roy slipped a coin into Elysia’s palm where it
disappeared. “So this is Elysia.” He said aloud and floated over to peer at her from beside Roy. “And please do something to Maes for throwing a knife through me.”

Roy promptly stepped on Maes’s foot as the man came over, and as Maes danced around swearing, and Elysia giggled, he grinned. “That’s for throwing a knife at me.”

“Thank you.” Edward smirked, and folded his arms. “So you’re not a pedophile? That isn’t where some of the virgins come from.”

Roy turned his head to look at Edward and gave him a minute shake of his head with a smile before looking around at Elysia. “And how are you today?”

Elysia grinned as she patted at Roy’s hair. “Daddy’s playing with me today.”

“He’s a good daddy, even if he is insane.” Roy smirked.

“Thanks for the glowing endorsement.” Maes commented wryly and rolled his eyes. “And why are you out here, Roy? I’d have thought you’d be doing… other things.” He finished meaningfully.

Edward snorted. “The virgins can wait until I’m done with him.”

Roy chuckled at them both. “Thought it would do me some good to get outside.”

“You should come over for dinner later then.” Maes suggested. “You know we don’t see you as often as we’d like. And Elysia would like that, wouldn’t you hunny?”

Elysia squealed as she nodded enthusiastically. “Please come, Uncle Roy. Please?! Please?!”

“Oh…” Roy paused dramatically, even as he looked over at the ghost who had floated over to stand beside Maes.

Edward smiled at him and nodded. “I’d like to come.” And he would, he liked Maes. And his daughter seemed sweet enough. He wanted to see a bit more of Roy. A part of the man he would only see when he was surrounded by friends. Friends he could actually touch.

“All right.” Roy gave in, sounding defeated but pleased.

“YAY!” Elysia squealed, and nearly tumbled from Roy’s arms in her excitement. “Can Uncle Roy’s friend come to?”

All the men frowned, for different reasons.

“You mean Riza?” Maes suggested, and glanced up at Roy who shrugged.

“No.” Elysia giggled.

Roy turned his gaze to Edward, even as he answered. “We’ll see.”

Edward, feeling slightly stunned and more than a little uncertain floated around so that he would be in Elysia’s line of sight again. But no matter how he waved a hand at her, he got no response. And finally he gave it up and shrugged. It was pointless, no one could see him but Roy. Elysia was most likely thinking of someone but didn’t recall a name. Perhaps Hazel?

“She can’t see me.” Edward said as he came back around. “No response at all. Perhaps she means Hazel?”
Roy gave a small shrug, at least, it was a shrug to Edward. To anyone else, he was just adjusting his hold on Elysia. “So what time tonight?”

“Seven.” Maes replied with a smile, and then turned to Elysia. “Come on hunny, let’s go play and leave Uncle Roy to his walk.”

Elysia groaned, but obeyed as she gave Roy a quick kiss on the cheek before scrambling down from his hold even as he went to deposit her on the ground. “Bye-bye, Uncle Roy!”

“I’ll see you tonight.” He smiled down at her, ruffling her hair before smiling up at Maes. “See you, and no more knife throwing!”

Maes winked at him and took Elysia by the hand. “Come on, let’s go show everyone how cute you’ve gotten!”

And as Maes and Elysia walked off towards the play equipment, Edward stared after them shaking his head. “That girl is going to grow up with an ego bigger than yours.”

Roy laughed appreciatively. “That’s where her mom comes in. To ground her.” And he looked over at Edward. “So she didn’t notice you at all?”

Edward shook his head. “No. And I’m sure she would have said something, like her dad throwing a knife through someone. That would have been an accusatory conversation.”

Roy smiled, and turned away with a “come on”, ignoring his hamburger that had fallen to the ground when he’d been surprised. And he kept his eyes trained firmly on the ground as he walked, trying not to feel guilty that he was happy.

…happy no one else could see Edward.

For when Elysia had said something that could have implied she could see the ghost, Roy had felt a strong flash of jealousy.

For that he felt guilty.

And he’d never tell Edward, ever, that he was happy only he could see the ghost. It felt wrong… it felt right… and he didn’t know why he felt those things at all.

Edward merely floated along beside the man, aware something was bothering him. But all the same, letting it be for now. He got the sense that now was not the time to try and discuss whatever it was. So he tried to content himself with looking at the scenery he’d been kept from for so many years.
Chapter 11

The two of them spent the rest of the afternoon at the park together. As it was, Roy had no place else he said he needed to be. Or things he really needed to do. So they walked a few circuits this way and that around the park. Watching as it gradually emptied as families went on their way. But for Edward and Roy, they stayed. And eventually found their way back to the swings.

“I’ve been thinking.” Roy finally said as they swung back and forth together. “If we leave early next Saturday morning, there’s someplace I think you’d enjoy going. If you’re agreeable to coming with me.”

The look Edward turned on him was purely curious. “Where?”

Roy smiled, he’d been expecting that question. But he glanced over at the ghost with a wink. “It’s a surprise for you. Will you come?”

Edward smiled after a moment, and nodded. “Of course. You have me curious now. And if it’s someplace new, my world will be even bigger.”

“It’ll be new enough.” Roy looked away and towards the sky with a smile. “You trust me far too easily. Though I know why… and it’s not like I’d ever do anything to harm that trust.”

Edward kicked off from the ground some more to help boost him back into the air. “I take it your friends might have reservations?”

“Oh, a sort, yes.”

Leaning back a bit as he gripped the chains, Edward smiled faintly. “It’s because they can experience all of you. I can’t.”

Roy watched him for a few seconds before looking back at the sky. “You just experience a different part of me. A part very few do.”

Edward glanced over at him as he straightened and resumed swinging properly, but said nothing as he too looked up at the sky. Yes, he knew he experienced a different part of Roy. The side of him that seemed to be the one he kept hidden from everyone else. That of a good man. But was it wrong for him to want to know everything? Even the flaws beyond what he already saw? Even the fear he could inflict? Was it wrong?

They swung back and forth in silence broken only by the rhythmic creaking of the chains for several minutes before their silent thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of yet another child come to ogle at the swing that was moving on its own.

“How’re you doin’ that?” The little boy asked Roy suspiciously.

Edward looked over at the boy, and only swung higher.

Roy looked over at the swing Edward was on, and then looked back at the child. “I’ve an invisible friend.” He explained, recalling Edward’s jesting suggestion.

“You can’t be inbisible.” The boy accused.

Roy shrugged, “that’s what I keep telling him. But he refuses to show himself. He’s rather shy.”

The boy glared at the swing where Edward still swung. “That’s unfair. I want to be invisible too!”

“Trust me, kid. You don’t want to be like me.” Edward’s smile seemed forced, and he looked away from the child.

Roy, who had looked over at Edward then, turned back to the child. “I don’t-”

But the boy suddenly whipped his head around, “gotta go! Mommy’s callin’!” And he raced off with one last look towards the invisible friend.

Roy watched the boy run off towards where he could see the woman who must have been his mother standing there waiting for him. And he looked away when he saw her glare his way. He didn’t recognize her… but he couldn’t blame her for wanting to keep her child away from someone who had a reputation for being a killer as well. Not that he’d ever harm some innocent child.

Edward had caught the exchange, and he shifted his gaze back to Roy, lips pursed in thought before saying, “don’t take it to heart.” He said quietly. “You can’t do anything about people who assume they know the whole story. And besides, when’s the last time you killed someone?”

“Well, about a year ago.” Roy let out a sigh through his nose and smiled wryly over at the ghost. “Ironic that I should have a ghost as a companion.”

Edward smiled back warmly. “I sure hope you’re not complaining. I’m becoming quite fond of you.”

“Not complaining at all.” Roy’s smile became more successful as he forgot about everything save for what was in front of him now. It was becoming increasingly easy to focus on just Edward. Yet he didn’t dare look at the potential drawbacks… not now. “I want you to stay with me.”

Edward gazed at Roy as if not quite sure what to make of it, but he was happy. He wanted to stay with Roy. “And I will. I’ve nowhere else I want to be more.” He admitted without a trace of hesitancy. Out of any possible place he could be, he was where he desired to be. He could have all the freedom to explore as much of the world as could be opened to him, but he’d only go there so long as Roy went with him.

Roy chuckled and looked away, turning his gaze back to the sky where the clouds were gathering at that alarming speed that was normal. “I’m glad.” He wasn’t even sure why it mattered to him so much that he and Edward stay together. And perhaps it did have to do with the fact that clearly they must have some sort of connection, for all that only he could see Edward or be his link to the outside world.

He hoped he’d never live to see the day Edward would leave him. Yet he knew that there was a good chance he might. All he could do was wait it out, and hope.

Edward followed Roy’s gaze, repressing a shudder as he saw those clouds roll in. He wasn’t afraid of storms exactly, but they had a lasting memory in his mind. Literally. And now that he could see the thunderhead clouds, it brought the memory back clearer than ever. His hands gripped at the chains so hard that if he were still flesh and blood, he’d have had harsh indentations from the links embedded in his skin. “It’s been a long time.” He murmured softly, staring at the gathering mass.

Roy tore his gaze back to Edward from the clouds yet again, but this time his eyes were concerned. “Do you want to go inside? It’s still a few hours until dinner, but-”
“I’m fine.” Edward cut across, still watching the brewing storm. “No memories I’ve not been carrying with me for seven years. Besides, it’s different now. I’m already dead… I’m not about to do anything dangerous… and I’m with you.”

Roy cocked an eyebrow as he smirked at the ghost. “Mmm yes, with me. I’ll protect you from the big bad storm.”

“Shut up!” Edward growled as Roy began to laugh. But he smiled despite himself. “I don’t need protection.”

Roy winked at him. “But think of what a smooth move that would be into gaining your undying affection.”

Edward stuck his tongue out childishly. “I’ll pass, thanks. Any undying affection I have for you stems from something totally unrelated to your attempts at flirting with me.”

“So they’re no longer atrocious attempts?” Roy asked with interest.

“Don’t get too full of yourself.” Edward cautioned with a smile.

Roy chuckled a bit, “but you’ve undying affection for me?”

Edward rolled his eyes. “Impossible man.” He muttered, but was still smiling as he went back to watching the sky. The sun was setting swifter now, as if gravity was tugging either it or the world faster in one direction. Rose hued light of the setting sun shone down across the sky, against the gathered backdrop of steel gray thunderclouds. The thunderclouds seemingly waiting to let loose their bowels until the sun passed beyond the horizon.

“I sure hope it decides to not rain.” Roy sighed as he swung back and forth slowly, barely gaining any altitude now.

“You’ve your gloves in your pockets though, so they should be okay.” Edward reminded him.

Roy shrugged. “Not so much worried about that, as I am if I do need them and it’s raining. It gets unpredictable in…” he trailed off, looking at the sky with a frown, “dangerous ways. For everyone.”

“I understand why.” Edward gave a small grimace. “But I doubt we’ll have to worry about that tonight. Besides, not everything that has to happen to you because of a little rain is bad.”

Well, there was always sex in the rain… but Roy didn’t quite have an opportunity for that tonight. And even if it was an exhilarating idea, he wasn’t about to ditch Edward tonight. He’d made plans to be with the ghost, so he’d not go back on them. Even for sex in the rain. “You’re lucky I like you as much as I do.” He informed the ghost matter-of-factly.

“How’s that?” Edward queried as he watched the birds get in some last minute flying on the warm air currents of the wind that was presumably picking up by the erratic sway of the boughs of trees. It looked fun, and in a way he wished he could join them. But the wind didn’t affect him. And he’d hate to get caught in a strong gale if it did… Roy would have to come retrieve him.

“Because I’m not going to ditch you to have sex in the rain. That’s a good thing that can happen with rain.” Roy explained with a smirk.

Edward groaned at the thought. “That’s one good thing you don’t need to worry about sharing with me.” He informed the man.
Roy laughed at the ghost’s reaction. “I’ll remember that. I’ll just rely on you to take care of me when I catch a cold.”

“I’d at least let you suffer the first day on your own.” Edward smiled to himself. Not about to argue that he’d leave Roy on his own. He already had come to the realization that he had a desire to take care of Roy. He’d taken care of him when he’d finally shown up after the drinks and bedroom activities instead of leaving Roy on his own. He knew the man didn’t need anyone to take care of him. But it didn’t seem to matter.

“I’m so glad I decided to keep you around.” Roy teased back.

“Me too.” Edward smiled over at him, and they shared a bit of a laugh before turning back to their quiet swinging and watching of the sky. Yes… he was content and happy staying with Roy. Even if the man wasn’t perfect. He wasn’t perfect either, he probably had the headstone to prove it.

They swung back and forth together, never quite gaining much altitude, as the storm brewed. The rose hues of light lessening gradually until it only outlined the underbellies of the clouds. And then it was gone altogether. The trees bowed in the wind, and the birds had since taken refuge in the twisting branches. And as far as either could tell they were absolutely alone.

After a time Roy dug his heels into the sand to bring himself to a swaying halt. “Come on, it’s time we head to Maes’s house.” And he stood up.

Edward immediately released any control he had over the swing and floated to his side. “Does he have any pets? I might get them in trouble.”

Roy shook his head as he finished crossing through the sand, and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Not unless he’s gotten one since I was last over there. They’ve never seemed the type of family to get a pet. And I’m not sure why. I was glad to find Hazel and have the stability of housing to keep him.”

“Such a masculine pet too.” Edward grinned. “I won’t worry then about upsetting any animals if they sense me.”

“My having a squirrel is only a testament to how masculine I am. It takes a real man to have a furry ball of fluff as a pet.” Roy chuckled. But he still would never let anyone he didn’t want to see Hazel into his home. He truly believed that someone might steal his squirrel.

Edward laughed, “yes, Roy. As soon as I saw you pull a squirrel out of your jacket there was no doubt in my mind that you were the incarnation of manliness.”

Roy snorted.

“Or curl up in bed like a good boy and drink hot chocolate.” Edward’s grin was positively evil.

Roy glowered at the ghost, but a smile was tugging at his mouth, just waiting for him to give up trying to hold it back. “Another side of me only you get to see.” And then deciding to have his own little fun, added. “I like being taken care of. I’ll only be submissive for the right person in bed. And you certainly succeeded in ordering me into bed.”

Edward was sure if he was capable of it, he’d have blushed. But as it was he could only manage a deer in the headlights look that made Roy burst out laughing. “I-I’m – I didn’t! Not like that! Roy!”

“Sorry.” He laughed, but silently thought to himself it certainly was the truth. “I know I promised to stop flustering you, but it’s so much fun.”
Edward looked away, still a bit self-conscious. “I remember telling you I can take it. It’s just… that was more atrocious than usual. I don’t want you to change your personality because of me.”

“Ouch, more atrocious.” Roy held a hand over his heart. “Edward, the only reason I still live after such an arrow to the heart is that you don’t want me to change.”

“Don’t push your luck.” Edward smirked at his antics.

Roy winked at him, but smiled. “Don’t you go changing either, ghost.”

Edward merely smiled back, but said nothing.

The walk to Maes’s house wasn’t too long, but along the way Roy made sure that the ghost’s world was widened. It was easy for Edward to pick out the spots of whiteness around him in this darkness, and thus point them out to Roy so the man could continue being an owl and expand his world. During the walk the wind had picked up a great deal judging by the way Roy’s clothes and hair were being whipped about. But it only started to pour rain about a block from their destination.

Edward watched over Roy in concern, and floated faster as the man picked up the pace. He was getting absolutely drenched by the rain that was falling in slanted lead sheets and given ammunition by the wind. It might not have to take sex in the rain to make Roy catch a cold. “You okay?”

“Fine. Not much farther and I can dry my clothes.” Roy tugged his jacket tighter despite the fact it was soaked through. And he grumbled over the fact that Edward wasn’t affected by it at all.

Edward nodded, and stayed close beside him for more than the usual reasons. It wasn’t like he could do anything, but he felt that perhaps his being there helped with being drenched. And besides… it gave him something of an excuse to cover up his reaction to the thunder and lightning. The audio and visual stimulation was unsettling him bit by bit. He wasn’t afraid, but it was quite assaulting to his senses. He’d not encountered anything like this since his death. And it was loud, and bright, and sudden.

Roy didn’t ask, so he needn’t be fooled, but he had spent enough time out with Edward in public over the weekend to know what it meant when the ghost got this close to him. He mentioned nothing of it though, only hurried on his way so he could dry off, and make sure Edward was able to be inside a smaller structure away from the flashes of lightning and the worst of the noise of the thunder.

When they at last reached the front door of the correct house, Roy rapped on the wet lacquered wood and glanced over at the ghost beside him. “Go on in as soon as he opens.”

Edward nodded and floated up so he was near the topmost area of the door, and when it did swing open, he darted into the world revealed to him before he had to worry about not passing through anyone. And he quickly turned back to watch Roy, not even bothering to investigate what had already been exposed to him.

“See your timing is impeccable as always.” Maes grinned as he saw the state Roy was in. He hadn’t even heard the storm start, he’d been too busy listening to his daughter reading him a fairytale. But by the looks of the outdoors, it was quite the downpour.

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Roy rolled his eyes and invited himself inside out of the rain where he began to drip-dry and create a rather substantial puddle already on the floor. “You should try it sometime.”

“I’ll pass.” Maes shut the door. “Had enough of being out in inclement weather when you were herding us around Ishval. Besides, a wise man has enough sense to get out of the rain.”
“Don’t pull Ishval on me, Maes. I’ll seriously miss my mark.” Roy shot him a dark look as he tugged on one glove. He ignored his best friend ducking around the corner to where he knew the kitchen lay, and let his alchemy dry his clothes near instantaneously… and without shrinking!

Edward floated down to settle by Roy and give the man a frown. “He teases you about it?”

“Not seriously.” Roy replied quietly as he made a show of turning around to pull off his jacket. “For him it’s a ‘laugh to keep from crying’ thing.”

Edward didn’t have a chance to ask if the manwhoring and binge drinking was Roy’s way of coping, for into their momentary solitude flew Elysia.

“Uncle Roy!” She squealed happily, and flew into his arms as Roy ducked obediently to sweep her up off her feet.

“I swear you grow taller every time I see you.” Roy beamed at her as he held both jacket and child in his arms.

Elysia giggled, “I’m gonna be taller than you Uncle Roy.”

Roy gasped dramatically. “But then how could I pick you up?”

“I could pick you up!” Elysia suggested as she began to pat at his hair.

Edward snickered. Between the two of them, he wasn’t sure if either of their egos would allow for it. But he couldn’t help but think that Roy made a good uncle for the little girl, blood related or not.

“Having trouble getting in the door again?” Came a laughing feminine voice, and Gracia walked into view.

When Edward landed eyes on this woman, who was everything he believed a mother would look like walked into view, he couldn’t help but feel a jolt of sad longing for his own mother. Even though Gracia’s hair was shorter, lighter, and she was somewhat more plump than his own mother had been, he still got that same warm feeling from her. The feeling all good mothers radiated, of comfort.

Roy smiled at her in greeting. “Of course not. How are you, Gracia? Thanks for letting me over again.”

Gracia chuckled and retrieved her daughter to set Elysia down. “Hunny, go help your daddy in the kitchen.” And she smiled as she watched the little girl run off. Only then did she turn to Roy and embrace him mutually. “I’m doing wonderful. And it’s no bother at all you being here. You know you’re welcome any time.”

“I know. But you know how I hate to impose.” Roy reminded her, relinquishing his jacket as she held out a hand to take it.

“Is that why you always leave your nightly conquests before dawn?” She teased fondly. She knew his reputation very well, but didn’t hold it against him. It was just who Roy was.

Roy glanced over at Edward once, finding nothing in the ghost’s expression to tell him exactly what the apparition was thinking. “Safer that way for all involved. And besides, you know me, I’d cry my eyes out if I had only one person for the rest of my life.”

Gracia chuckled as she finished hanging his coat, and stepped over to pat him on the arm. “That can
be taken more than one way. Deny all you want, but deep down you want happy tears, not sad ones.”

“I like her too.” Edward decided all of a sudden.

Roy’s gaze flicked over to Edward briefly before looking back at Gracia. “You always were a romantic.”

“Come on, we’ll get us all fed.” Gracia smiled at him and began to walk off. “You’re not going anywhere soon anyway with that rain as it is.”

Didn’t he know it. “Best open another bottle of wine then.” Roy suggested as he followed after her.

Edward took to walking on the floor, right beside him. Staying close. He didn’t want to lose sight of Roy, and he was still a bit on edge from the thunder he could still hear. “I think you might be a romantic too. If it mattered enough to you, if they mattered enough.”

Roy was unable to reply, but for his own part, he sincerely doubted that such an occurrence would actually happen. Him? Find someone who was worth becoming a romantic and committing? It was laughable at best. Alarming at worst. He didn’t want the headache that went with any of that. Especially the headache involved in trying to find such a person.

“So Roy,” Gracia began as she took a seat at the dining table which Maes had just finished setting, “you were at the park today as well?”

Roy nodded as he took a seat as well, and as their dinners together were quite informal after having known each other so long, they all grabbed a serving dish and passed around without any formalities. Maes was attending to Elysia’s plate as well. “I felt like a walk, and some fresh air.” He said as he piled a healthy heap of mashed potatoes onto his plate, topped off by a dipperful of gravy. “Spent a lot of time out there just thinking though. Every now and then you need that.”

“Daddy threw a knife at Uncle Roy!” Elysia piped up helpfully.

Maes flinched guiltily under the look his wife was giving him. “I missed. You know how good my aim is.”

Gracia narrowed her eyes at him, before suddenly smiling. Something she knew would make him panic even more. “Well I’m glad Uncle Roy is okay.”

Edward had taken to hovering beside Roy at this point, and couldn’t help but nod in agreement with Gracia. He didn’t care if Maes was Roy’s best friend or not. If he hurt Roy… he might just become a dangerous ghost for a night. “Can I call you my Uncle Roy too? But seeing as how I’ve seen you mostly naked that could get awkward.” He asked in a distracted sort of tone.

When Roy choked on his potatoes and gravy, nearly inhaling it, there was only minor chaos at the table. And as he coughed the blockage free, he glared at Edward. The thought that Edward wouldn’t have seen anything but his chest didn’t cross his mind. And that bratty ghost could only smirk at him as he choked.

“Don’t you know how to eat?” Edward smiled at him sweetly now.

Roy figured that not only was silence on his end towards Edward needed right now, but it was deserved as punishment for making him choke.

“Are you all right?” Maes asked him with an odd look.
“Perfectly.” Roy said, and continued to eat to prove it.

Gracia smiled over at him. “And how was your first week back at work, Roy?”

Roy’s thoughts immediately went to the ghost there beside him, and a faint smile came onto his face as he thought about that first week. When he’d had his entire world turned upside down by one individual. A ghost once locked in his office, now at his side. It had been a first week back at work for the record books. “It’s been quite bearable, actually.”

Maes grinned at that, adding, “he’s been getting his work done on time every night. For the first time ever. He told Riza it wasn’t because he had anyone to go meet… but you’re scaring us Roy. We’ve not heard gunfire at all yet, and you’ve not been scrambling to make deadlines.”

Roy gave his friend a withering look. “I have my reasons, and not everything that motivates me has to come from the possibility of-” he glanced at Elysia, “-exchanging business cards.”

Maes cracked a grin, and Gracia smiled. Elysia didn’t know any better and just kept eating her peas.

“So what is it then? You have an opening you potentially see?” Gracia queried while reaching for her dinner roll.

Roy nodded, there was that. And now that Edward could stay by his side he didn’t need to worry about one day having to change offices. That would have severely limited his time with Edward. “I have Maes looking into it, but yes.” He told her. “I might be able to shove my way directly into a brigadier general position if this turns out the way I’m planning for it to.”

Hearing this, Edward studied Roy closely. The man wasn’t lying. Roy was up to something even as he had Maes checking out Basque Grand. But Roy had never mentioned anything to him, and since he’d been spending the time while Roy worked doing stuff like reading, he’d not seen anything pass across Roy’s desk that would have clued him in. He just hoped that the man could stay as discreet with everyone else.

Elysia, not really understanding much about this work stuff the adults were talking about, suddenly abandoned her peas and fixed a glare on Roy. “You didn’t bring your friend!” She accused with classic adolescent indignation.

All of the adults, and even Edward turned to her with mixed expressions. And Roy tilted his head as he considered the girl, trying to wrestle down the surge of jealousy stirring inside him. “You mean Hazel? I didn’t have time to go get him.”

Edward knew she couldn’t mean him, she hadn’t looked his way at all since he’d been here. “It’s not me.” He told Roy, not sure why it mattered that he did. “She hasn’t even looked through me tonight.”

Elysia frowned, “Hazel… the squirrel.”

Maes shrugged at his wife, and Gracia turned to her daughter with a placating smile. “Maybe Uncle Roy will bring Hazel next time.”

“I’ll do my best to.” Roy added, trying to not notice how Edward’s words made him feel. And he took a long drink of the wine that had been poured for him to try and dampen those emotions.

After dinner they retired to the living room, and Edward took to sitting on the arm of the chair Roy was in. He’d since stopped feeling so edgy, the thunder had ceased and with it the noise. But it didn’t occur to him to perhaps give Roy some space now because of it. And as Roy didn’t seem to mind his
presence, he stayed.

“What are your plans for next weekend?” Gracia asked Roy as they sat together. Maes had recently left to put Elysia to bed. “Maes and I were thinking about taking Elysia to the zoo if you wanted to come with us.”

Roy knew they were only trying to make him feel like a part of a family, since he had no family here. And mostly since he knew they thought he was alone. But even if he had felt alone before, there sure as hell was no way he could feel alone now. Even if no one else could see him, for which he was secretly happy about, Roy had Edward. “I’m actually going out of town.”

“Where are we going?” Edward asked, despite having been told it was a surprise.

“To visit your mother?” Gracia guessed. “How is she these days?”

Roy shrugged, “spoke to her about two weeks ago on the phone. She’s doing fine as always. I swear the woman is immortal and gets feistier with age. But no, I’m not going to visit her. It’s a surprise visit for a friend.”

“Who?” Gracia pounced immediately with a ravenous grin.

Roy scoffed, “like I’d tell you. You’d tell them I was coming and ruin the surprise. I know how women gossip.” And he smiled as he glanced up casually to see Edward pouting.

Maes soon rejoined them, and sat beside his wife on the coach. “So what’d I miss?”

“Roy’s taking the weekend off somewhere to go visit someone. He won’t tell me who.” Gracia informed him evilly, knowing her husband would pester the man into spilling. If not by tonight, than during the work week.

Roy immediately pointed a finger at his best friend. “Don’t even try. I’m not going to tell you who.”

“Is it a date?” Maes wheedled with a cunning grin in place.

Edward laughed, “they’re not going to let you off easy, are they. If you want me to leave so you can make up a credible story I’ll duck up through the roof for a few minutes. Just nudge me away.”

Roy did no such thing. Even if he did tell them where he was headed, making up a friend he was visiting there? No. He wasn’t going there. And he definitely wasn’t about to tell them that he had a ghost as a friend and that the trip was for the spirit’s benefit. “Not anyone I’m dating, have dated, nor will be dating.”

“Even if I were alive I wouldn’t date you.” Edward informed him with a smirk as he rested his chin on the heel of his hand while staring down at the man. “You flirt like crap.”

Roy merely smiled.

“You flirt like crap?” Maes asked flatly, thinking that those were the only reasons Roy would be going to visit someone he had had no dalliances with in past, present, or plans for the future. Besides those on Roy’s team, of course, the man had always flat out refused there… not that he blamed him.

“I am not ugly!” Edward scowled, crossing his arms over his chest and glaring at Maes. “He’s going the right way for a haunting.”
Roy smiled at Edward’s reaction, he could practically feel his seething indignation at being indirectly called ugly. But he kept his eyes straight forward at his friend. “I don’t screw everything available that walks.”

“So they’ve already been taken before you could get to them?” Gracia guessed just for the fun of it.

Roy’s head bowed. In a way… yes. In a way Edward had been taken from him before he could get to him when he and his brother were just children. He should have thought to go there sooner, and he had been. He truly had been planning to go to Risembool to talk to the kids when Alphonse’s letter had arrived with news of Edward’s death. And at that point, well, he never made the journey. “In a way, yes. I took too long.”

“I knew it was something like that.” Maes smirked, but at his side, Gracia was still closely watching the man while her husband looked away too soon to see that flash of one emotion she’d never seen before pass in Roy’s eyes when he talked about someone else. Regret. But then it was gone, and the man was smiling again.

“That’s why a visit is in order.” Roy finished. “So I won’t be able to go with you to the zoo. But thanks for the offer.”

And as the three began to talk once more about various things, Edward continued to stare at Roy. Trying to piece the man’s words together with where they might be going. He’d not asked to go anywhere that would require a weekend trip. So what was he up to? Or was it just something said to fit Gracia and Maes’s expectations of what they wanted to hear?

When the clock struck ten p.m., he still hadn’t come to a decision. Only more theories. And as Roy stood with an announcement that he’d better head home and get some sleep, he rose from the arm of the chair as well.

“T’ll see you at work.” Roy said as the three entered the hallway near the front door, Edward floating near the ceiling. “Gracia, dinner was wonderful as always.”

“Of course it was.” Gracia grinned at him, and gave him a quick hug.

Maes merely clapped Roy on the back. “Best run home if it’s still raining. Sure you don’t want an umbrella in case?”

Roy opened the front door and looked out. If it was still raining, it was lightly at best. Nothing much to worry about. “You know I hate umbrellas.” He muttered, and accepted his coat from Gracia, tugging it on. “Have a good night you two.”

As the front door closed, Roy began to walk down the path to the sidewalk, feeling the light mist of rain against his skin. It would take it a while at this rate to get him very wet. And from the woodwork of the house shot Edward to join him.

The ghost landed on the ground and began to walk as well. “You’re being careful, aren’t you? This thing with Grand? I really, really don’t like him. I don’t want him to hurt you.” He said as he peered closely around at Roy’s face.

“I am.” Roy replied gently, giving him a reassuring sort of look. “And so is Maes. Don’t worry, Ed, I won’t put myself in any danger needlessly. I have before sometimes, sure, but you need me. And I won’t leave you alone because I acted like an idiot.”

Edward worried his bottom lip between his teeth for a moment, before giving a shallow nod. “Okay.”
“It’ll be okay. Just trust me, I’ve got everything under control.” Roy tried to further reassure him.
“Now are you okay? I know the thunder and lightning was a bit much for you. Sensory overload?”

Edward looked away self-consciously, fixing his gaze on the rain-washed streets that glowed with spots of yellow from lamplight. “Yeah. I was fine for a while, but I think after spending most of this afternoon outside at the park it just hit me all of a sudden. It was a lot more loud noise and flashing of light than I’m used to.”

“But you’re okay now?” Roy pressed.

“But you’re okay now?” Roy pressed.

“Being near you helps calm me.” Edward admitted, just a little bit embarrassed, but not enough to keep it from Roy. Besides, he believed the man already knew that. If he didn’t well… Roy could only be utterly, hopelessly clueless. “So I’m fine now.”

Roy smiled, feeling something akin to pride flash through him. “I’m glad. You can be close to me whenever you need to until you get over the culture shocks.”

“You mean until I start acting my age?” Edward turned to him with an uncertain sort of smile on his face, it looked almost like a grimace, really.

“There’s nothing wrong with what you’re going through.” Roy said quite firmly. “I think you’ve handled it quite well, personally. I think if I’d been contained as you were I’d have been a lot jumpier than you’ve been. And I mean that.” And Roy thought about it for a moment before adding with a grin, “besides, it makes me feel powerful and wanted when you cling to me. Like I get to protect you.”

Not for the first time did Edward wish he were capable of shoving Roy. “I’m not a date, remember? That won’t work on me.”

“Was worth a try to make you smile again.” Roy told him, taking note that it had worked.

Edward laughed softly. “Then I won’t worry anymore that I seem childish to you.”

Roy smiled back at him. “I’ve never thought of you as a child. Childish enthusiasm perhaps, yes. But I admit I admire that about you. No, Ed, you could never be childish to me. And I’m not just saying that so you don’t torture me for the rest of my life.”

“That’s right, you’re stuck with me for the rest of your life.”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘stuck’.” Roy murmured to himself, feeling happy as he made his way home with his companion despite the steady drizzle of rain.

When they finally got home, Roy was quite wet again. Yet he merely headed for his bedroom as Edward locked the front door before pelting through the walls to beat him upstairs.

Entering his bedroom he saw the ghost was sitting on his bed, mercifully untouched by the elements of nature. “I’m just going to take a hot shower.” He said and tugged off his jacket on his way to the bathroom. “Maybe I won’t get sick if I warm myself up like that.”

Edward nodded, and as Roy vanished into the bathroom to finish stripping and set his clothes aside to presumably dry, he made his way back down through the walls and floors into the kitchen. He knew what else would warm Roy up, and he still had the remainder from before saved in the fridge.

So he opened the door and pulled out the container of hot chocolate and set it on a counter while he searched for and found a pan. He started it heating and mixing back up again as he listened to the
hissing of increased rainfall outside. It seemed that they’d made it back just in time. Once he was
done heating it all back up he flipped the heat off the burner and poured Roy a mug of the stuff.

Making his way back up to Roy’s bedroom by way of the stairs he opened the door to let himself in.
And hearing that Roy had just turned off the shower, settled on the bed to wait while cradling the
mug in his hands.

Roy stepped out of the bathroom with a wall of steam, drying his hair with the towel that he hadn’t
wrapped about his waist. Seeing Edward sitting there on his bed he smiled, but not for the normal
reason he might smile in seeing someone in his bed – if he ever changed his mind about bringing
someone home to his place –. It was the growing familiarity of having the ghost there, and
welcoming the presence. As well as what was in said ghost’s hands. “Did you make me more hot
chocolate?”

Edward nodded with a sunny smile. “Thought it would help. Showers only warm from the outside
in. This warms inside out.” He said, not blinking at the fact that Roy was quite naked save for a
towel.

Roy smiled back in gratitude and tossed the towel he’d been drying his hair with aside. “Thank you,
it will help.” He didn’t mention the fact that he didn’t think he’d need it. But then again, he hadn’t
thought that having some would have helped keep the worst of a hangover at bay. “I’ll be out again
in a moment.” He said as he grabbed a pair of checkered pajama bottoms from a dresser drawer and
vanished back into the bathroom.

So Edward waited patiently, and when Roy joined him on the bed, he passed the mug over. “To
your health?”

Roy laughed, and raised the mug in a toast to the ghost. “To not getting sick.” And he drank the
entire thing under Edward’s watchful gaze. He passed the empty mug to Edward’s waiting hand
when he was done. “Thanks. It’s still delicious.”

Edward smiled at him gratefully, and floated up off the bed, intending to take the dirty mug
downstairs. Along with the one he’d left up here from before. “Do you feel warm again?”

“Completely.” Roy admitted. The rich liquid had melted any lingering ice he hadn’t even noticed
from his bones.

Edward beamed, and collected the other mug before heading towards the door and looking over his
shoulder at Roy who was climbing under the covers of the bed. “Goodnight, Roy.”

Roy, who had finished settling in, raised himself up on one elbow. “Wait, Ed.”

Edward turned back to him curiously. “Yes?”

“You’re welcome to come back to my bed again tonight.” He offered with a bit of a wicked smile.
“And you don’t have to stay at a bottom corner.”

“Am I the first virgin you’ve said that to?” Edward asked through a return smile. He knew that while
it may sound like an invitation of another sort, it wasn’t. And he knew that Roy was only making it
sound that way to tease him.

Roy winked at him, and settled back down against the bed and pillows. “Yes. You’re the only one
who gets to see this side of me.”

Edward gave him a warm smile. “Lucky me.”
Roy watched as Edward left the room, and closing his eyes he sighed contentedly. And he began to drift off to sleep hoping that he’d wake up seeing Edward nearby again. He wasn’t sure why it mattered, but then, he didn’t understand a lot of how he was feeling lately when it came to the ghost. Jealousy ranking near the top. And that jealousy was the last thing on his mind before he fell completely asleep.
Monday was both a disappointment and a relief in Roy’s mind as he stirred awake from a blissfully peaceful sleep. One that felt of warmth and contentment, the kind you rarely had since hitting puberty and thus the age of understanding the meaning of stress, or gaining wet dreams. No, this sleep had been completely undisturbed. And though Roy was awake, he lay there, eyes closed, for several moments more.

In one way, he was displeased about going back to work today. The start of a new week. It was for all the usual reasons that made people not want to go to work on Monday, but now he had the addition of a certain individual with whom he’d actually enjoyed spending the majority of his weekend with. If that weekend could have continued forever, he doubted he’d have ever complained. There had just been something intensely relaxing and at the same time rejuvenating, about being around the ghost for so long. Not having their time together interrupted any longer by his needing to go home, or the rush of paperwork.

But on that same token, he was relieved he could get back to that rush. Because it was the very effect the weekend had had on him, mentally, emotionally, even physically, all relating back to Edward, that made him want to seek out the stable shore he already knew. He reckoned that over time he’d grow used to the intense change in his life that Edward signified. He knew he would… after all, he had meant it when he’d asked Edward to come with him… and to stay with him.

So he slowly opened his eyes, squinting against the golden glow of sunlight that was beginning to show over the very bottom of the windowsill. And then his head lifted, looking around for Edward. Yet despite what he’d told the ghost about being welcome to come back to his bed, said silvery apparition was nowhere in sight.

It made him frown, and he ignored the shadow of disappointment that brushed at the edges of his consciousness. He had no reason to even consider feeling disappointed that Edward wasn’t waiting on his bed again for the second morning in a row. Not when the sun was rising. He knew where the ghost must be. So he shoved the covers off of himself and climbed out of bed with a languid and bone-popping full body stretch.

One of these mornings he vowed to wake up in time to watch the sun rise with Edward. He got the feeling that it would mean a lot to the ghost.

One hand hooking into the front of his hair at his forehead he tugged at the black locks absently as he padded his way to the bathroom. He had a toilet to use and personal hygiene to get over with.

As per Roy’s guess, Edward was in fact up on the roof already.

This particular morning he hadn’t felt like watching it from inside as he’d done the previous day. And so he’d popped up through the roof once again and settled down to await his sunrise. A sight that he was sure one day would lose its continuous awe factor over him, but at the same time he never wanted it to. The sun rising, even setting, was one of the prettiest things he’d been kept from seeing these past seven years. The sky… the clouds… even the stars at night… they still held sway over him.

Yet he strayed no farther than the roof, as if going any further at such moments would spoil the majesty of the nature that surrounded him.
And the nature surrounding him the night after a rainstorm was purely surreal.

Downstairs Roy had just finished his shower, and he exited the bathroom with towel around his waist just in case. There was just no telling where Edward would pop up, although the bathroom seemed safely his own territory. And he didn’t want to risk offending the ghost. This was as naked as he’d be getting in the rest of his own home it seemed, now that he actually had a human companion living with him. A companion that had the run of the house.

He was pulling an extra uniform from his closet when a rust brown ball of fur shot into his room. “Someone slept in late. Else I’m up early.” He chided the squirrel, before bursting out laughing as Hazel nearly face planted into the carpet in bewilderment.

Hazel, having righted himself self-consciously after skidding to a halt, began to preen his whiskers haughtily while observing his human in sideways glances that were meant to say ‘about time you became responsible’.

Roy grinned at the animal. “Between you and Edward I’m starting to feel as if you two have some secret pact now to take shifts of looking after me.” And he turned on his heel to stride back to the bathroom while calling, “at least you finally trust I’m potty trained,” over his shoulder.

Hazel lost no time in dashing after Roy, squeezing through the door the instant before it snapped closed. He’d narrowly avoided losing his tail, but he didn’t seem to notice as he leapt onto the bathroom counter to begin grooming himself again under his human’s deadpan expression.

“That isn’t code for ‘I think I might still need supervision’.” Roy informed the squirrel, was pointedly ignored, and rolled his eyes before setting to the task of getting dressed.

Once he’d dressed and done a few second battle with his hair to get it to look perfect, Roy plucked Hazel up off the bathroom counter while murmuring something that sounded much like “unsanitary” under his breath. The squirrel was transferred to a shoulder and he left the bathroom and soon enough the bedroom to go downstairs and deal with breakfast for both he and his pet.

Somehow Hazel got served first, and he left the squirrel in the laundry room to eat while he went out into the kitchen to try and motivate himself to cook. As it was, he was frankly lacking the motivation to eat a proper breakfast. Else, the attention to task for it. Because after several minutes of opening the fridge and staring into it, closing it to go and open nearly every cupboard that contained food, reopening the fridge only to find that somehow the peanut butter had ended up inside of it between now and the first time he’d opened it, returned the peanut butter, and opened the fridge again, he realized that he was clearly not getting anywhere.

What was worse, he didn’t even know what was distracting him so.

Slamming the fridge door shut again with a little more force than the situation merited, Roy grabbed a slice of bread and promptly made himself dry toast. Dry toast which he ate without so much as a flicker of a grimace as he made his way to the backdoor. Letting himself out he finished stuffing the dry toast into his mouth as he turned to stare up at the overhang of the roof. He couldn’t see Edward, but he was sure the ghost was up there.

So he did the only thing that seemed logical to do. He dusted the crumbs off the fingers of his gloves and began to scale the side of his house once again.

Edward noticed this time when a living being popped up over the edge of the roof, and he looked over to see Roy straighten out of his crouched landing position. “Good morning.” He smiled in cheery welcome. “How are you feeling?”
“If you’re referring as to whether or not I feel ill after being soaked through twice last night,” Roy answered as he walked against the slope of the roof towards the ghost, “I feel perfectly normal.”

“How dare you assume I’d be worried about your health!” Edward teased through his offended look.

Roy laughed good-naturedly and sat down next to the ghost, turning his gaze to the horizon. “I dare anything against someone who can’t physically touch me.”

Edward scoffed, but didn’t take offense to the jab at his state of existence. His being dead truly didn’t bother him, he was used to it by now. “Just wait, I’ll duck down and loosen the rafters so you go tumbling through. How much do you weigh? I bet I wouldn’t have to loosen them much.”

“Hey!” Roy exclaimed over a peal of laughter. “Don’t be going and modifying my house or I’m making you fix it all, by yourself, while I’m in the hospital enjoying paid time off and nurses in short skirts.”

“So how much do you weigh?” Edward persisted, though he had rolled his eyes at the ‘nurses in short skirts’ comment. His internal monologue at that point muttering ‘manwhore’, but not actually verbally voicing it.

Not this time.

Roy groaned, he’d thought those nagging personal questions had been through when Edward had asked – and eventually been told – how old he was. Okay, so that was only one question. But still. How much he weighed? And he knew from experience that the ghost was more stubborn than a dumb mule about such a question. “I think such a question qualifies under too personal for you to know.”

At that, Edward smirked, not losing heart. “We didn’t get to play chess last night, so I’m suffering from a withdrawal of asking you questions to get to know you better.”

“And my weight will help you know me better?” Roy frowned at him incredulously.

Edward nodded with a feral grin.

Roy groaned again, this time it was accompanied by an upward flare of his eyes as if praying to whatever gods might exist for patience. Help. Sudden amnesia on Edward’s part. Anything. “Do I get a question as well then, after this?” He finally asked, knowing that it would be easier to just give in. It wasn’t like Edward could broadcast it to anyone.

Well, he could… but he doubted the ghost was the sort to start writing flyers portraying something to rival his medical history and distribute them.

“If it’s going to be about what dessert might be my favorite?” Edward guessed.

Roy gave him a hurt look. “You make me sound so predictable. But I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed there, Ed.”

Edward smiled, far from being disappointed. “I agree to the terms. Now tell me how much you weigh.”

“Last I checked, one hundred seventy-four pounds.” Roy grumbled, thoroughly disgruntled at revealing that to anyone at all. “And I’m all muscle! Muscle weighs more.”

Edward chuckled. Of course Roy had to get in a last minute claim about his figure. Something he
might have teased Roy about had he the ammunition for it, but as it was, he couldn’t claim Roy was fat. He’d seen the man practically naked, and Roy was telling the truth about being all muscle. “That’s rather average I thought. And for someone who looks like you it almost sounds light to me. But then, I’m no doctor, and I certainly have nothing to measure you against.” He grinned cheekily. “I don’t weigh anything.”

Roy glowered at him, but couldn’t find any reasonable retort to such a thing. So instead, he latched onto the one thing he could, adopting a coy smile with which he graced the ghost. “And how do I look?”

Edward blinked at him momentarily, thinking fast on what Roy meant before it suddenly dawned on him. He snorted and turned away. “Like my personal idiot.”

If it had been meant as anything but a fond sounding statement, Roy didn’t catch it. “May I ask another question?”

Surprise made Edward turn and look at him again, a bit confused by the gentle smile he saw there. “Please.”

“Have you seen any other ghosts since you’ve been free?” Roy asked carefully, more in regard to the wording, than actual concern about drudging up something bad with his question.

Edward blinked, and then shook his head. “Not a one. Why?”

“Well,” Roy began, careful once more, “you said you had no unfinished business–”

“I don’t.” Edward interrupted smoothly.

“But then what I don’t understand is why there aren’t thousands of other ghosts clogging the streets and such. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m wondering why you’re still here. And why you were locked up in an office for seven years.” Roy dug a hand into the front of his hair as his brow furrowed. “And why I’m the only one who can see you.”

Edward’s bottom lip had ended between his teeth as he thought about it, taking care not to take it the wrong way. He knew Roy wanted him here, else he’d never have been able to get free of that office. So it was pointless to assume that Roy meant what he’d said as anything bad. “I’m not sure myself. About any of it.” And he looked around as if to truly be sure he was alone in his kind. “Maybe we’re all locked up somewhere waiting for someone to release us. I don’t know what the significance of you being my key to the world is, but you are. And…” he trailed off for a moment as his attention flickered back to memory momentarily. “It could be the way I died. My death wasn’t a common one, at all. So maybe that’s why I’m the only one, so far I’ve seen.”

Roy supposed it could be… it was certainly the only thing that thus far made sense. The most sense.

“I don’t mind that I only have you.” Edward continued after a short silence, his silver eyes resting on Roy. “If I see another ghost I’ll definitely be telling you, if you don’t see that ghost yourself. But no matter the reasons why I’m still here, and why you’re the only one who can see me, I’m glad to be here with you.”

Roy still sat silent for a few seconds after Edward had quieted, now only being watched by the ghost. “I’m glad too. Despite you turning my normal life upside down, I’m glad.”

Edward laughed at that, and felt a flash of pride. “You needed it, trust me. You may fear that squirrel giving you a talking to more than me, but face it, you need someone to turn your life upside down.”
“Maybe you’re right.” Roy smiled at him thoughtfully, sharing undisturbed for the first time one of those silver-eyed gazes that should have unnerved him… should have. It was in the moment that he realized he wasn’t that he abruptly looked away, breaking the mood. “I’m going to be late to work at this rate. You coming?”

Edward shot upward immediately in response. “I’m not spending the day here alone, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

“You wouldn’t be alone, you’d have Hazel.” Roy teased as he began to cautiously lower himself off the edge of the roof so he could climb back down.

“As much as I like your manly pet,” Edward said as he floated along beside Roy, “Hazel rather lacks the ability to have an intelligent conversation with me.”

“Thought I was your personal idiot.” Roy reminded him as he made it to a second story window without much difficulty – it was slower going than usual since the paint was still affected from the rain of the previous night.

Edward grinned, and floated lower as Roy managed to find leverage on the jutting upper sill of a first story window. “You are. In certain ways, things. But fine, I’d rather spend time with someone who does more than play with balls – wait…”

Roy burst into laughter, his balance wavering.

“Someone who can actually see me. Not just sense me.” Edward substituted hurriedly.

Roy gripped desperately to his handholds on the house as laughter continued to shake him and threaten his strength to turn into nothingness. “I’m just that multitalented?” He queried in a voice that shook with each laugh, and he carefully tried to lower himself down further.

“Oh shut up, Roy.” Edward snapped despite a grin and a great lack of irritation in his voice. He was more than amused himself, and fighting back the urge to laugh himself. He was sure that if ghosts could blush, he’d be doing it now.

Roy sniggered and finished lowering himself enough to safely jump down the rest of the way. He landed easily down on the grass, and turned to the ghost at his side as he straightened. “Now that you bring it up though, I feel rested. So tonight I’m off to get another date.”

Edward scowled, “just so long as we play chess tonight before you leave work. Maes interrupted us from having a game last night and you promised me.”

“We shall play chess tonight.” Roy promised once again, and this time planned to keep that promise. “But you wanted to go to that dinner, so it’s your fault to.”

Edward blinked at the claim, and followed behind Roy as the man walked towards the backdoor so they could go back inside. “You would have turned him down if I hadn’t wanted to?”

Roy closed his eyes briefly as he reached out to grasp the door handle. “Yesterday was a day just for you, including the night. I have nights that belong to me, you have ones that belong to you. I would have turned him down had you wanted me to.” And he opened the door to let them in, holding it for the ghost as well.

Edward walked on through after him, trying not to feel too pleased that he had nights that were specific just for him. Yes, it had been sort of implied when Roy hadn’t gone out partying and instead chose to spend the entire day and night with him. But hearing it expressly implied was a whole other
thing. Something that made him feel much like he had when Roy had promised to celebrate his
deathday with him. “As long as I get chess tonight.”

Roy smiled as he shut the door. “That we will. And tonight will be the night I finally get it right.”

“I think not. You’re terrible at guessing my favorite dessert.” Edward informed him, and vanished
through a wall heading for the front door. “Come on, you’ll be late.” He called back as an
afterthought.

Roy chuckled softly and headed after the silvery apparition.

Twenty minutes later found Roy arriving at work at last. He’d taken a different route that morning to
expose more of the city to Edward, and that took time. But he was only pushing the clock by a few
measly minutes. Well, they weren’t measly to a certain Lieutenant, but to him, they had been well
worth it.

“Will I ever get to see you really use your alchemy?” Edward asked through a silence that had
stretched several minutes as Roy took the long way around Headquarters to enter the building.

Roy frowned slightly, one of his hands twitching reflexively at the question. “How do you mean,
‘really use it’?” He asked, glad that no one was around this part of the building at this time of day.
Everyone else was usually smart enough to take the short way into work when they were running
late.

“Like, use it as if you were in danger.” Edward clarified, and then turned a hasty look on Roy. “Not
that I want you to be in danger!”

Roy smiled just a bit at the concern. “I know you didn’t mean it like that.” He knew how much
Edward relied on him, and he didn’t plan to let the ghost down. As much as Edward was dependant
on him, he was beginning to believe he’d feel quite lost without the ghost around. So he could
understand how Edward felt about his personal safety. He sure as hell wasn’t about to let an exorcist
or anyone like that get near Edward. “I’d say that the chances of you not ever seeing me go full out
would be slim. Almost every new State Alchemist one day or another gets it into their head that
testing their skills, in a legal way or not, against the Flame Alchemist, Hero of the Ishval War, would
be a good idea. And that’s just one small part of the population I’ve ever had to use my alchemy
against.”

Edward slowly nodded. “I mean, logically I want you to be safe. Never have to protect yourself. But
realistically… and I guess I’m also curious. I’ve heard a lot about you and I was an alchemist once
too.”

“A very good one too.” Roy agreed, “I’m sure you would have given your father a run for his
money had you lived.”

Edward scowled at the mention of his father. “Just stay safe. Even if I am curious.”

“Don’t worry, Ed.” Roy smiled at the grass they were walking across. “You’re one of the few
people I don’t want to leave alone in this world any sooner than I must. Between you and my
mother, I’ve got plenty of reasons to stay safe. But I’ll satisfy your curiosity too.”

Edward mulled that over for several yards before asking, “I’ll be able to meet your mother one day,
right? I’d like that. As much as I can meet her anyway.”

Roy cracked a small grin. “Of course you will. When I can manage it we’ll take a week or so
vacation and go see her. You should probably be glad though that she can’t see you, her hugs can
crush steel I swear. And she’d definitely hug you.”

“Why would she hug me?” Edward blinked.

Roy’s grin softened to an easy smile. “Because, you turned my life upside down. She’s been trying and failing to do it herself since I was a kid. In her book, that merits you a bone-crushing hug.”

After that they both fell silent as they entered the building. When there was no telling when or where someone would pop out, they couldn’t risk conversing right now. Or, at least Roy couldn’t, but Edward stayed quiet anyway. He didn’t want to make things difficult, and he didn’t particularly need Roy just then. Not in a verbal way.

However their mutual silence changed somewhat once they got up to where a certain Riza Hawkeye was waiting behind her desk looking particularly murderous.

“You’re seven minutes late, sir.” Riza informed him with narrowed eyes, running a cloth along the barrel of her pistol in an almost sensual manner as she stared down her superior officer and longtime friend.

“She better not shoot at you.” Edward growled defensively.

Roy couldn’t help but smirk at the ghost’s protective nature. “That’s actually fairly good for me. If I recall, isn’t that supposed to mean I’m early?”

Riza sighed, and stood up from her chair. “Last week you were on time. What happened to your sudden punctuality?”

“You stopped letting surprise strippers into my office before I got in in the morning.” Roy shrugged nonchalantly. “Thought if I was a bit late this morning you’d have managed to find the time to sneak one in there.”

“There better not be any strippers in there.” Edward muttered darkly under his breath.

Riza pointed her gun at the door to Roy’s office. “Strippers or not, get to work, sir. If it’s not all done by the end of the day I’m going to seriously wonder about what’s now missing that turned you back into your former lazy self.”

Roy scoffed at that, already walking towards the door. “I am not lazy! You do not look like I do by being lazy. And such wondering would be good for you, if you’ve enough free time to polish your gun on military time then you’re clearly not being challenged enough.”

“Mustang.” She growled warningly.

Roy flashed her his most winning grin, and tugged open the door. “Hawkeye.” He swept her a courtly bow before stepping inside and shutting the door after him. More to protect him from potential gunfire than anything.

Riza shook her head, a small smile worming its way onto her face. “Friend or not, I don’t think I’ll ever understand that man.” She said to herself as she sat back down again.

Edward, who had turned to her when she had spoken, tilted his head a bit. “Bet you’d never believe that he finishes his work early now so he can play chess with a ghost.” And he looked down with a faint smile. “Still a bit hard for me to believe too… I’m no longer lonely.”

He turned then to the shut door between he and the office. An office he’d been trapped inside for
seven years. An office that now contained the one person who could see him. Floating over to the
door slowly, he reached out a hesitant hand which he rested against the wood. It was firm as he had
wanted it to be. His eyes slipped closed as he gave a shaking breath of nerves.

Now that he was free of that office, the thought of going back into the one place where he’d been
held captive for so long was a daunting thought. More daunting than it had seemed at any moment
prior to this. A barrage of “what if’s” swirled in his head, each one making his eyes screw tighter
shut.

It was in that moment that the door at his hand suddenly was opened.

Roy didn’t meet Edward’s startled look, merely looked past his companion to where Riza was
working. “Could you run down to the mess hall and bring me up some coffee?”

Riza couldn’t see the harm in it, the caffeine would probably be beneficial to what she wanted out of
Roy. So she nodded and stood. “I’ll be back in a few minutes then.”

“Thank you.” Roy smiled at her gratefully, and waited until she’d left before he looked down at
Edward tenderly. When he’d realized that the ghost wasn’t coming in right away, it seemed he’d
guessed rightly that something was wrong. And the expression of heart wrenching uncertainty on
Edward’s face proved him correct. “Edward?”

Edward carded a nervous hand back through the silver fringe of hair that had fallen across one eye.
“It’s not as easy as I thought it would be.”

Roy nodded in understanding, and stepped back only to extend his hand. Just as he’d done the night
he’d freed Edward. And as gently as he could manage, as if Edward were nothing more than a
spooked deer, said, “Edward, will you come with me?”

Edward only hesitated a moment as the familiar question registered through his uncertainty. His eyes
darted up to meet Roy’s own dark ones, and slowly, in just as familiar a gesture, he reached out a
hand until it was a hairs breadth from where it would have connected and passed through Roy’s.
And he answered the only way he could. “Yes.”

Roy smiled bracingly, and took a step back which caused his hand to retreat. Yet Edward moved
after him as smoothly as if they had been touching. And though he had seen a shudder pass through
the nearly transparent body, Edward followed him. It made his chest constrict, to know the amount
of trust Edward must have in him. It nigh took his breath away, and he smiled as Edward now stood
with him in the office – rather close to him. “Can you see back out?”

Edward looked away from Roy’s eyes towards the door. The whiteness was still gone. He could see
clearly the room he had just left, and he looked back to Roy with a bright smile. “Thank you.”

Roy pushed the door shut with one hand, not moving from where he stood with Edward. “Anything
for my personal ghost.”

Edward watched as Roy turned to walk over to his desk, feeling more content than he’d ever felt in
this office. Yes, it would be fine now. As long as he had Roy, he’d be okay. It didn’t matter to him
that he didn’t like relying on anyone for anything. You couldn’t be contained for seven years without
being able to be noticed without becoming obnoxiously independent. But with Roy, it was nice to
know he didn’t have to go through anything alone anymore. Not if he didn’t want to.

Casting Roy one last look he floated over to the shelf where he’d left the books Roy had brought for
him and selected one of the thicker novels he’d not yet read. Soon he was curled up on the couch
with the book open in his hands, his silver eyes only for the words written there on the pages.

Roy’s coffee came and went, papers were rustled either from the desk or the couch, and silence reigned. But it was a comfortable silence. A silence that was destined to be broken soon, the serenity of the atmosphere thrown out the window with it.

When next the office door opened, Edward barely had time to let the book pass through him to thump to the couch before they were interrupted. It was the third time in an hour that his reading had been interrupted, and the glare he had turned on the person to interrupt it was soon replaced with wary apprehension and a degree of resentment.

“Colonel Mustang, thought I’d drop down personally to make sure everything was running smoothly after your transfer.”

Roy may have dropped the salute he didn’t feel, but he remained standing, and alert for the very reason of Edward’s warning. He could see said ghost now, and Edward was hovering mid-air looking much like a dog waiting to be allowed to chase out an intruder. “Ah,” he began smoothly, curbing any emotion from his voice, “General Grand, so good of you to come personally. An honor.”

Edward glared at said General’s back as the man finally stepped the rest of the way up to Roy’s desk after having looked around in confusion for a moment for a place to invite himself to sit. “My couches.” He snarled. “My office. I’d consider it an honor to drop one of my couches on you, several times.”

Only years of wearing a metaphorical mask kept Roy from reacting to Edward’s vehement commentary. The ghost hadn’t been joking about his dislike for Grand.

Grand himself had decidedly given up on finding a temporary place to sit. “Nonsense. Always a pleasure to make sure the star State Alchemist is adjusting well. Which, judging by how efficiently you’ve been working, you’re adjusting quite well after the transfer.”

Roy’s smile was thin-lipped. “Yes, the transfer went even better than I’d predicted. I must thank you for your concern about how it has gone, and of the office.”

“Ah, yes.” Grand looked around, frowning at the lack of chairs in front of the Colonel’s desk. “Are you sure you’ve experienced no abnormalities? It seems your chairs have vanished.” But he glanced up at Roy with a smirk, “or did you incinerate them in three seconds?”

“I am not abnormal.”

Roy replied, quite unblinkingly, “I can incinerate a mere chair faster than that. As it is, I did not order chairs. I much prefer the couches. Far more sensible to sit a large group of people such as my team in the case of a meeting with them.”

Grand nodded absently, still looking about. “It seems you are adjusting well then. I am very pleased with the progress of your work thus far.”

“He’s scoping out your territory.” Edward forewarned as he floated forward to sit himself on the desk between Roy and General Grand. “He doesn’t trust you. He never did it to anyone who was in his pocket. And he’s stalling.”

Roy couldn’t help but feel that Grand had a reason to not trust him. He had a dangerous reputation among some levels of society, and for good reason. But where he had his alchemy, Grand had his manipulations. That much he knew. “Thank you, sir. Speaking of my work, however, I’m afraid I do
have rather a lot of it this morning.”

Grand caught the unspoken hint, and nodded magnanimously as his eyes did one last suspicious sweep of the room. Perhaps it was just his mind playing tricks on him, but every time he came into this office, it felt as if something unseen were watching him. The sensation prickled at the back of his neck. But once again, there was nothing to be seen. Damn the Fuhrer for sticking Mustang in this office… it was always harder to manipulate someone when you were unsettled. And the idea of manipulating Roy Mustang, Flame Alchemist, was a great feat to undertake in itself as it was.

“Sir?” Roy prompted when Grand did not reply.

Edward, who had floated off to one side was glaring fiercely at the General. “Stay away from him.”

To whom Edward was saying that to, Roy wasn’t sure, but he didn’t pay it much more mind as Grand finally snapped out of it.

“My apologies.” Grand nodded stiffly. “It seems everything is as it should be. Before I return to my own work, I would like to invite you to the parade grounds next week to watch the practical for the new State Alchemist hopefuls. It has been a long time since we’ve had a State Alchemist of your caliber in Central permanently.”

Roy couldn’t help but think that it was because he was the only one left from the Ishval war who had not either died, gone clinically off the deep end, or been tossed into prison for various nefarious deeds that were the result of skipping off the deep end chanting ‘hallelujah’ the entire way down. “I would very much like to attend.”

“Suck up.” Edward growled, and unless he’d been looking for it, he’d have missed Roy’s dart of eyes at him. “Him, not you.”

“I’ll put you on the guest list then.” Grand nodded imperiously. “For now, I release you back to your work.”

Edward didn’t even watch to see the sickening display of Roy showing submission to anyone through a salute that wasn’t deserved before he had whirled through the air towards where the coat rack rested at the side of the door out of the office. Didn’t even look to see if Roy was watching him, much less trying to hand signal him anything. He only watched with a vindictive gleam in his eyes as General Grand strode towards the closed door. “You try and hurt Roy, and I’ll kill you.” He promised, not wondering where this sudden protective streak had come from. He knew.

General Grand had just reached the door and was grasping the handle when the coat rack smacked into him. He didn’t register that it had hit him with the force of something wielded and not something that had been merely off balanced. Only that his head felt as if it had been split open and he was seeing stars as he lost his balance, tumbling sideways onto the floor and landing in an ungainly heap with the metal coat rack on top of him.

Edward immediately looked over at Roy with a bright smile. “Can we get a heavier coat rack?”

Roy bit the inside of his cheek, hard, to keep himself from laughing. And he glared at the ghost, though the effect was probably ruined by the flicker of a grin that slipped through. He knew that perhaps he should be a little mad at Edward, but he couldn’t bring himself to it. He understood why the ghost had done it, and to be quite honest with himself, he felt that Edward had deserved to clobber General Grand. If only to assert to himself that he could do something about protecting Roy.

Hurrying around his desk in the act of concern, Roy called out “Hawkeye!” as he went. The instant
before he reached the General, the door opened quickly in response to his summons…

…hitting the fallen General with the edge of the door rather viciously in the lower regions.

Edward burst into gales of laughter, clutching at his sides as a shriek of a yelp joined the chaos.

“Oh my.” Riza remarked unsympathetically as she gazed down at the scene, the moment however that she caught Roy’s pointed look, she switched tunes completely. “General! Here, give me your hand and let's help you up. Colonel, please get that coat rack off him.”

Roy did so with regret, and almost hoped that Edward would tip it back over. “Please escort the General back to his office, Lieutenant.” He ordered, and he helped Riza get the large man up off the ground before sending them both on their way.

The General was in and out of consciousness and limping, so he didn’t see the snickering faces of the rest of Roy’s team.

Roy dusted off his hands with an air of a job well done, and looked at Falman. “Find Maes, inform him that the General nearly got brained with a coat rack and castrated with a door. I doubt he’ll think to check the infirmary to spy on anyone.”

“Yes, sir.” Falman grinned and got up immediately.

Meanwhile Roy ducked back into his office and snapped the door shut before rounding on Edward who had quieted his laughter to chuckles hid behind a hand. “I should be mad at you, but actually I’ve never been more proud. I’ve wanted to club him over the head since I met him. At the very least.”

Edward winked at him, silver eyes sparkling in mischief. “You keep your job, I’ll act out in your place. But seriously, can’t we have a heavier coat rack?”
Chapter 13

By late afternoon Roy had received word over the phone via Riza – who was acting uncharacteristically female by passing along gossip, much less hearing said gossip – that General Grand had been sent home by the infirmary nurses with an ice pack for both head and groin. Apparently he had sustained “grievous” injuries that required some home rest away from the stress of the constant up-and-down of the work environment.

Roy chalked Riza acting like a female up to her having some sadistic pleasure of nearly castrating a man, and she was on an estrogen high because of it. As for his heartfelt regards for the general’s condition, he had hung up the phone feeling very pleased with the ghost that was now occupying the favored right hand corner of the ceiling.

“General Grand is on his way home with ice packs.” Roy announced as he finished chuckling to himself. “Apparently between you and Riza you really did him in. Good work.”

Edward looked away from his book with a thin smile. “I’ll hit him harder next time. If he’s not on his way to the cemetery to pick out a suitable place, I didn’t hit him hard enough.”

Roy tried not to grimace. “You’re a bit vindictive, you know that? Not that I mind. As long as it’s not directed at me. But for just having only a vague idea of how evil someone might be, you’re like a Doberman.”

With a shrug, Edward turned so that he was facing Roy from where he hovered, instead of having to turn his head. “Vague or concrete, evil is still evil. And the vaguer evils would be more dangerous, wouldn’t you say? Besides,” Edward tilted his head slightly, “I see no reason that just because I’m dead, I shouldn’t be allowed to protect what matters most to me.”

“Who.” Roy corrected with a bit of a grin, trying not to feel too pleased that he mattered a great deal to the ghost. It still made him feel flashes of guilt when he thought about such things as how in control he was over a great deal of Edward’s happiness. The fact that Edward now could leave, albeit to only a few other places in the world, eased the guilt some. But not entirely.

Edward peered at Roy in an assessing manner. “And here I was just thinking that you were a thing… whose sole purpose in life is to act like the incarnation of temptation.”

“Among other things.” Roy replied smugly, not at all ruffled by Edward’s teasing. “Temptation, power, pride-”

“Heroism.” Edward inserted with something of a smirk.

That actually cut Roy off, and he blinked for a moment as he tried to recall what he’d been about to add to the list, before finally giving up on the lost cause. “Pardon?”

Edward, who had looked back down at the book he’d been reading, flipped a page casually. “Hedonism.”

“I could have sworn you said heroism.” A slight frown crept onto Roy’s face. Had he misheard? Or was the ghost really just yanking his chain?

Edward carefully kept from smiling. “I’m sure I didn’t.”
Roy’s mouth tugged to one side as he contemplated the ghost, “right. It’s not like you have any reason to think that too… like some other people. I’m not your hero.”

Edward’s eyes glanced over at Roy in the quickest of looks before turning back to his book.“Right.” He agreed, and turned another page while saying warmly, “not my hero.”

It was then Roy knew, somehow, that he hadn’t misheard Edward at all. But he ducked his head back to his paperwork both to work, and to hide his smile. Edward didn’t seem to want to admit to having said that, for whatever reason. So he got back to work, squashing the impulse to announce that he was the ‘Hero of the Trapped Ghost’.

Even if it did have a bit of a snazzy cultish ring to it.

After a few hours Fuery and Breda knocked and entered the office, which caught Edward’s attention immediately. He hadn’t yet properly gotten a feel for these two men. Or Falman. But he was hesitant to leave the office without Roy just to do some exploring and people watching.

“Yes?” Roy asked, raising his head from his paperwork.

“We were wondering if you were planning to eat in again today, or if you’re coming with us.” Breda replied, and beside him Fuery nodded.

Roy blinked. Come again? And his confusion must have shown on his face because Fuery quickly supplied: “for lunch, sir.”

Lunch… Roy looked at the clock on the wall with a quick jerk of his head, eyes widening as he saw what time it was. He hadn’t even noticed it was past noon, hadn’t even realized he might be hungry. But now that he was aware, he suddenly also became aware that the single slice of toast he’d eaten this morning had not stuck with him. “How time flies when you’re having fun.”

Edward, who had managed to get the book he’d been reading to the floor before Roy had called for them to enter, now floated through the air over to him. He knew Roy had only said that to hedge and give him time to say which he’d prefer. “I’d like to go out. I think I can handle it.”

Roy gave a nod that to anyone else, appeared as one of thoughtfulness. “As long as we don’t go anywhere open and noisy. I don’t have the energy to deal with that today.” He allowed, figuring that he’d do just a bit more to keep Edward at ease.

The ghost smiled at Roy’s consideration, and couldn’t find it in himself to feel affronted that Roy would assume he was incapable of handling lots of noise and a very large and milling lunch crowd. Because they both knew better. Right now, he wasn’t capable of that for long. And really, he felt too flattered that Roy was considering him so much for practically everything he did. He knew it couldn’t be easy to go from just looking after yourself, to looking out for someone else as well.

“We were planning to leave in ten, if that’s okay with you.” Breda said.

Edward studied the portly man with a small smile, and looked between him and Fuery with a semblance of amusement. Roy sure knew how to pick a mismatched looking team. Now that he thought about it, he couldn’t quite see any one similarity that linked them all aside from their commitment to Roy.

“That’s fine.” Roy agreed, and gave them a sharp nod. “I’d like to get this file looked through before then, though, so if that’s all…?”

The two men knew a dismissal when they heard one. “Yes, sir.”
Edward watched as they retreated, and only once the door closed did he look over at Roy, to meet the gaze Roy was now turning on him. “I like them. But seriously, you’ve the most mismatched looking team I’ve ever seen. And I’ve seen quite a few come through those doors.” He informed him, and sat up on the edge of Roy’s desk.

Roy grinned at that, and let out a soft laugh as he thought about it. “True… but I didn’t pick them to be matching pairs pulling my carriage to the top.” He shook his head. “No. Their uses are for their talents.”

“I’ve yet to really be around Falman, and when will the male Armstrong be here?” Edward asked with true curiosity. He wanted to see if the man was anything like his sister.

“By next week.” Roy twirled his pen idly between nimble fingers. “He has to finalize on his end, pack, and move.”

Edward slowly nodded, and thought about what he wanted to say next for several seconds before just going for it. “How much of your life are you rearranging for me?”

Roy studied him silently, his face betraying no expression before he finally responded. “Is this because of lunch?”

Edward nodded.

“To say that I’m rearranging very little would be a lie.” Roy said slowly, thinking about his words even as he was saying them. “But you’re no imposition to me.”

“But I also don’t want you to give up living your life for you. I’m dead already.” Edward frowned at him.

Roy merely smiled, “you’re a part of my life, Ed. I’m not giving up anything, unless I give up you.” And he studied Edward’s surprised expression for a moment, before adding, “I’m not giving up you.”

Edward slowly floated off the side of the desk to stand, watching Roy speechlessly as if he’d never quite seen the man before. “That was almost… sweet. Possessive, but sweet.”

Roy’s smile didn’t fade. “Come on, you, let’s go to lunch.” And he replaced his pen and stood up abruptly. He was adamant that they’d leave that conversation where it was.

Edward didn’t notice anything out of place, and so nodded with an eager smile. Even if he couldn’t eat, he still wanted to go and watch the interaction of a lunch between Roy and his personal team. And he floated after Roy feeling very cheerful as he eyed the coat rack, before following the man out the door.

Roy had held the door open extra long for Edward to pass through as well, on the pretense that he was glancing about his office for some purpose. But once the ghost was through he shut the door and turned to gather with his team. “Are we all ready then?”

Havoc was the first to turn with a grin as he stood up from a clearance sale grade office chair whose only novelty was tilting back to allow for his lazy posture. “Starved. Since when do you make us wait to go get food while you do paperwork?”

“Since he’s found someone else to jerk around for more than one date.” Riza met the brunt of Roy’s glare without so much as a twitch. “Even though he denies it.”
Edward frowned at that, “I thought you didn’t go for the same one more than once.”

Roy made a mental note to go back to that sometime today, if Edward didn’t pounce on him about it first. “I do deny it.” He stated quite calmly as he adjusted the collar on his uniform. “And with complete honesty. Now if you don’t mind, I’m rather hungry.”

“He has a point.” Breda grumbled, already heading for the door. “I’m starved. Can’t we discuss the Colonel once we at least have our appetizers?”

“You’re always hungry.” Fuery pointed out, following.

Roy was following as well, “who said I’m the topic for discussion?!”

Edward laughed and floated after the man. “Well I for one think you’re outvoted. Even if I didn’t want to let them discuss you, it’d be two against five.”

Roy glanced behind him to give the ghost a halfhearted glare, and turned back forward as said apparition only began to laugh more. Ghosts. They were absolutely no help at all in matters like this.

The walk to the café that had been selected for lunch had been a rather raucous one, full of inabilities to walk in a straight line, or not duck around each other for some purpose or another. It was rather like a kindergarten classroom still being trained to walk in an orderly fashion. Which, as a result, caused Edward to have to float up above them all to keep clear of their antics and the majority of their noise. Yet he wasn’t being bothered just yet, and as the walk was a short one, he was still quite at ease when they began entering the café.

Roy took the opportunity to act like a gentlemen and hold the door open for everyone, which included the tail of the line, Edward.

“Thanks.” Edward said gratefully, and ducked in, immediately shooting up to hover near the ceiling out of the way.

Roy merely smiled, and stepped in.

Inside Riza was already securing them a table, and as Roy looked around, he felt this place was perfect. The lighting was ambient, the color of the décor was warm, and the general atmosphere of the place was calm and in its own way, seductive. It was a place that beckoned you to come sit down to eat, and spend lots of money while you were at it just because of its comforting setting.

Edward floated above the group as they were led over to their table which was tucked away several tables from any other diners to allow for privacy while the amount of patrons allowed for it. As soon as everyone was sitting, Edward floated down to an empty chair in a table next to them.

Roy only glanced around once to take notice of his “surroundings”, and see that Edward was comfortably seated, before turning to his menu. “Apple strudel?”

“Not before you eat your lunch, you won’t.” Hawkeye chastised, her eyes not lifting from the list of beverages on the back of her menu. Something she found ridiculous. Beverages were the first thing you ordered, they should not be hidden on the back of the menu.

Edward, however, wasn’t deterred from giving his own answer. “Wrong again.”

Roy smiled at both answers, though mostly at Edward’s. Well, he had tried.

“So tell us about this person you claim doesn’t exist.” Havoc began, “if you’re not going to be
serious about screwing with them again, I’ll take ‘em off your hands.”

“I’ll never understand why you want his leftovers.” Falman sighed as he scanned the list of entrees.

Havoc snorted, “because he has good leftovers. Steals all the ones I want first, but unlike him, I don’t give up so easily.”

“Yet you give them up eventually anyway.” Riza piped up with a roll of her eyes.

“Even wine turns to vinegar, my dear Riza.” Roy said sagaciously, and as if sensing the foot aiming his way, moved his leg just in time to feel the wind rush by and flutter the hem of his pant leg.

Edward was contemplating borrowing the water pitcher circling around with one of the waitresses in order to dump it on Roy’s head. The man was absolutely anti-commitment. And he believed that during his entire time living with Roy until the man’s death, he’d never understand why Roy was such a manwhore. Nothing against himself, but did Roy really want to end up dying with only a ghost around to be there for it?

Havoc set his menu aside, having decided. “So who is she? He?”

Roy shrugged, “your guess is as good as mine, since such a person doesn’t exist. I’m going to a bar tonight, not a restaurant or the theater.”

Any further questioning was for now, halted, as the waitress came over to take their orders. At which point, in an effort to prove his point, when the waitress got at last to taking Roy’s order, he began with flashing his most charming smile.

“Oh no.” Edward groaned under his breath, trying to figure out a way to warn the woman. But unfortunately, she seemed already pulled into his gravity.

“This is going to sound like a really bad pick-up line,” Roy began, ignoring the snort he heard come from Edward’s direction and a muttered “it is”, “but I swear I know you from somewhere. Don’t tell me, you once worked at a bakery.”

The waitress blushed prettily under the attentions of the good-looking man in the high ranking uniform. Working in Central, you fast learned to identify badges and symbols on uniforms to see if the person was worth your time. “I’m afraid not.”

“Really?” Roy looked crestfallen, “I was so sure… sorry. It’s just, I was hoping you were her. I have to bake this birthday cake for the daughter of one of my friends. But I’ve no idea where to begin.”

“It’s called eggs and flour, dumbass.” Edward growled at him.

The waitress, sensing an in, jumped on it. “I could still help. I work here, after all.” She motioned around at the café. “I’d be glad to show you how to make the birthday cake.”

Roy smiled at her, the pure picture of relieved gratitude. “Do you think you could maybe bring a cake pan? I’m afraid I don’t cook that often and-”

“Of course.” She interrupted kindly. “As a matter of fact, I get off at eight tonight. Why don’t we meet up here and we can go straight to my place?”

“Maes is going to kill you when he finds out you’ve been mentioning his daughter to get dates.” Edward chimed in dryly.
Roy nodded agreeably. “I’ll be here.”

“As riveting as this is, we’ve only an hour for lunch.” Riza butted in, leveling one of her most dangerous looks at the waitress. “So can you do your job now, and flirt with him later?”

“I agree with her.” Edward sighed, slumping sideways against the back of his chair.

The waitress gave her a stiff smile. “I’ll place your orders right away, miss.”

“Lieutenant.” Riza corrected as the waitress turned on her heel to sashay back to the kitchen.

“Now that was just rude, ruining my fun.” Roy sighed at her, and yelped as he ducked the glass salt shaker.

“So, are you really going to meet her?” Breda asked, opening his fifth container of jelly from the little basket on the table and using his spoon to eat it just like that.

Roy smirked, “you’ll never know, will you.”

“We could always stalk you, sir.” Falman pointed out as he straightened from bending over towards the floor to retrieve the salt shaker which had landed about two feet to his side back behind Roy’s chair.

“Try it, and none of you will be able to sit down for a week. And not because of any fun stimulation.” Roy informed them blandly, making sure to raise one hand up for an inspection in order to show off his glove, before carding his fingers back through his hair.

It appeared to work, judging by the pale expressions on every face but Riza’s. She merely looked in need of a painkiller and a nap.

Edward was beginning to wonder what Maes would have said or done, had the man been here. But it appeared that once again, Maes was off doing whatever secretive tasks Roy had assigned him. He just hoped that wherever the man was, he was still safe. He believed that were he not a ghost, he’d have liked to befriend Maes, strange as the man could sometimes be.

The meals were brought by the waitress, who made sure not to make direct eye contact with Riza, before she left again with a smile towards Roy. He never saw, he was busy shaking what seemed to be the entire container of pepper all over his fries.

To everyone else but Edward, this was normal behavior, but for the ghost’s part, he was baffled. Who the hell needed that much pepper? Who could even tolerate it? “You’re insane.” He decided, and smiled when Roy had to pass off his laugh as a sneeze.

Something that worked well, considering what he’d just been drenching perfectly good fries in.

When it was time to select desserts, everyone but Edward thought Roy was having a side-effect from his over-consumption of pepper when the man started reading the list aloud. “Tiramisu?”

“No.” Edward smirked as he stared at the back of Roy’s head.

“Pumpkin cheesecake?”

“No.”

“Ice cream.”
“No.”

Roy nearly turned around at that point, to berate the ghost about what child didn’t like ice cream. But he restrained himself – barely. “Selection of in-season fruits with three sauces?”

“Are you seriously asking me that?” Edward deadpanned.

“Yes.” Roy replied, before he could stop himself.

“The fruit selection it is.” The waitress announced as she wrote it down, and collected their menus.

Roy handed his over feeling just a bit rattled. When had she shown back up to take their dessert orders? Shaking his head resolutely, Roy reached for his iced tea to give himself something to do besides ignore the looks he was getting from his team, and Edward’s little snickers.

“And my answer would have been no, by the way.” Edward told him once he got a hold of his amusement.

Roy could only drink more iced tea. At least, until the looks Riza was shooting him began to wear on his nerves. Setting his tea back down with a sharp ‘clunk’, he rounded on her. “What?” He asked in what probably qualified as overdramatic exasperation.

Riza smirked at him, “oh, nothing. Just wondering what all that was about. We can read too, you know.”

“Of course I know that. I interviewed you all before I allowed you on my team.” Roy quipped at her. “You can’t tell me you’ve never read a menu out loud before.”

“To the children I used to babysit.” Riza grinned at him, and quickly turned to engage Falman in conversation, lest she hazard Roy getting the tinder under him lit.

Roy grumbled to himself, and took to glowering at his iced tea.

Edward grinned, and floated over to him then to sit up in front of him in the place the plates would normally be. But as it was, it was clear right now as they waited for their desserts. And he fit if he pulled his legs up to his chest. “Don’t take it too hard. I for one appreciate it that you try not to leave me out of anything.”

Roy looked up from his iced tea which was now resting in the incorporeal left buttock of the ghost, to the silver eyes watching him so warmly. Unable to say anything in response, he could only return the gaze before lowering his eyes again. Though he did wish Edward would get his ass off of his iced tea. Even if the ghost hadn’t had issues with people passing through him, he had issues with reaching left buttocks.

But when Edward didn’t get up from the table, and he could still feel the ghost watching him, he stood up. “Excuse me… don’t eat my melon balls when they come with their sauces.” And with that questionable sounding statement being said, he gave Edward the briefest jerk of the head before turning to go find the restrooms.

The ghost was still snickering as they entered the bathroom. And he waited as Roy ducked to look under the stall doors to be sure they were alone, before he locked them inside. Neither would appreciate someone walking in on Roy supposedly talking to himself.

“You,” Roy pointed at the ghost, “stop sitting on my iced tea.”
Edward grinned at him, far from feeling abashed. “I’ll see what I can do. So what was with all the pepper?” He asked, floating over to sit on the counter by the sinks and swing his legs back and forth.

Roy followed him, gripping the underside of the counter with his fingers and leaning forward on the heels of his hands. “I just like pepper.” He shrugged, staring into the mirror. “How are you doing? Is that why you came and sat where you did?”

Edward cocked his head to one side as he watched the man. “So no matter how I’m doing I can do that?” But at Roy’s glower, he smiled and quickly amended his answer. “I’m actually doing really well. Not feeling edgy yet.”

“So…”?

“Do I need a reason to come sit with you?” Edward asked without a hint as to how he felt about the question one way or the other.

Roy quirked a wry smile, and closed his eyes as he shook his head at the ghost. “No, you never do. I just wanted to make sure you were okay, I guess.”

Edward turned to look in the mirror, seeing his near-translucent self look back at him. He hadn’t really taken a good look in a mirror for years. “I’m so much older looking than I remember.” He muttered, raising a hand back to brush at the glass, allowing his fingers to actually make contact.

“You’re eighteen now.” Roy replied, remembering the only time Edward had ever mentioned looking into a mirror. But had it really been so long between times?

Edward looked at Roy’s reflection in the glass, the dark eyes watching him via it. “I prefer being seven… if we go by my deathday years.”

Surprising himself by actually giving a short laugh, Roy smiled at him. “And we’ll celebrate your eighth one together.”

Edward blinked at that, and turned away from Roy’s reflection to the man himself. “Yes…”

“But you do look eighteen.” Roy winked at him, and drew away from the counter. “We should get back out there. I’d hate for them to have eaten my balls by now.”

Edward tried not to look amused as Roy laughed at his own crudeness. “Yes, whatever would become of you without those?” He asked in an airy tone, and followed the man out of the restroom.

“Apocalyptic chaos.” Roy muttered in return, before he strode out into the open.

As it turned out, Roy’s melon balls had been left alone as he’d asked. And after the check had been settled, Riza dragged the men all out with a variety of warning glances. The waitress was left looking after Roy.

Once they’d all made it back to the office, Roy left the others to resume their work out in the front office, while he went back to his. This time, he opened the door while meeting Edward’s somewhat uncertain gaze. “It’s okay.” He whispered quietly.

Edward worried his bottom lip a few more seconds, before nodding and drawing a deep breath to step through the doorway. When he heard the door close behind him, he turned back to see Roy smiling at him. “Sorry. Might take me a few more times.”

Roy shook his head, loosening the collar of his uniform as he began to make for his desk. “It’s okay,
I understand. I really do. You were imprisoned here for seven years. It’s only natural that it could take more than one or two tries of going back in to what held you captive.”

“That’s the truth.” Edward sighed and settled onto a cleared section of Roy’s desk, much as he’d done at the café.

Roy, who’d already resumed his chair, tilted it back so he could meet Edward’s eyes without getting a crick in his neck. “Is there any way for me to make it easier? Do you want to stay after hours today and we can practice going in and out?”

Edward actually cracked a smile at that, though he had an impulse to whack Roy upside the head. “Just being here for me until I no longer fear it is enough. I doubt I’ll be able to come in here on my own, without you either in the room already or at the door, anytime soon. I certainly don’t think I could come in here without you anywhere in sight.”

That Roy could understand as well. He believed he’d have the same sentiments. “We’ll keep working on it then. We have all the time in the world… sort of.” He grinned.

Edward grinned back, and then the grin faded to a look of confusion. “So what was that about you going on more than one date with the same person? I thought you said you only did one night stands.”

“I do.” Roy had seized a pen, and was now twirling it idly between his fingers. “But the manner in how fast I actually bed them can vary. Lately I’ve not been in the mood for extended foreplay over more than one evening. But if I was, then maybe a dinner date, or a theater date, promises made and kept for another date. At which point I may or may not extend the foreplay. Sometimes the buildup of kissing and groping can be fun too.”

Edward shook his head morosely. “You really do have this down to more of a science than I first thought.”

“Naturally.” Roy smirked, “I have to space out the selection. There are only so many people in the country, only so many virgins. I have to make the supply last.”

“And do I want to know what you do when you can’t find them?” Edward asked with reasonable wariness.

Roy decided to take some pity and sugarcoat the details. “Let’s just put it this way, when those times happen, heed my warning of not entering my bedroom until I say otherwise.”

Edward gulped, “I’ll remember.”

There were definitely things that Roy got up to that he definitely did not want to see. He was quite happy, thank you very much, at not having to be privy to such things anymore. Not that he was a prude. But there were just some morals he still had.

Roy flashed him a smile, and turned back to his pile of paperwork. “Off you go if you want me to finish this in time for chess.” And he was still smiling as the ghost left to amuse himself with books. It seemed that their nightly chess games were motivation still for them both in their own unique ways.

Like clockwork, Roy finished his paperwork an hour and a half early, and toted it out to Riza to do with as she expediently would. While he was gone he knew Edward was setting up the chess set. He wasn’t disappointed when he walked back in away from the perplexed and amazed stares of his staff to shut the office door behind him and find the board only a few pieces away from being set.
Edward smiled over at Roy as the man resumed his chair, and lifted his legs up under him so he was no longer standing, and instead hovering in a sitting position. “You can always tell them it’s because you have chess games with a ghost before work lets out.”

Roy rolled his eyes. “I don’t like being committed in relationships, or in mental institutions. Maes might believe me… but I still say I doubt I’ll ever risk it.”

Edward chuckled softly, and watched as Roy moved a white pawn forward only one space. “Is Maes back yet?”

“No.” Roy shrugged, and glanced over his shoulder towards the windows. “I doubted he would have been. He’s probably staking out or collecting information on Grand. We need to find that laboratory. No, Maes usually will leave straight for home from where he is once the work day is over. Unless it’s urgent, then he’ll come find me.”

“Does he know you’re going to be with that airhead waitress who was making googly eyes at you?” Edward asked sweetly, moving a black pawn forward.

Roy smirked back at Edward, and moved another pawn. “He’d figure it out and wait on my doorstep.” Trying not to recall the image of Edward sitting there on the doorstep himself. Glowing, and looking up at the sky, waiting for him.

“Are you going to see her tonight?”

“Probably. I’ll get a free cake out of it too. Might as well, nothing is wrong with a free cake.” Roy chuckled to himself, until he caught Edward’s look and coughed self-consciously. “Yes, I’m planning to see her.”

Edward nudged another pawn forward. “So what are we going to do until she gets off work?”

Roy studied Edward’s move cryptically. “I was thinking about taking a walk around town. Cover as much ground as we can before I go meet her. Do you want me to drop you off at home before I do that so you don’t have to find your way back on your own?”

Edward shook his head just a bit. “If you’re getting drunk again, you’re going to need me to carry that cake. Otherwise it’s going to end up on the pavement with your face in it.”

“And if someone sees a cake floating around on its own?” Roy pointed out, though he was smiling.

“Do you seriously think that at that ungodly hour, they won’t think they hallucinated?” Edward countered.

“Ah,” Roy articulated intelligently. “Good point.”

Edward nodded absentely, “of course it is.”

But Roy had already found another potential problem. “Are you sure you want to wait outside wherever she lives for me?”

“It’s not like anyone can see me and call someone to arrest me for loitering.” Edward shrugged. “Don’t worry about me. I’d rather make sure you get home okay, and don’t suffocate in a cake.”

Roy slowly nodded, accepting that Edward would be fine. And if he was being entirely honest with himself, he’d be glad for the company on the way home. Even if at this moment he was fighting back the first twinges of guilt at having Edward waiting for him outside somewhere while he got laid.
What was it about the ghost that could make him feel guilty about so many damn things that should be insignificant?

Edward hadn’t seemed to notice the distracted silence. “So, shall we go back to a uniform question game?”

“Like whether or not I think they make me look fat?” Roy blinked at him, not quite coherent after frolicking through his guilt conscience.

The ghost gave him an utterly deadpan look. “Not that ‘uniform’, you idiot.”

Roy gave an “ah!” of sudden comprehension, and flushed just a bit. “Right, sorry. Sure.”

“Are you flustered right now?” Edward asked coyly.

“Is that your question?” Roy replied with a saccharine smile.

Edward smirked at him, “it is.”

Roy chuckled, his smile turning more easy and natural. “Just a bit, yes.” He replied honestly. “Or, I was. I just got caught up thinking about something.”

Edward’s arching silvery eyebrow was all the response he got.

“Not your turn for a question, even a nonverbal one.” Roy chastised him. “So, since tomorrow I’ll be spending entirely with you—” he got that perverse pleasure at seeing Edward’s face light up, “—I was wondering if you’d like to go shopping for a bike with me after work.”

“Yes!” Edward agreed instantaneously. “I have to learn how to ride a bike so I can ride your motorcycle.”

Roy groaned halfheartedly. “Motorcycles are a bit different from bikes.”

“Will you teach me though?” Edward asked, and before Roy could ask in return, “yes, that is my question.”

Roy smiled, “I’ll teach you once you’ve mastered riding a bike. I’ll take you out with me on it a few times here soon enough. Once you’re getting good with the bike.”

Edward’s grin was positively wicked. “How fortunate I don’t need to sleep.” And hearing Roy’s answering groan only made him grin wider.

By the time they finished up two games, the scores were even. But in total, neither could manage to recall who had the largest amount of wins over the other. Even so, they were satisfied with the result. And so Edward packed it away while Roy went to go bid his goodbyes to those of his personal team who still lingered. Once everything was in order in Roy’s office, and the team was all gone, the two of them made their getaway.

“So, where are we going to walk first?” Edward asked as they started down an empty hallway.

Roy smiled over at him, rather like a cat who’d gotten into the cream. “I’m taking you on a tour of Headquarters. So far you barely know a quarter of the building. And personally, I think you should see as much of the place as you can.” He didn’t voice the ‘just in case’ that was hanging on the end of that.

Should at any point he step out of the office, he wanted Edward to be able to find him again if he
were called away anywhere by someone just running in to carry the message that he was needed elsewhere. Mostly to keep the ghost from panicking if he were unable to find him, but also as a precaution. For what, he wasn’t sure. But it seemed necessary that Edward be shown everything Roy could get into to show him.

Edward slowly nodded as he thought their destination over, and then turned to Roy suddenly. “Make sure you show me Grand’s office.”

Roy was agreeable to that, and so they started off on their tour together. Being sure that they waited until offices were empty before entering them to have a quick peek so that Edward would be able to enter at will on his own should he choose to later. And each visit brought them closer to Grand’s office.
Chapter 14

To be fair, Roy wasn’t entirely sure what he was expecting when they finally made it to Grand’s office. He’d opened the door to the room, and entered first to be sure that Edward could do the same. But he truly wasn’t sure why the ghost had wanted to come here. Possible pranks, perhaps. But Edward was multifaceted, he couldn’t be sure if the ghost had an ulterior motive beyond pranks. All he could do was ask, so he did.

“What’s on your mind, Ed?”

Edward gave Roy a guardedly hopeful look. “Don’t suppose I could talk you into arson?”

Roy surprised himself by actually smiling. “I once promised myself I’d only take such orders from then on from no one but me. Sorry.”

“Can’t be helped.” Edward smiled back. “Don’t worry, I’d be astounded if you actually did. Just because it’d only be lacking your signature burned into the floor. I want you to stay out of danger.”

“So why are we here for longer than a peek inside for your benefit?” He asked. And it was true, every other room they’d only looked to make sure any whiteness retreated, and then moved on. Never once staying as long as they lingered here now.

Edward looked around, clearly looking for something specific. “I guess it was too much to hope that he’d just have a map lying about with a big ‘X’ marking the spot of that laboratory.” He muttered even as he continued to float about the room searching for anything that might help.

If Roy could use such information to destroy Grand, he wasn’t going to sit idly by. Not when he potentially could help Roy. So what if Roy also wrangled a promotion out of the deal? He just wanted Grand gone. The man was a threat, he was evil, and he didn’t want him anywhere near Roy.

“With him? Such information, if it is available in some tangible form,” Roy frowned as he glanced about the room, “wouldn’t be here. Most likely at his house.”

Edward arched an enquiring eyebrow. “So no to arson, but how do you feel about breaking and entering?”

Roy put his hands on his hips. “Are you trying to turn me into a criminal?” But his tone was more teasing than accusatory. “It’s something that I know how to do, but I won’t even for this.” And he held up a hand to forestall Edward’s reaction, whatever it would have been. “If I’m going to do this, I’m going to do it right.”

“And having Maes spy on him is right?” Edward reminded him, not at all understanding Roy’s reasoning.

“This is the Military.” Roy explained as he walked over to Grand’s desk, so nice and neatly arranged, almost obsessively so. “Spying is more commonplace than you think. It’s his fault if he and his staff are too arrogant to watch out for such things.”

“So people might try to spy on you?”

Roy nodded absently, “they do. But the difference is that their efforts are always wasted. I do not
joke when I say that at least half of the missing in action list belongs to either me, or one of the others. Though I think Maes is starting to catch up to me.”

Edward suddenly found himself liking Maes even more, as well as the others. “Is it because of your reputation?”

“I’m dangerous, they know this.” Roy flicked through a few papers in Grand’s inbox basket. “I’m also quite young to have moved up the ranks as quickly as I have. And that alone gives them reason to want to keep an eye on me.”

“You’re only twenty seven.” Edward recalled, not seeing how that was too young. “Anything I’ve ever heard about you says you started young anyway, as soon as you could.”

Roy’s smile was more of a grimace. “Reminding me how old I am?”

“You’re not old!” Edward interjected with an exasperated expression.

“Twenty seven is young to be where I am. Despite everything.” Roy continued as if he hadn’t heard. “But I’ve earned it. And that’s what scares people, even beyond the fact that I could incinerate them within seconds with only a snap of my fingers.”

“Can’t you just incinerate Grand and be done with it? You’d leave no evidence if you turned him into ash.” Edward asked, eager as ever to be rid of that man. “Instead of playing this spying game?”

“The spying game is necessary if I want ammunition to slide into his position as a general.” Roy shook his head. “So no, I can’t. Even if it would be nice. Maybe afterwards I’ll turn him into ash as a gift for you.” His eyes looked darkly towards the floor. “I sure wouldn’t lose any sleep over killing him.”

No, Basque Grand would never be someone he’d regret dispatching. There were just some people in life he would never mind turning into a pile of ash. And who knew, timed properly, it might be an ironically perfect deathday gift for the ghost.

Edward wasn’t sure how he felt about it being a gift. He wasn’t sure he was that morbid. But it was an interesting thought to ponder. “Who do you lose sleep over?”

Roy turned his head away, black eyes glinting with something dark. How could he even begin to admit to Edward the two deaths he regretted more than any others? The ones that had nearly destroyed him through his contemplation of suicide, and made him take that vow with himself that he’d do whatever he could to not be in that situation again. Knowing what he knew now about Edward’s only friend back in Risembool… how could he be honest with the ghost and not lose him? “Just two innocent people who had no reason to die.” He said quietly, “they were the ones that gave me reason to have the goal I’ve now.”

“The people that made you, you.” Edward said mostly to himself, and faintly smiled as he watched Roy’s dejected looking figure. “Listen, Roy, for what it’s worth, death isn’t so bad. And for me, I went through the most painful death anyone could ever go through. Just remember, you’re doing the right thing now. And no one could blame you for that.”

Roy finally looked back at the ghost, though he knew he’d be met with that piercing silver gaze that Edward seemed to have at times like these. The one that made him fear the ghost could see straight to his soul. Yet he didn’t flinch away. “What is it like to die?”

Edward’s faint smile didn’t waver, but his gaze gentled somewhat. “It did hurt, yes. But when the pain ended, and before I woke up in the office…” he gave a barely audible laugh, “it was nothing
but the greatest feeling of serenity I’d ever known.”

Roy wasn’t sure what this was he was feeling. Was it relief? Was it sadness? He only knew that something inside him felt different from before just hearing that. “That’s...”

“Not so bad.” Edward supplied, knowing that right now Roy probably felt that anything he said would sound grossly inadequate and insincere. But said by someone who was already dead? “No. No, it isn’t so bad.”

Roy found himself attempting something of a smile back at the ghost. “I’m sorry I was too late to save you. I should have decided to leave sooner for Risembool. Instead you were dead before I would have gone.”

Edward blinked, completely caught off guard by the apology. An apology he didn’t need, nor want. He’d been trying to find his father, not Roy. If anything, it should be his father apologizing. Not this man who had freed him. “My death was not your fault.” He replied at last. “Even if you had come when I was alive, I would have gone through with it anyway. Don’t feel as if you’re to blame for any part of my death. You’re not.”

Roy slowly nodded, wanting and knowing he should believe the ghost. “I would have liked to have met you before you died then. If I could go back, knowing we’d still have this in the future.”

“Whatever for?” Edward frowned slightly, not seeing the appeal. “I was just a kid. Sure, I was a great alchemist even at that age, you said so yourself. But still.”

Roy smiled, and looked the ghost over thoughtfully. “I’d have liked to see you as you used to look. Not all silver.”

Edward rolled his eyes, “like any child. Sweaty and dirty, wanting kittens and crap.”

Roy snorted, “I mean things like what color your hair was. Or your eyes were.” He said, studying Edward closely, trying to picture what would have suited him the best.

Edward kept his feelings about that carefully concealed, and let only a wry smile slip through. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“Yes, you’ve said that before.” Roy reminded him.

“Because it’s true.” Edward sighed, and turned away to find Grand’s chair. “Now be useful and transmute me a wrench.”

Roy didn’t question, he had a good idea now with the way Edward had floated down to sit on the floor and was peering under the chair what the ghost was plotting. And so he grabbed a piece of paper, the stapler, and began while asking, “at least eye color? Your eyes are pretty now, but I’m curious.”

Edward looked over his shoulder incredulously. “My eyes are not pretty.” He growled, and glared as Roy laughed. “They were pretty before I died.” He muttered softly, and turned back away from Roy as a flash of light lit the room.

Roy passed the wrench down to the ghost. “Here, have fun. Though after you’re done with that, there’s that shelf up there.” He pointed up to the wall behind Grand’s desk where a shelf held various medals and picture frames of the man’s family. “Think you can rig it to be unstable enough to collapse when he hits the floor?”
Edward glanced up, “I’ll see what I can do. Obviously there’s no way to test it beforehand.” And he began loosening the screws on Grand’s office chair whilst humming a cheerful tune.

No, he wouldn’t ever tell Roy what color his hair used to be. Or even his eyes. Especially his eyes. His gaze darkened some as he worked on the screws. Roy had once told him he loved the sun because of its color. That iridescent gold color. The same color his eyes had been. And while his hair had been a few shades lighter, it had still been a golden blond.

He wasn’t sure why he wanted keep that from Roy, but he did even so.

Roy meanwhile was sitting on the edge of Grand’s desk watching Edward’s steady progress. Yes, the ghost had clearly done this before on other chairs. But as he watched, his only thoughts were of gratitude. Edward had quite effectively steered him, while making him feel good, away from that more dark topic of death. When normally he’d have gone and drowned himself in a bottle, Edward had guided him back to something more lighthearted without even seeming to make an effort.

“Done!” Edward announced with delight, and chucked the wrench back up behind him to where he knew Roy sat.

Roy jerked into action to scramble and catch the tool before it fell. And he turned it back into what it used to be as Edward floated up off the floor. “He’s going to be having another bad day, clearly.”

Edward crossed his arms as he rotated and floated up towards the shelf to be on eye level with it. “He deserves them.”

“Well hurry up with the shelf if you think anything can be done with it.” Roy said, checking the clock on the wall. “We should finish our little tour as much as we can before the janitors show up. And we can probably take a short tour of what’s surrounding Headquarters before I go pick that woman up for cake baking.”

Edward snorted mirthlessly. “Do you even know her name?”

“Nope.” Roy replied unconcernedly.

“And you’re going to pick her up in your uniform?” Edward asked as he inspected the braces holding up the shelf.

Roy smirked, leaning back against the desk with a casual flip of his head to make his hair ruffle. “Of course. She clearly enjoyed looking at it. A lot of people have a uniform kink, even if this uniform does look horrid.”

“At least you are aware of that.” Edward grumbled, and began to mess with the braces.

“Why, Ed,” Roy began in a teasing tone, “are you saying that I look better in other clothes?”

Edward sent him a sideways glare, as if daring him to try flirting. “I’m not totally fashion inept just because I’m dead and stuck in clothes from seven years ago that I wore as a child.”

“Of course not.” Roy placated. “But for curiosities sake, what do you think I look the best in?”

“Nothing.” Edward deadpanned.

Roy stumbled where he was leaning back against the desk, nearly falling onto his ass and avoiding braining himself in the process. “What?!”
Edward snickered, quite pleased with the reaction he’d gotten. And he smirked at Roy coyly. “Don’t tell me that’s how you react when one of your prey victims tells you you’d look better naked. It’s amazing you get any at all.”

Roy glowered at him, and straightened away from the desk to go slump against the wall beside the ghost. “You’re not a prey victim though.” And he wasn’t too sure he liked the taste of the words prey and victim together.

“That’s right.” Edward praised with a grin, ignoring the look he could feel Roy leveling at him.

“So, do you really think I look better naked?” Roy asked curiously, crossing his arms over his chest.

Edward cracked a smile. “I’ve no desire to see you naked to judge. Now be helpful and tug at the brace on your end until it’s about a quarter inch out. This thing is only secured by dowels. It’ll come down easily enough when he crashes to the floor as long as we tug it out enough.”

So together they worked on loosening the braces with their bolted dowels far enough out of the wall so that the shelf rested precariously. And once Grand crashed to the floor, it would rest not against the wall, but if Edward’s hope was correct, on the man himself.

“I can only hope I catch him with his hands dirty regarding that laboratory before you turn him into a vegetable or kill him with these stunts of yours.” Roy muttered as they left the man’s office.

“Work harder and faster then.” Was all Edward had to say on the matter. He wasn’t about to take his sweet time with anything.

They toured what of Headquarters that they could still fit in before they needed to leave, lest they risk being spotted by the janitors. Or rather, lest Roy risk being spotted by the janitors. Neither of them wanted to give anyone room to ask questions about why he’d been there late and wandering around the night before General Grand’s next mishap.

After they’d gotten free of Headquarters they wandered about the outside wall, taking short detours here and there to introduce Edward to even more of the city. Even if it was a silent affair due to the fact that they were never the only ones on whichever streets they took. So they walked, or floated, around together silently until it was time for Roy to report for his manwhoring and cake baking duties.

“Just try not to find her tonsils with your tongue until you two are inside her place?” Edward requested as they rounded the last corner to the café.

“And we have a cake baked.” Roy muttered in a brief absence of people being close enough. “Don’t worry.”

“I don’t care so much about the cake.” Edward grumbled, and followed along almost as if he were sulking. He wasn’t too pleased about Roy doing this. But when was he ever?

They reached the café promptly at eight. And the waitress whom Roy was about to screw over for cake and sex, was only minutes behind them. When she appeared with a bounce in her step and a beaming smile on her face, Edward could only scowl.

Roy could only smile back at her and say, “are you sure it’s still fine for me to come over?”

“Absolutely.” She agreed immediately, and took the liberty of linking her arm with one of his as she sidled up to him with a few bats of her lashes. “Your best friend’s daughter is going to have a very good cake, never you worry.”
“Thank you,” Roy took a quick glance towards her shirt, which to anyone else made it appear as if he were checking out her chest, “Nick.”

Edward snorted not at the name, but at the look on Roy’s face when he’d said the name. It had been just a flash, but the bewilderment had been there.

“Oh, call me Nicky.” She insisted, “I only ask to be called Nick at the café. It sounds more mature.”

“How insightful of her.” Edward rolled his eyes.

“Nicky.” Roy repeated with an easy smile. “Shall we go?”

And go they did, with Edward picking up the back and trailing behind them with a look of disgruntled mockery on his face as he listened to them flirt back and forth about the stupidest things. Honestly, Roy was terrible at flirting. It was clearly just his personality and good looks that got him all these dates. And about the time Nicky announced they were nearing her house, Edward darted around to face Roy while floating backwards.

“Don’t let the cake burn. And I can’t believe you’re actually serious about going through this.” He jerked his head towards Nicky. “She’s vapid.”

Roy couldn’t help but think, “and you’re a brat”, to himself as he merely rolled his eyes at the ghost. So he turned his attention back to Nicky to answer the question she’d just asked. “Yes. Being the Flame Alchemist does give me a lot of power. I’m a State Alchemist, plus a Colonel.”

“Perhaps after we bake the cake,” Nicky hinted slyly as she gave him a light nudge with her shoulder, “you can show me a different sort of power?”

“Well,” Roy appeared as if he was considering it, “I am certainly capable of lighting a different fire. But few can handle the intensity.”

Edward was sure that if he had saliva, he’d have choked on his own spit.

“I’ll bring the oven mitts then.” Nicky winked up at him.

Forget the choking, Edward just wanted to hurl all over her noisy, perfectly polished heels.

Meanwhile Roy was reflecting on all the possible uses for leftover cake icing. Which was far too interesting a topic for him to notice that if Edward weren’t silver, he’d be green.

When they finally reached Nicky’s quaint little house, Edward tried not to feel annoyed when Roy followed the woman inside without a second glance towards him. He had no reason to feel annoyed, right? He’d chosen to follow and wait. And so wait he would.

But even so the ghost sat down rather moodily on the grass outside.

Inside, the cake baking was about to commence.

“I was thinking two layers?” Nicky suggested as she roamed about her kitchen gathering ingredients.

“For a little girl?” Roy grinned, “definitely.” Okay, so the cake was for him, he could live with two layers. It was just more to eat. Not a bad thing when it came to cake.

It was between mixing the flour with the other dry ingredients, and the greasing of the pans, that Roy noticed where the kitchen windows faced.
The front yard.

And there, out in that yard, was the one thing that made him pause in what he was supposed to be stirring. Edward was sitting out in the grass, plucking at the blades and tossing them aside absently. Not quite professional lawn care, but that wasn’t what mattered to Roy just then as he felt that flash of guilt return anew.

“Roy, everything okay?” Nicky asked from where she was creaming butter and sugar together.

Roy jerked back to himself, and smiled over at her. “Yes. Thought I saw something.”

“Probably the neighbor’s cat.” Nicky smiled back.

“Must have been.” Roy agreed, and purposefully ducked his head to his task so he wouldn’t watch the silvery and softly glowing ghost that was waiting for him. Now was not the time to be thinking about Edward.

When the batter was finally complete, and the cake in the oven, Roy helped Nicky prepare a quick dinner for them. Being sure to sneak in lingering touches here and there while making sure that she was drinking plenty of wine. Though the wine wasn’t difficult to get in her. Which didn’t surprise him. He’d smirked for a reason when she’d pulled out the bottle. It was a bottle and vintage label he’d know anywhere. And he knew it would get her smashed drunk.

“Bet she never expected that I’d use the quality of the wine to further nefarious activities.” Roy muttered, and fondly poured himself another glass as Nicky tottered about the kitchen with a plate of ravioli that was supposed to be bound for the table.

Finally Roy went to lend her chivalrous assistance.

Nicky sank into her seat with a tipsy giggle, and swiped the bottle of wine out of Roy’s hands. “Now this,” she whispered conspiratorially at him, “this is good stuff. Are you trying to get me drunk?”

Roy thought she was doing a fine job of that herself. But his original intention had been to get her at least free of inhibitions. Not drunk. “It is good stuff.” He agreed easily, taking a sip of what was in his glass.

“Never had a bad bottle.” Nicky nodded sagely, an effect that was ruined by her overall increasingly drunk appearance.

Roy would have been surprised if there was. For a reason that made him surprised that his mother wasn’t an alcoholic. But he wasn’t about to go around talking about that. It seemed to him that his flings would be turned on more by the thought of Roy Mustang the Flame Alchemist, than Roy Mustang the successor to a wine vineyard. Even if it was one of the most lucrative ones. Besides, the fewer people who even thought about his mother the better.

“Then all the more reason to keep buying.” He said, smirking inwardly at the thought that his mother owed him some sort of royalties for this. He’d collect when he next visited. “But enough of the wine,” he appealed, sliding one hand over to cover hers, “I’m far more interested in you.”

Which was true, he’d been around this wine his entire life. He knew everything about it. Not that he wanted to know everything about Nicky… but she was none the wiser. All he had to do was act interested until the cake was done baking and was frosted.

Good thing he had a decent bottle of wine.
Meanwhile outside, Edward continued to sit and pluck at the blades of grass. He knew he was in for a long wait, so it only made sense that therefore Nicky would get a rather large bald patch on her lawn. He had nothing else to do. So he continued to systematically destroy blade by blade of grass, the lawn, while he stared up at the cloudless night.

He found the color of the stars and moon a bit ironic, now that he thought about it. And that was enough to keep him occupied as the hours wore on.

Around midnight, Roy had slipped out of bed and back into his clothes. He didn’t even have to worry about waking Nicky up, she was completely out of it thanks to the copious amounts of wine in her system as well as the physical exertions she’d just participated in. He expected that even a bomb going off outside her house wouldn’t wake her.

So he took his sweet time in getting dressed, and then trotted on down to the kitchen to lay possession to his cake. It was a marvelous creation. A two tiered chocolate cake iced in a cream cheese frosting. It looked like decadence to him, he’d be happily eating this one.

Picking it up off the counter he balanced it in his hands as he made his way to the door, somehow got it open without dropping the cake, and got out of the house.

“Ed?”

The ghost jerked out of his reverie and grass plucking as he heard his name called. And he blinked in surprise as he looked over to see Roy there. “Bit early for you to be retiring, isn’t it?” He asked as he floated up off the grass and quickly over to the man.

Roy rolled his eyes, “she got her hands on a bottle of the wine my mother makes. One from a very good year, so she’s completely out of it.”

“And you?” Edward asked as he reached out for the cake, casting it an appraising look. “I could make a better cake in my sleep.” He remarked blandly.

“Well, we’re not all pâtissier geniuses.” Roy reminded him as he handed the cake over gratefully. “And I didn’t drink as much as she did. But even so, I’d rather you carry the cake.”

Edward shared the sentiment. “People who are drunk never think they are. And your eyes tell me you are.”

Roy smiled at him, “then good thing you’re here.”

Edward rolled his eyes, but returned the smile. “Come on, Roy. Let’s get your drunk ass home and in the shower. Then it’s to bed for you.”

Roy obediently started off after the ghost who was dutifully carrying the cake. He could sympathize with Edward not wanting him to trip and fall in it and suffocate. It wasn’t exactly a glorious way to die. “As long as I get a piece of that cake.”

Edward glanced over his shoulder with a smirk. “We’ll see. Now hurry it up or we’ll never get home. Stop sauntering and start walking.”

Roy just grinned and trotted up a few paces to fall in with the ghost. “It’s not exactly fair that you’re floating and I’m rather intoxicated.”

“Even if I were walking I’d still be leaving you in my dust.” Edward retorted, but slowed down just a fraction. “I think you owe Elysia a piece of this cake. And Maes, so he doesn’t flip out on you for
using his daughter as a bargaining chip for picking up your toys.”

“At least I didn’t actually have her with me.” Roy hid a yawn behind one hand. “I’m not that type of guy.”

Edward snorted, “if that was supposed to make me see you as less of a manwhore, it isn’t working.”

Roy laughed just a bit. “I’m just pointing out that I could be more of a manwhore. Not that I’m agreeing I’m a manwhore.”

“Healthy sexual appetite.” Edward drawled mockingly. “Yeah, I know.”

Roy glanced down at the cake Edward was bearing. “Healthy sweets appetite too.” And he lifted his gaze to Edward’s face. “So… you can bake a cake better than this?”

Edward glanced down at the simple creation. “Yep.” He decided nonchalantly. “Or I could try. I told you I used to help with the cooking. And my mom sometimes did fancier things. It wasn’t always the simple cooking you’d expect from a rural home.”

“Well if the hot chocolate you make is anything to judge by…” Roy trailed off thoughtfully. “Want to show me?”

“Show you what?” Edward asked instead. “How to make hot chocolate?”

Roy wouldn’t actually mind that, but, “no. Cakes. I’ll help you.”

Edward gave him a startled look. “Why? You just made a cake, idiot. You eat too many, especially any of the cake I would make, and you’ll be needing to do pushups to keep your figure. It’s not like I can help eat them.”

“Because I’m curious.” Roy said, as if that explained everything. “And I know how to share food with others. Not including Hazel.”

Edward stared at Roy, assessing him, for several seconds before sighing. “Curious huh? I suppose it wouldn’t hurt anything but all the muscle. And fewer dates wouldn’t hurt you.”

“Hey!” Roy scowled.

“Fine, I’ll bake a cake with you.” Edward gave in, but gave Roy a narrow-eyed look. “But don’t think this puts me in the same category as that waitress! And don’t expect me to tutor you properly on everything they fail at thanks to your atrocious lines.” And he adopted a mocking tone as he mimicked, “don’t tell me, you once worked at a bakery,” before bursting out laughing.

Roy glared at the ghost, “for your information, it worked. Why try hard when you don’t have to make the effort?”

Edward merely rolled his eyes in minor exasperation.

“And it’s not about being taught how to bake a cake. If this cake tastes like crap, it’s because she was thinking of me and not the recipe. So it had better taste awful. And in such case, I want to help you make a proper cake so I can still have some.”

“And if it doesn’t taste like crap?” Edward asked with a bit of a smirk.

“Then I get two cakes, and I’m not complaining.” Roy shrugged. “My pride is not so easily wounded when I can chalk it up to women being multitaskers.”
So it was just excuses then? Edward shook his head. “You’re terrible. And since when would it be her fault the cake tasted bad? Didn’t you help? Wouldn’t you have been distracted by your unsavory ulterior motives?”

“I fought in a war, I can handle multiple things.” Roy explained, looking down at the sidewalk as he recalled the only thing he’d been distracted by that night.

“Good!” Edward chirped cheerfully, startling the man beside him. “Then you’ll be quite helpful with this cake I have planned. But I think we’ll need to go to the market again. I doubt you have fresh cranberries lying about.”

Roy blinked, “no. Can’t say that I do.” Well, the market it was then. “We’ll turn one of these evenings into a shopping excursion for your bike and cranberries.”

The two finally reached Roy’s home without any incidents beyond Roy tripping over a curb, which caused Edward to laugh at him for another half a block. Once they were inside Edward left for the kitchen to put the cake away while Roy headed upstairs for a shower.

And Edward floated about three feet from the ground, legs pulled up as if he were sitting, and he was staring at the cake sitting there innocently on the kitchen counter. Putting an elbow on his thigh he cradled his chin against the heel of his hand as he frowned at it. It seemed like a harmless cake, and not at all deserving of his displeasure at its presence. Yet he’d dutifully brought it home. Even if having it here now made him want to sweep the confection onto the floor and blame an earthquake that had occurred just in one part of the kitchen. Roy was drunk, he’d believe that, wouldn’t he?

“Just a stupid cake.” Edward sighed moodily. “Mine will be better.”

Upstairs Roy had finished with his shower, and after he dried off he pulled on at least his pajama pants before stepping out of the bathroom with the usual wall of steam. Yet he wasn’t greeted by what he had expected.

Edward was missing.

It shouldn’t have stood out so much, but it did. Not a single night before now had Edward not been in his room at some time for some reason or another. “Odd.” He murmured under his breath, and found his slippers before padding out of his room to go in search of the ghost.

And when he finally found the apparition, he was still staring at the cake.

“So something wrong, Ed?” Roy asked, pausing at the corner he’d turned.

Edward whipped to face him, hand dropping away from his chin and legs straightening. “No, nothing. Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

Roy felt the sudden strangest urge to fidget and barely restrained the inclination. “It’s just… you weren’t there?” His face twisted into something like an apologetic expression as he dug a hand back through his damp hair in a confused manner. “You’re always up there and well, I thought something might be wrong.”

For several long seconds, all Edward could do was blink owlishly. And then he smiled. “Sorry, I lost track of time. Everything’s fine.”

Roy nodded as he slowly stepped forward. “Kind of makes me sound like a little kid, doesn’t it.”

“Just a bit,” Edward smiled warmly. “But don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”
It took Roy a moment to start laughing as he saw the underlying humor in that. “You’re very sweet.”

“Not at all. Just honest.” Edward replied cheekily, and as Roy reached him, he floated down to stand on the floor. “Are you wanting more hot chocolate?” He asked, silver eyes searching Roy’s face, “or just me?”

The words had just left his lips when he realized what they sounded like. And Roy burst out laughing at the horrified look on the ghost’s face, a ghost who, if he could, would surely be blushing right now.

Roy couldn’t let this pass him by, but his smile was genuine. “Just you…” and he let Edward stare at him wide-eyed for barely a second before adding, “to make me some hot chocolate. Yes, that’d be nice since you’re offering. Though I really only came to make sure you were okay.”

Edward had wanted to shove Roy before, but never to this degree. “Bastard.” He muttered in embarrassment, and whirled away to go start.

Roy smiled after him almost fondly. “Brat.” He murmured too softly for Edward to hear, and followed him. And he chose a counter near the stove to lean back against and watch as Edward began to make the hot chocolate. He’d never seen it done before, and he was interested.

By the time the dark chocolate was well on its way to melting with the milk and cream, Edward was feeling a good deal less embarrassed. And he glanced over to see Roy still actively watching. “It was one of the first things I learned how to make. I still think my mom must have known she was dying.” And he slowly whisked at the contents in the pan, watching the differences in color chase each other about. “So she did what she could to groom me into someone who could take care of Alphonse and myself when she was gone.” Followed by a tired sounding, “and then I died.”

Roy looked down into the pan as well. “But you gave your life to save your brother’s. Even if what the two of you did was foolish, and even if you didn’t know that you’d die in the act, I think you did just fine by Alphonse. You saved his life.”

Edward looked at Roy for a long moment, as those black eyes found his own. Until finally he gave a small smile and looked away to start on the next step of the hot chocolate. “Yeah… I did.”

Roy didn’t say anything more as the ghost systematically began to finish the hot chocolate. Only stood there in observation, content just with the company. He rarely had company that he could just relax with, and not for the first time did he find himself glad that he had Edward with him now, wherever he went.

When it was done, Edward found a clean mug and poured some of the rich liquid inside the ceramic vessel. Unable to feel the heat, he picked the steaming mug up and offered it to Roy handle first. “Careful.” He cautioned, knowing that while he couldn’t be burned, Roy could.

“Thanks.” Roy said as he took it and began to blow on the steam.

“You’re welcome. Hopefully it will help you not look terrible tomorrow.” It had helped the last time.

Roy grinned a little and began to walk off. “I guess we’ll see.” And he took three more steps before pausing and looking over his shoulder at the ghost. “You coming?”

Edward smiled and nodded. “I’ll be up as soon as I put the leftovers away.” And he watched as Roy disappeared around the corner before turning to do just that. It seemed as if the hot chocolate was intended to become a staple in Roy’s household. It would not do to waste any. As soon as it was all packaged for later drinking, Edward wasted no time in shooting up through walls and ceiling to
reach Roy’s bedroom.

The cake sat temporarily forgotten on the counter.
Chapter 15

As dawn broke the next day, Edward was stretched out on his side on Roy’s bed. During the night the man had migrated over to the left side of the bed, so he’d taken the right. Though he was more than ready to dart away should Roy flop over, he was keeping an eye on the man even as he read the book he’d grabbed sometime during the night.

He wasn’t sure why he felt the impulse to always stay close to Roy, but as the man didn’t seem to mind, he gave himself over to that impulse. In a way he supposed it was just something to do with not having actual verbal contact with someone in so long. Just like Roy had taken Hazel in to take care of, he felt rather the same attachment that the squirrel must. Not as a pet, but feeling as though he belonged and was wanted somewhere.

It was one of many reasons he stayed.

But it didn’t fully explain the reason he stayed so close, for Hazel certainly did not seem so bound to Roy. Yet it was something.

“At least I’m not lonely anymore.” Edward murmured as he continued to read.

Three pages of his book later, Edward was startled from his reading as a rust brown ball of fur sprung up onto Roy’s chest. “Morning, Hazel.” He greeted despite the squirrel’s inability to hear him.

Hazel could sense that his owner was not alone in the bed. But no matter how hard he tried, he could never see whoever was there. And he sat back on his haunches, fluffing his tail, staring in Edward’s direction for a moment until he realized that he still had a task to do.

Roy still was asleep, and this would not do at all.

Edward meanwhile had for the present forgotten about his book so he could observe.

Hazel had turned from watching in Edward’s general direction in order to scamper over to sit on Roy’s pillow, directly behind the man’s head. He wasted no time in beginning to groom his owner’s hair. A stimulation that rarely failed.

The familiar feeling of paws running through his hair caused a still sleepy Roy to groan and reach back in an attempt to fend off his furry alarm clock.

Edward could only arch an eyebrow as Hazel, instead of being discouraged by Roy’s attempts to swat him away, only to see the squirrel launch himself off the pillow and latch around Roy’s forearm like a leech. And that bushy tail only circled around as an anchor – just in case.

And then Hazel began spastically nuzzling Roy’s wrist.

“Agh!” Roy jolted awake and whipped his arm forward so he could glare at Hazel who was running his cold nose back and forth along his wrist. “Hazel!”

Hazel only clung tighter and began to lick at his human’s wrist.

“Hazel…” Roy groaned and began to shake his arm up and down in an attempt to dislodge the
Hazel began to chatter indignantly at being shaken, turning accusatory black eyes on Roy as he informed his human all about what he thought of being shook like that. Even if this wasn’t the first, nor the last time Roy had done this.

Roy listened for only a few migraine worthy seconds before he interrupted. “Okay! Okay, I’m awake.” And he used his free arm to push himself up so he was sitting up in his bed, the covers falling around his waist. “See?”

Hazel hopped off of his human’s arm to sit nestled in the hollow formed by his legs under the blanket, and held up his front paws while fluffing his tail out behind him and chirping demurely.

“Isn’t this the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.” Edward drawled teasingly.

Roy nearly fell off the bed as he jumped and swore at the same time. “Ed!” He gasped while turning wide eyes on the ghost who was sprawled along his bed – Hazel momentarily forgotten.

Edward laughed as he raised himself up on an elbow. “About time it’s you getting startled instead of me.”

“I just wasn’t expecting you there.” Roy hedged, and was reminded of Hazel’s presence when the squirrel suddenly jumped onto his shoulder and butted his head against Roy’s chin demandingly. “Terror.” He muttered under his breath while reaching up a hand to caress the furry head.

Edward’s grin was positively devilish. “No one would believe you were a formidable alchemist if they saw you like this right now.”

Roy stuck his tongue out childishly before plucking Hazel off his shoulder and holding the squirrel much like he would a baby. “How fortunate it is then that you’re the only one who ever gets to see.”

“I could always take blackmail pictures.” Edward suggested through a laugh.

Stroking Hazel’s belly with one forefinger Roy was smiling down at the perfectly boneless squirrel who would have been purring were he a cat. “If you can happen to get Maes’s camera away from him, at that point I believe you deserve to take some blackmail pictures.”

Edward took that to mean that Maes was the sort of person who’d even fight a ghost over possession of his camera. Something that he found rather amusing to think about. “The feared Flame Alchemist and his pet squirrel. It would make front page headlines.”

Roy rolled his eyes, “the newspapers in this country aren’t even worth a place in a compost heap.” And he swung his legs around the edge of the bed and stood up, still keeping Hazel as nothing more than a happy puddle of jelly in his arms.

Edward could only smile as Roy headed off into the bathroom with a yawn and an armful of squirrel.

As Roy shut the bathroom door behind him he walked over to deposit Hazel onto the counter. And he merely smiled as the squirrel pouted at the change. “Can’t have you getting spoiled now, can I?” He chuckled and began to strip for his shower.

When Roy exited the bathroom with Hazel darting ahead to lead the way, he saw that Edward had now quite contentedly sprawled himself across the entire bed to read that book. He shook his head with a bit of a smile as he looked away from the scene.
“You’re not going out manwhoring tonight, are you?” Edward asked without lifting his eyes from the pages of the book.

Roy snorted softly as he continued the tedious task of buttoning his uniform. “No. I think I’m on a pretty permanent every other day schedule for right now. Tonight you have me all to yourself.”

Edward’s face brightened as he finally looked up from his book and whirled around so he was sitting on the bed now, facing Roy. “Can we go get me a bike tonight?”

“If that’s what you want to do tonight.” Roy agreed amiably, looking over with a smile to the excited ghost.

“What is it you did on your nights off from manwhoring before I came into the domestic picture?” Edward asked, struck by the sudden curiosity.

Roy finished with his uniform, his face twisting into something akin to a grimace as he walked over to the bed after a pause. “Alchemy. Sometimes dinner with Maes and the girls, but we’ve done that recently. Or if I really didn’t feel up to alchemy research I’d read… sometimes take my motorcycle out.”

“You’ve not felt like doing any of that?” Edward tilted his head to the right, causing his silver hair to shift and float. “Is it because of me?”

Roy sat down on the end of the bed, looking at the ghost still. “Yes and no, really. To both.” He placed his hands behind him on the bedspread and leaned back. “Sometimes I want to, I won’t deny. But to be quite honest I’m enjoying my time with you very much. I did most of that stuff because I had nothing else to do. No one else around. But now you’re here, and I am liking the company.”

“But I like having you around.”

Selfishly so… but he didn’t say that.

Edward gave an understanding smile of acceptance. “I like being around.”

Roy’s smile widened for the barest of seconds before he was suddenly standing back up. “I should be getting to work. Are you coming with me, or do you want to stay here and read more?”

Edward was off the bed as well in a flash. “I can finish reading tonight while you’re asleep. I’m not missing Grand’s next accident for the world.”

Roy laughed as he began walking out of his bedroom. “I won’t get concerned then if you suddenly vanish this morning say around eight…” he hinted not so subtly.

Edward made sure to log that information away. “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

They left the house together without a single thought spared between them as to the cake that still sat untouched on a countertop. After all, there were always more important things than a cake baked in such frivolity as that one had been.

When they got to Roy’s office Edward instantly claimed one of the couches in a flopping maneuver
that couldn’t have been more boneless looking if the ghost had tried.

…probably due to the fact that technically Edward no longer had bones, but that was getting too literal.

Roy meanwhile took a seat at his desk before eyeing the stack of paperwork for the day with trepidation. He would much rather be leaving in near half an hour to see General Grand get more acquainted with the troublemaking side of his ghostly companion. But as things were, even if he didn’t have paperwork, he really shouldn’t be seen anywhere near the vicinity of that office.

“Before I leave,” Edward began, “can you find some excuse to prop the door open until I return? I’m still not quite… comfortable, passing through alone.” And only the knowledge that Roy understood why, and didn’t make him feel childish about it kept him from feeling self-conscious and embarrassed.

Roy took his pen in hand, “I will. And you can call me from the other side if you need me. I don’t mind.” He said firmly as he fixed his gaze on the ghost.

No matter what it was, he wanted Edward to trust in him. He knew what the ghost had been through. He knew the culture shock that Edward would experience for a bit longer. So he was glad that Edward had the balls to actually ask for help when he needed it. He wasn’t sure he could have tolerated a silent sufferer for long.

“Considering what I do know about you, I’m sure you would make a wonderful excuse for such an emergency.” Edward said drolly.

Roy grinned a bit as he began to start on the paperwork. “That and I am the superior officer in this little quadrant of Headquarters. I can prop my door open or wander in and out of the doorway as I please. Any questions or concerns will just be filed away in the trash bin.”

“I’m surprised there isn’t just a compost heap for those out back. Hell, you could throw the newspapers in with it.” Edward chuckled as he hugged his knees to his chest.

“Only after I clipped out all the reprints of your lovely blackmail photos.” Roy corrected quite happily.

Edward smirked as he considered actually getting such photos. But it might be difficult to get the camera if Maes was truly that protective of the item that he’d notice it being lifted even for a day. Sure, he could always steal a camera if provided with the access to a camera store… but he doubted that was a place Roy would ever venture, and he had certain morals about stealing things. “You tempt me greatly, Roy Mustang.”

Roy carefully hid a smile as he kept his head bent to his work. “I do what I can.” He merely replied, instead of giving in to the impulse to point out any potential innuendos.

Edward waited impatiently for ten more minutes before he finally popped off the couch. “I’m going to head over there now. Don’t want to chance missing the fun.”

Roy was on his feet without prompting, and heading over to open the door for the silvery apparition. “Just be careful, Edward.”

“I doubt I’ll run into anything like a ghost banisher, but I’ll keep that in mind.” Edward said as he floated over to wait at the door patiently.

“Or attract attention to the idea that this may not be an accident. Don’t touch anything.” Roy
cautioned as he opened the door.

Edward nodded and floated out, “don’t worry. I know how to keep a low profile. I have been this way seven years.” He reminded the man with a smile before pelting off down the hallway past the front office.

He had left too fast to hear what excuse Roy must have come up with, but he didn’t mind. The only thing he did mind regarding Roy was the man’s absence. But it couldn’t be helped. So he’d bear with the uncomfortable feeling of being a goodly distance away from Roy. It was for a good end result.

“And I need to get over this fear of losing sight of him, or being separated.” Edward murmured as he pelted through the air on a course memorized last night. “Just another culture shock thing… logically I know it’s silly to worry about it.”

Because even on the chance he were to get trapped again somehow, he had no shadows of doubt that Roy would not find him again. He still wasn’t sure what to call his unique relationship with Roy, but he knew Roy wouldn’t leave him behind.

When he got to Grand’s office area, he found that the front office was not as empty as it had been last night. Like with the setup Roy had, there was a more frontal office where desks, a table, and various chairs were set up. There were already officers sitting around chatting or doing work, again, much like you’d see with Roy’s front office. But the one thing that wasn’t the same was the person sitting at the desk Hawkeye would have occupied. She wasn’t even wearing a military uniform. Regular employed civilian?

“I bet Hawkeye’s better at her job.” Edward said loyally before ignoring them all in order to pass through General Grand’s office door.

It was something that made him highly uncomfortable and nervous to do despite his eagerness to see the general meet his next demise. But he forced himself to do it. Nothing bad had happened… so that eased his mind somewhat.

Taking a look around, specifically at the soon to be scene of the crime, Edward made sure everything was as it should be. Only then did he take to hovering above the general’s desk to wait out the last minutes until his arrival. The urge to rifle through the man’s things in an attempt to find anything helpful as to that laboratory was nudging at him, but even without remembering Roy’s warning he knew he couldn’t.

So he did his best to rein those urges in as he waited.

And he didn’t have to wait long.

The door was opened, causing Edward to whirl around to watch as General Grand entered the office. He instantly felt the intense dislike he had for this man come to the forefront of his emotions. The first time he’d ever seen Grand he had known that something wasn’t right about the man. And future observations of him had only cemented his belief.

“And get me some coffee!” General Grand called out behind him before he shut his office door.

Grand was scowling as he held a small baggie of ice to his head while limping towards his desk. Why did his desk have to be so far away?! He groaned aloud, nearly brained and castrated in one day. It was a shame they were all accidents, for he’d not had a new test subject in far too long. He wouldn’t touch Mustang… yet. After all, he’d been one of the driving forces on approving the man’s
transfer. But that Riza Hawkeye, she was strong willed. She would make an excellent next lab rat if only she had given him reason to “send her to the stockades”.

“Damn it all…” He growled as he limped his way around his desk.

A sneering sort of smirk was on Edward’s face as he waited in anticipation. “You should just give up and leave. I can finally be seen and heard, and I know your dirty secret.” His silver eyes had a steely glint to them as he added, “Roy will destroy you.”

“Good thing they never had coat racks or Hawkeye behind doors in Ishval.” Grand continued to gripe. “Would have hurt my reputation. The Iron Blood Alchemist being defeated by a coat rack.”

Edward’s unsympathetic snickering stopped abruptly. Grand was an alchemist too?

But further thoughts on that matter were temporarily sustained as Grand pulled out his chair so he could sit down. He gave a relieved sigh at being able to sit down and relax, and was pulling his baggie of ice away from his head to apply it to his crotch when his chair gave an ominous creak.

There wasn’t even time to process the noise before the chair suddenly collapsed.

“AH!” Grand yelled out as he was pitched backwards and sideways like some demented carnival ride. Too fast to stop it, too fast to avoid banging his shins against the top edge of his desk as he was cast aside by his chair. He landed on his side gracelessly and so hard his vision blacked out momentarily as the wind was knocked from his body.

The telltale shifting above him told him it wasn’t over yet – whatever this madness was.

And he looked up with wide eyes just in time to see the shelf that had always been anchored to the wall behind his desk shift and tip downwards. The pictures and other baubles that had been set atop it came crashing down around him first with enough noise to have rattled even the bravest of nerves.

But his nerves weren’t the greatest of his worries…

Frantically he tried to scramble out of the way despite the pain his crotch was in as he tried to move in this awkward position. And then the shelf came crashing down unmercifully to his shoulder and the arm he’d thrown over his head just in case he wasn’t moving fast enough away. And he hadn’t been.

Edward tilted his head to the right, lips pursed as he considered the mess before him. “You need a heavier shelf.”

At that moment the door was flung open and several people, the civilian woman and two of the general’s subordinate officers only hovered in the doorway to give various gasps before all hurrying over.

“General!” One officer cried as he rushed over to push the shelf off of the man.

“Sir!” The woman knelt down beside him, “what happened?!”

Edward would have thought it would be obvious.

“I’ll call the medical ward!” The other officer said as he hurried over to grab General Grand’s phone off the desk and frantically dial.

Edward shook his head as he watched the sickeningly saccharine scene unfold. “You all have no
idea what a monster that man is, do you.” He stated as he crossed his arms over his chest. “This man won’t be forgiven by the people he has killed.”

And he whispered it like a promise.

Edward stayed, watching Grand in disgust until the man was finally taken away on a stretcher by some of the in-Headquarters doctors. It seemed that he might have caused the man to fracture something in his arm. Not that he felt even the least flicker of guilt or sympathy. “If you are an alchemist, this is fortuitous for many.” Alchemists needed full use of their hands, and if one was slung up in an arm cast…

He left the office around the time that the man’s staff began to puzzle over how the chair had collapsed. None of them for one second seemed to be considering that the shelf had fallen for any reason other than the sudden earthquake that had occurred when the large framed man had been tossed to the floor.

It took him until he was only a few hallways down from Roy’s office to start laughing. But it was not a carefree sort of laughter. It was more bitterly toned, the laugh of someone who felt that Grand had deserved what he’d gotten.

After all, he hadn’t done any of those things to General Grand for the sheer amusement of a prank.

When he reached the front office where Hawkeye, Breda, Falman, Fuery, and Havoc were in attendance unaware of what had just befallen General Grand, he smiled. They needn’t worry today about catching someone trying to spy on Roy.

Quite happily he landed down on the floor and walked through Roy’s open office door. And with it open, and able to see Roy hard at work there at his desk, it cooled his nerves. “He needs a heavier shelf.” Edward said in way of announcing his presence.

Roy looked up with a welcoming smile, and unbeknownst to Edward he breathed a sigh of relief that the ghost was back. “Oh? Did this one not fracture his skull to your liking?” He asked quietly – the door to his office was still open after all.

Edward’s look was sour at best. “He had the sense to use an arm to cover his head since he couldn’t seem to move out of the way fast enough. I think he’s still suffering from what happened last time.”

“Well perhaps he’ll get a heavier one.” Roy chuckled softly and stood so he could go close the door before heading back to his desk where Edward was seated in his chair. “Move, you.”

Edward gave him a pouting look but floated up to instead sit on the left side of Roy’s desk where there was more room. And as he watched Roy sit down he remembered something. “Grand is an alchemist?”

Instead of getting straight back to work, Roy looked up at the ghost in surprise. “You didn’t know?”

Edward shook his head. “He never did alchemy before around me, so I never saw that he was. And it was never mentioned around me before.”

Roy leaned back in his chair as his fingers wove together at the tips. “He was part of the Ishval war, same as me. And he was rather…” Roy’s already dark eyes only darkened further, “bloodthirsty. Very broad in his killing… as long as he got to kill as many as he could, he was happy. And he was laughing.”

Edward believed that by the look in Roy’s eyes, he wasn’t the only one who had felt a cold darkness
“With our alchemy enhanced through—” Roy cut himself off with a shake of his head, “he was able to attack with greater force. As were we all. But he more often than not became something inhuman in battle. When he realized the extent of his alchemic power through that enhancement he became overjoyed, whereas I started down the road that would eventually lead to my turning a gun on myself and nearly pulling the trigger.” But he pressed on, unwilling to really talk too much about his contemplation of suicide. “They call him the Iron Blood Alchemist… and I can only guess that the reason you’ve never seen his alchemy yourself is because his alchemy is only good for one purpose.”

Edward didn’t need to be told what purpose that was, not after everything Roy had said. And it seemed Roy didn’t feel the need to expound on that either.

“There’s a reason that he’s not called the hero of the Ishval war.” Roy didn’t believe he was worthy of carrying the title either, but carry it he did. If he had to choose between Basque Grand and himself… the choice was clear.

Edward frowned in worry, “can you win against him if it ever came down to a fight?”

Roy did not answer right away, it was not an easy answer to give. “I would certainly not back down from a fight. It would all be a matter of whether or not I could react in time if he struck first. His alchemy works fast, very fast. And a second too late could dearly cost me.”

Edward nodded slowly. If ever he needed the inspiration to keep pulling these sort of pranks on Grand, he had it now. “Then you’ll have to be the first to strike.”

“I intend to.” Roy knew that the moment he sensed Grand was about to attack, he wouldn’t hold back. The only situation in which he could see Grand about to attack him was the one in which he had forced the general out of the military for the crimes he was committing secretly. And at that point in time, it no longer mattered to keep Grand alive.

He wouldn’t abandon Edward… so he knew he would have to win against Grand. There was no other option. He refused to abandon Edward.

It was then that the office door opened, and Roy’s gaze was drawn away from the ghost on his desk. Maes shut the door behind him before walking forward looking torn between amusement and bewilderment. “Did you have anything to do with what happened to Grand this time?”

Roy blinked at his best friend, “something happened to him?”

“Yes.”

“And I didn’t have anything to do with what happened last time either.” Roy added for good measure. It really was all of Edward’s doing. Or Riza’s. The one thing he’d helped with last night had been on Edward’s insistence. “So what happened to him now?”

Maes gave his friend a disbelieving look, but said nothing to it as he took a seat on the arm of one of the couches. “His chair collapsed under him and then a shelf fell and looks to have bruised up his arm pretty bad.”

“No broken bones?” Edward complained.

Roy tactfully hid a smile at the whiny tone of the ghost. “Well I certainly had nothing to do with it. I’ve been here all morning.”
Maes could believe it. With Roy’s sudden dedication to getting his work done he doubted the man even left for bathroom breaks anymore. “I’ll keep an eye on him even so. I doubt that even injuries like he has now will stop him from working on his own machinations.”

“True.” Roy tipped his head forward in a semblance of a nod. “Has he gone anywhere suspicious yet during the day?”

“No. I keep waiting for him to. But if he leaves Headquarters it’s always to public places. Nothing that would ever house a secret laboratory like you’re suggesting.” Maes gave a quiet sigh. “I think I’ll speak to Gracia about taking a few nights and weekends to follow him. She’ll understand. This isn’t the first time we’ve done something like this.”

Roy nodded, knowing that Gracia would indeed. She truly was one of the most understanding women he’d ever met.

Maes considered his friend for a moment before asking, “are you ever going to tell me where you got this information? Doesn’t your source have anything more to give you?”

Roy knew without even consulting the ghost that Edward didn’t. Edward would have told him everything without hesitation. “No, and no. I’ve already told you everything my source gave us to go on. But I trust my source, they wouldn’t have led me wrong.”

“Certainly not.” Edward agreed.

“I’ll see what I can manage.” Maes said and stood up. “Anything else you want me to do today aside from stalking?”

Roy smiled and shook his head. “No, go be a stalker. You’re good at it.”

“Yes, I am.” Maes agreed wholeheartedly and stood up while adopting a bright smile as he remembered something critically important. “I’ll show you pictures of Elysia tomorrow. The latest ones are still getting developed, but she is so cute in them!”

Roy’s look was utterly deadpan. “Can I just take your word for it?”

“Absolutely not.” Maes looked scandalized as he turned to leave.

Edward was laughing quietly as Maes left the office. “He really keeps growing on me.”

“Yes.” Roy agreed with a sigh, “he is rather parasitic.”

“Not like that!” Edward’s laugh renewed.

Roy smiled up at him and scooted his chair forward so he could grab his pen again and resume his work. “I don’t have many friends. There’s a reason he’s my best one.”

Edward didn’t have to ask why, he knew. “Would Grand ever try and attack Maes with alchemy?” He asked as the question suddenly occurred to him. Before he hadn’t thought much of Maes following Grand. He believed Maes was a skilled combatant. But that was before he had learned that Grand was an alchemist.

What much could someone like Maes do against an alchemist like Roy had described?

“That is very possible.” Roy replied as he began to read over the form currently before him. “But Maes knows the dangers. You have to trust that he can handle himself. Sometimes faith goes a long way in
a person and their ability to pull through when they’re disadvantaged.”

Edward couldn’t help but smile, “you have a lot of faith in all of your team, don’t you.”

“Quite a lot.” And for good reason, he’d handpicked all of them. “And they know it. So they do everything in their power not to let me down.”

“I think it’s more than that.” Edward mused as he watched Roy work. “I’ve been in this office for seven years, and for that entire time I’ve never seen a team so loyal to their superior.”

Roy smiled, “well, there is only one Roy Mustang.”


“You’ll never know.”

As the hours passed Roy continued to steadily plough through his work. Edward had left to go float in his favorite corner of the ceiling while he read another book. It was quite peaceful for them, as opposed to another part of Headquarters that was dealing with a wounded general. The only thought Roy gave the situation was wondering what Edward would do next.

But it was a passing thought.

Eventually the lunch hour rolled around, and once again Roy’s office door opened. This time admitting Jean Havoc.

“You want to come out with us to lunch again? Or are you staying in?” He asked as he approached Roy’s desk – not seeing a book dive bomb from the air to the floor.

Roy looked up from his paperwork, and immediately bought time for Edward to choose. “You want me to stay in, don’t you.” He taunted with a good-natured smirk. “That way you can have even a sliver of a chance of getting a date for tonight.”

Havoc scoffed at the implication. “I’ll have you know that I already have a date for tonight.”

Roy perked up immediately with interest. “Oh? Do I know him? Her?”

Havoc was right to grow wary, and he pointed a finger at Mustang. “I found this one. I’m not telling you how to get to her.”

“Her…” Roy gave a shrug. “Had too many hers lately anyway.”

Jean was far from looking sympathetic.

“You’ve had too many of everything lately.” Edward corrected as he walked over to join them. “Let’s go out again. I’m doing better day by day.”

“I’ll come, just give me a few minutes.” Roy said as he twirled his pen over the form he had been in the middle of perusing.

“Right. We were thinking of a pizzeria, you good with that?” Havoc asked as he half turned to leave.

Roy waved his free hand absently. “It’s food. I’m good with it.”

Edward floated backwards to flop onto the couch. “Is there any food you don’t like?”
“Of course there is.” Roy said as he began to pen corrections onto the form. “Veal and oranges. I can’t stand the taste of either.”

“Even if your mother prepares them?”

“Especially if my mother prepares them.” Roy cracked a small smile. “She’s actually not half bad as a cook. I survived as a child on her cooking. But I just don’t like veal or oranges. At all. I’m sure you could stand eating a cake even though it had milk in it, right?”

“Of course!” Edward agreed, and wondered just how drunk Roy had been last night. Hadn’t they spent most of their walk home talking about cakes? He’d have thought it would have been obvious he wouldn’t have turned down eating cake when he was alive.

“Yeah… well I can’t stand either no matter what they’re mixed in with.” Roy finally laid his pen down and stood up. “Is it just any cake that is your favorite dessert? Not a specific one?”

Edward chuckled as he floated up from the couch and took to standing on the floor. “I’m having a hard time deciding which is worse, your flirting, or your guessing of my favorite dessert.”

Roy grimaced as he walked over to join his companion. “Let’s leave my flirting out of it.”

“Did you know you sometimes talk in your sleep?” Edward offered with a devilish grin.

“Changed my mind, continue bashing my flirting talent.” Roy quickly sacrificed as he felt his cheeks actually begin to tinge pink. He didn’t remember what he’d been dreaming last night, and he hadn’t woken up with soiled sheets… but that didn’t mean it couldn’t have been something equally embarrassing for Edward to listen to. He’d rather be blissfully unaware.

“Spoilsport.” Edward chided as he laughed. The truth was that Roy hadn’t made a peep any of the nights he’d spent in the man’s bedroom. But he wasn’t about to tell Roy that. This was more fun.

“More like picking my battles.” Roy groaned as he walked over to fetch his coat and tug it on.

Edward shrugged, “same thing.” And he could only smile at Roy’s withering look before following the man out of the office. He’d never been to a pizzeria before. He’d never been to a lot of places before. He just hoped that it wouldn’t be too crowded… or that there’d be an empty seat next to Roy this time.
Chapter 16

Chapter Sixteen

When the group got to the pizzeria it was a crowded affair. By the looks of things one of the local schools was having a lunch out for several classes, and children were everywhere in the dining area. Even from the current vantage point it was easy to see that the shakers of red pepper flakes were becoming a much coveted accessory for attacking people with when the teachers weren’t looking.

Much to Edward’s frown of delight, of course, but when Roy looked over at him – he had taken to sitting up on a nearby counter under which menus were stacked in order to be out of the way – he had raised his hands in a gesture of supplication. “We can’t exactly leave.” He said, his voice undercut with a shadow of uncertainty. “I should be fine, but I’ll let you know if I need to go outside.”

Roy gave the ghost a small smile before turning to deal with the seating as a harried looking waiter made his appearance. “Obviously someplace away from the virus breeding ground over there.” He jerked one thumb to indicate the children.

The waiter gave an understanding but almost exasperated looking nod. “Sometimes I wonder why we give the kids discounts. Seems we should be charging double the price.” He bemoaned as he grabbed enough laminated menus for the entire group. “This way.”

Their table ended up being reasonably far away from the pandemonium, and after the waiter had left with their drink orders Hawkeye turned to Roy with a smirk.

“Just you wait, Mustang,” she began firmly, “one day you’ll have your own personal virus breeding ground just like Maes.”

Roy was not the only one at the table who found that statement amusing, and over the sounds of their amusement said, “I doubt the condom company is going out of business any time soon.”

Edward had settled onto an opposite table, there being no empty seats at the one everyone else was at. “If they did it wouldn’t matter. Celibacy might do you some good.”

Roy was reasonably certain now that ‘celibacy’ was a potentially heart attack inducing word.

She merely smirked at him, “one day you’re going to find someone, and then you’ll be eating your words.”

“Oh unless that someone is a guy.” Havoc pointed out, much to Roy’s gesture of approval.

“Adoption?” Fuery piped up thoughtfully.

Roy rolled his eyes, “I do not want kids. And I do not want to “find someone”. Haven’t we established this years before now?”

“We’re hoping you’ll eventually grow out of it, sir.” Falman explained absently as he continued to eye the children as they began a messy looking game of racing around the tables with pizza slices much to the teacher’s chagrin.

Roy turned a shocked look on him, “is everyone but Havoc now housing fantasies of me being domesticated?”
“You are domesticated.” Edward finally spoke up, “you have a pet and you’re living with someone the rest of your life. Even if I am dead.”

Roy wasn’t entirely sure that counted, but he couldn’t mention that here.

“We actually have bets going on of how long it will take.” Breda offered, really only to see the look on his superior’s face. “Maes is a most generous contributor.”

Roy let his head drop into one hand. “You all are impossible. Everyone here but Havoc is clearly insane, I’m sending you all in for psych evaluations.”

An empty threat that was met with a bout of chuckling.

Their drinks arrived, and their pizza orders were given by the slice, and the waiter left again. It was around that time that the children had noticed their group, and living here in Central, they knew military officers when they saw them. And being children they were rather… enthusiastic about this discovery.

Edward was forced to shoot into the air with a bit of a yelp and a stormy glare towards the children who had suddenly swamped the table Roy was sitting at.

“What’s the matter with ya then? You a girl?” The boy asked, clearly not meaning the “girl” comment in a nice way.

Which made a muscle above Hawkeye’s eye twitch.

Roy was stifling laughter behind one hand. As would have been the others, were they not under similar attack.

Havoc currently was trying to detach a young girl from his arm as she shrieked, “I got the witch! I got the witch!”

Another boy was staring at Breda accusingly. “You ate all the pizza!”

Breda could only blink at him while slowly flushing pink, even if he was comfortable with his current overweight state.

“Arthritis.” Falman provided stonily, and gave Roy a deadpan look that sent the man into a fit of laughter unable to be stifled by his hand.

Edward could only watch, his irritation with the children fading as he found Roy’s laughter contagious. Who’d have ever thought they’d become under attack by children in a pizzeria?

And then some of the other children spotted Roy, and promptly a boy and girl were trying to climb onto him. “You’re pretty!” The girl declared as she nearly toppled off her one-shinned perch on Roy’s leg, only to be caught and steadied by him. “Have you ever killed anyone?” This other boy interrogated as he climbed up sideways on Roy’s lap.
Edward was suddenly scowling again.

Roy was rather used to children thanks to Elysia, and for that he was grateful all of a sudden. Otherwise the climbing all over him would have probably irritated the hell out of him. “Thank you,” he told the girl, and then he looked at the boy, “killing people is a very bad thing.”

Which was a lame answer, and the boy knew it, but Roy was saved from having the obvious pointed out when one of the teachers finally came racing over to rescue them.

“I’m so sorry!” She panted, looking truly scandalized. “Children, go back to your tables! You should know better than to bother these nice people!” And as they all began to leave, voicing their displeasure, she frowned after them. “And I’ll be speaking to your parents about this!”

That shut them up rather quickly, and they fairly fled back to their own tables.

The teacher meanwhile turned back to Roy and the others looking genuinely apologetic. “I’m sorry about that.”

Roy turned a smile on her, “please don’t worry about it. They did no harm.”

Not too long after the teacher left did their food arrive, and Edward settled back down onto the table he’d previously occupied. He’d stopped scowling, but he still felt irritation to both those children who’d climbed on Roy. Which was strange to him, because he’d not felt irritated when Elysia had been climbing on Roy or even being held by the man.

“And you lot wonder why Mustang doesn’t want kids.” Havoc muttered as he grabbed the shaker of parmesan cheese in one hand and began to drown his slices of pepperoni and mushroom pizza in the cheese and with the other, grab the red pepper flake shaker and add a healthy dose of those.

Roy smiled, but didn’t answer as he took a bite of his bacon and sundried tomato covered slice minus all the parmesan and pepper.

“But he did well with them.” Riza made sure to point out with a wicked smile.

“Oh course I did.” Roy agreed amiably. “I’m used to Elysia. And you should be glad she wasn’t among them. Else we’d not have gotten away so easily.”

Despite all his exasperation regarding Maes and the photographs of his daughter, or just even listening to the man prattle on about her, he had spent a lot of time with Elysia. It was just a part of being Maes’s best friend. And truthfully he was rather fond of the child, and she him, as was evident in all the times she called him his uncle. But they’d not have gotten away so easily even with a teacher’s assistance if Elysia had been there.

She would have been the ringleader of a gaggle of germy leech-like children.

He made a mental note to wash his hands exceptionally well later.

Roy didn’t even notice that Edward hadn’t made a peep, nor sat himself on his drink until long after the school children had left. Which made him suddenly turn around to look for the ghost, discovering Edward sitting on a nearby table and staring out the window looking rather preoccupied.

“You okay?” Falman asked, having seen Roy’s sudden movement.

Roy turned away from Edward who hadn’t noticed his gaze, to sit forward again and see that the others eyes were on him now as well. “Yeah. Thought I heard something.”
Not too long later the group got up to file out, needing to head back to Headquarters and the never-ending job. As they did so Roy fell to the rear of the pack so Edward could float beside him. He waited until they were outside of the pizzeria before giving the ghost a worried look.

Edward caught the look out of the corner of his eye, and turned to look at Roy while dropping down to walk as well. “I’m fine. I just didn’t like the kids who were pawing you.” He explained, “trying to figure out why… I don’t mind it when Elysia is around you.”

Roy couldn’t exactly say much, and Edward knew it, so a quick nod sufficed until they were able to get back to the office. Where as soon as Roy had shed the last living person vying for his attention he closed his office door to leave he and Edward in privacy.

“You spent all of lunch trying to figure out why you didn’t like those kids climbing on me?” Roy recalled just to be sure of what it was exactly as he went to half sit and half lean on the front-facing edge of his desk.

Edward sunk to sit on the coffee table with his legs folded off to one side. “Yeah.” He grumbled, and carded a hand back through his silver hair. “Doesn’t bother me when Elysia does it.”

Roy smiled faintly, “perhaps because you know she’s Maes’s daughter. I don’t mean this in a bad way, but it could be that your desire to keep me safe has extended now even to keeping me safe from children.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Edward snorted.

“No promises.” Edward grouched, but smiled in return even as his arms crossed over his chest.

“Is it?” Roy asked lightly and smiled, “don’t be so sure, Ed. I know you’re not mentally unstable… so don’t be so quick to believe that you being that protective of me is ridiculous. Deep down, am I not worth that much to you?”

Edward didn’t answer right away as Roy went around his desk at last to sit down and resume working. He sat there, thinking it over. Was it really that farfetched an idea that his instinct to keep Roy safe and alive now even extended to mere children? He’d been a child once… he had been an accomplished alchemist as a child. And therein perhaps lay the answer.

“You are.” Edward finally replied, and seeing Roy’s eyes look up at him, continued, “it doesn’t matter who it is, Roy. I want to keep you safe. I want to do what I can for you. I know I’m not very useful in a lot of things being a ghost. But I want to do what I can… and protecting you is one of those things. Without you…” his voice faltered for a moment, “I don’t want to be lonely again so soon. You’re worth more to me than words could ever do justice.”

Roy’s smile was warm as he gazed at the ghost. “Just don’t do to children what you do to Grand.”

“And don’t be so hard on yourself.” Roy added gently, “I wouldn’t call what you do for me being useful, but as you saw last night… when you’re not around, I notice. There are plenty of useful people in this world, Edward… but there’s only one you.”

Edward stared at Roy in bemusement. “So I’m not useful?”

“Just in a way that is different from everyone else. What I’m trying to say, Ed, is that you shouldn’t try and fit in with everyone else. You’re far too unique – being a ghost notwithstanding – to be grouped with them.”
“Oh.” Edward faltered rather intelligently, his crossed arms lowering now. And he fixed Roy with an indefinable look. “That was… sweet of you.”

Roy smiled, a faint chuckle escaping him. “As you often tell me… it’s honesty.”

“Still,” Edward began to smile as well, “only one me?”

Roy gave a slight nod, unable to look away from the shining silver eyes. “I can bear losing a lot of people in my life, Edward. But you… never you.” He said softly, “so don’t worry that you sometimes feel you’re not useful, for even if you were the most impractical being to ever exist, I would never want to be without you.”

“…nor I you.” Edward replied after a long moment just spent gazing at each other, and his smile flickered to new life. “Even if you’re the biggest manwhore to exist.”

Roy scoffed and picked up his pen once more in his theatric indignation that was causing Edward to laugh, much to his genuine delight. “I have paperwork to do, you troublesome ghost. Do you want our game of chess tonight or not?”

Edward floated up off the coffee table still laughing. “And a bike too, don’t forget. We’re going to get me a bike tonight.”

“Yes.” Roy agreed with a smile as he turned back to his paperwork. “Chess, a bike, and cranberries. Is there anything else you want? You demanding thing.”

Edward floated over to fetch the book he’d been reading earlier that day. “A pony.”

“Right,” Roy rolled his eyes with a snort, “I’ll get right on that buying you a pony thing. Eighteen years old and you still want a pony. I thought you lived in a rural area?”

“My mom never allowed us pets, remember.” Edward settled on the floor, wedged into the corner with his book open on his lap.

Roy did remember. “I don’t have room for a pony, even if you were being serious.” He said as he applied himself to his paperwork.

Edward merely smiled. He hadn’t been being serious… but his smile faded a bit. Deep down a part of him ached with wistful wants he had no right having, but they remained. And he only buried them deeper as he forced himself to be lost in the words of the book.

The hours slid slowly past, with only the shuffling of papers or turning of pages to break the silence. But as had become habit, Roy did finish his paperwork early. He had a game of chess to play after all. And so he left the office to go turn the paperwork into Hawkeye for her to do with as she needed, leaving Edward to set up the chess board as was now customary.

Once Roy had returned and sat down at his desk, he moved first.

But was not the first to begin their round of questioning as Edward moved a pawn in turn. “So why have you never asked me to put cinnamon in your hot chocolate, with peppermint sticks and everything else?”

Roy was actually taken aback by the question, not quite knowing where that had come from. “Because yours tastes delicious enough without.” And he immediately pounced for his own question as he moved another pawn. “Why do you ask?”
“Well you told me once what you like in your hot chocolate and I’ve been adding none of that. Just to see I guess if you’d notice.” Edward shrugged.

“To tell you the truth,” Roy began, “I added that stuff because I found it bland without. All those extra flavors just for hot chocolate? Sure, they’re good accompaniments, but sometimes simple is best. And you do simple very well. I dare not ask you to taint what is already good just for memory or experimentation, unless you desire it one day.”

“Oh.” Edward perked up a bit. He’d been wondering about it for a few days now at the most fleeting of moments. “I just wanted to be sure… it’s just, I completely turned your life upside down. I know you can take care of yourself, but I wanted to do something nice for you.”

Roy smiled easily, “then be assured, yours is better. My favorite drink is still hot chocolate… just a better kind.” He moved another piece before addressing a potential question he could see arising in the future from what Edward had said. “I’m glad you want to do something nice for me, so do not worry that I might think you’re trying to take care of me. Friends do nice things for each other. Now if you start cooking all my meals,” he gave Edward a teasing smile, “then I might have to remind you that I do have a mother.”

Edward gave him a mocking look, “I’d never presume to want to be your mother. I doubt I am as fearsome as she to have raised someone like you. And nor will I cook all your meals.”

Roy was left to ponder whether Edward had been insulting him or not for the rest of their games. Until at last he was forced to assume Edward had insulted him, but if it was an insult indeed, it only made him smile. For there was nothing condescending about it.

After they had packed up the chess game and put it away, Roy was hurried by an eager Edward out of Headquarters.

On a rather crowded sidewalk, Roy was walking, leading the way towards the shop he knew sold bicycles. But as the sidewalk was so crowded with other foot traffic on its way to wherever, Edward was forced to walk in the road, dodging cars with little twirls whenever it seemed to suit him.

Roy forewent the thoughts of how silly Edward looked in lieu of still trying not to panic every time a car passed straight through the ghost. Though he did court the thought for a moment of what would happen if Edward suddenly went solid while a car was still passing through him. And why the hell was Edward allowing it anyway? He thought the ghost hated things passing through him. Sure, he was spinning out of the way every so often, but only whenever it seemed to suit him.

Edward was entirely unaware of Roy’s observation or thoughts as he continued to make his way down the road, letting himself float upward briefly on every swirl. He was far too enwrapped in his excitement that he’d soon be getting a bike. A bike that he would master within only days, and then Roy would just have to let him try out the motorcycle!

When at last they reached the bicycle shop the crowds on the sidewalk had thinned enough to allow Edward to walk comfortably with Roy. Together they entered through the open door of the shop, and it didn’t take any time at all for Edward to suddenly bolt away from Roy.

Roy cracked a smile at the childish enthusiasm he coveted so much in the ghost and followed after at a more sedate pace. There were just some adults that could get away with this type of enthusiasm, and Edward was one of them despite his being a ghost. Maes was another. As he reached Edward’s side as the ghost looked avidly at the selection of full size bikes, he made sure no one was within earshot before asking quietly. “Why’d you let all those cars go through you, I thought you didn’t like it?”
Edward gave a noncommittal sound that was almost akin to a raspberry as he didn’t lift his eyes from his perusal of bikes. “Couldn’t be bothered to notice the entire time. And if I’d have floated up above I was worried I’d lose track of the path we were taking and lose you.”

Roy shook his head with a smile, completely unseen by the ghost who’s attention was only for the bikes. As Roy looked around he saw that bikes were mounted to nearly every available space on the wall, some even hanging from the rafters. Then of course there were the bikes lined up in neat rows on the floor. The adult size bikes on one side, the children size on the other. And suddenly Roy knew he couldn’t resist. “The kid bikes are on the other side.” He remarked softly, for Edward’s ears only.

The shop owner and the family he was currently helping visibly jumped when a loud crash sounded from the opposite end of the store.

Roy was flat on his back, groaning under a pile of bikes. “My mistake.”

Edward harrumphed and went back to his browsing as if nothing had happened.

The shop owner had since hurried over to Roy, looking aghast. “Sir! Are you okay? Whatever happened?”

Roy helped the shop owner heave the bikes off of him, “no idea. But I’m fine.” He reassured the man, accepting the hand up.

“One of the kickstands must be loose.” The shop owner theorized, muscling them over against the wall to lean them there. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

Roy nodded, holding up an appeasing hand. “Perfectly. Please don’t worry about it.”

Once the shop owner had been convinced Roy was perfectly fine, he left to go finish with the family he’d been helping before the minor chaos. Leaving Roy to wander up to a smirking Edward who was staring at a dark blue, nearly black bike. “Pleased with yourself?”

“Fractionally.” Edward grinned, turning sparkling silver eyes on Roy. “You’re lucky I hold back with you.”

Roy gave him an amused smile before turning to look down at the bike. “Do you like this one?”

The side of Edward’s mouth quirked, “I’d like it better if it were black. Not just very dark blue.”

Roy glanced it over, taking note of the contraption as if it truly mattered that he buy Edward a safe bike. “Well,” he began with a forming smile, “you may not be an alchemist anymore, but I am.” And he looked up at Edward’s hopeful face. “So what do you say?”

“Yes!” Edward bounced into the air in delight. “Please?” And he landed directly in front of Roy to clasp his hands together in a begging gesture while turning wide silver eyes on Roy in a look that would have befitted a Spaniel. “Please, Roy?”

Roy stifled his laughter with one hand as he grinned openly at the ghost. “You know, when you act like this you make me feel like the most important person in the world.”

“You are.” Edward wheedled shamelessly. “A manwhore, but still important.”

“Just had to bring that into it…”
“Couldn’t let you get a bigger ego.”

Roy rolled his eyes, but still smiled. “Okay. It’s yours. Now wipe those puppy eyes off your face, god help me if Hazel ever learns that look as well. Between the two of you I’d be doomed for sure.”

Edward cackled menacingly before hopping onto the seat of his new bike with a gleeful smile.

Roy chuckled at Edward’s cackling, reminded that this ghost was the one who seemed set on killing Grand through paranormal means. Sometimes he could hardly believe that such a fearsome guard dog persona lay under that innocent and fun-loving personality he was beginning to know so well. “You’re both ends of the spectrum, aren’t you.” He murmured to himself, before turning to go find the shop owner.

The shop owner was delighted to be making two sales so far this evening. Especially one to the customer who’d been flattened by some of the bikes. “Planning to do some cycling, Colonel?” The shop owner asked, taking correct note of the insignia on Roy’s uniform.

Roy smiled easily. “I hear it’s good for working off stress.” And he eyed the shop owner seriously. “Stress makes you lose your hair. And I’m too young to be losing my hair.”

“Lots of stress then?” The shop owner interpreted.

He sure as hell would have been if he had put off getting Edward a bike any longer. “I’m not waiting for it to get to that point and risk the damage already being begun.”

Once the purchase had been made, Roy thanked the shop owner and walked over to where Edward was perched on the bike seat still. “Hold on, hmm?” He said quietly as he flipped the kickstand up and took the bike by both handlebars now.

Edward nodded, not seeing how hard it could be. His feet rested down on the pedals while he sat straight up with a delighted smile.

Only to screech as Roy moved the bike forward and turned it so it could be wheeled out of the store.

Roy tried not to laugh as he paused, waiting for Edward to regain his balance. “Sure you don’t want training wheels?”

“Shut up.” Edward growled. “You just surprised me.”

Roy nodded sagely, “hold on.” He repeated and started forward again. They made it out of the store fine, as Roy hadn’t had to take a sharp turn. As he walked the bike, now one-handed down the sidewalk, he stuck his other hand in a pocket.

It was to the market next.

“Can’t I try riding yet?” Edward asked as he just sat there as Roy guided the bike steadily along through the ever-thinning throng of people on the sidewalks.

“Nope.” Roy muttered quietly, barely moving his lips.

Edward sighed, and his eyes flickered mischievously as he suddenly remembered where his feet were.

Roy cursed under his breath as the bike gave a lurch forward, and he glared back at Edward who had stopped pedaling now in order to laugh.
And then Edward shrieked as the bike suddenly pitched to the right. His hands flying immediately up to the central bar linking the two handlebars to steady himself.

“That,” Roy began smugly, “is what the bike will do when you start to ride on your own.”

It was Edward’s turn to curse a bit, and vowed that he’d show Roy. He’d be mastering this bike sooner than Roy thought, and then it was on to the motorcycle!

By the time they reached the market the crowds had significantly thinned, and the vendors would be packing to go home in an hour or so, wanting to get some sleep before the next day of market. Roy easily guided the bike to his favorite fruit vendor to frequent.

Once there the kickstand went down on the bike, and Roy stepped over to begin examining cranberries as Edward joined him. “How many would you like?” He asked as he grabbed a small paper sack to put his purchases into.

Edward looked over the berries, running his hands through and over them. “Not many.” And with a sudden burst of inspiration he began to select berries and plop them down into the sack as Roy held it. Clearly not caring if anyone saw.

Roy could only hold the paper sack and try not to smile. He was just glad no one else seemed to be looking their way.

“There.” Edward dusted off his hands in an air of satisfaction.

Roy gave an approving nod as the ghost looked up at him. “We will make your cake then before these spoil.” And he stepped away to pay for his cranberries.

When he returned Edward was already perched back up on the bike smiling happily. And he couldn’t help but smile as well. He was glad that the ghost was so pleased, and apparently so determined to learn how to ride his new bike. Very first bike. He was glad that it was he who was able to give Edward this experience.

And he was immensely looking forward to the laughter that was sure to come from the initial trials. Despite his teasing, he did want Edward to succeed.

“Time to go home.” He smiled at the ghost, and flipped the kickstand back up so he could start the bike towards home.

They had gone perhaps halfway, in residential district again, when Edward spoke up again. “Thank you, Roy.” He said softly.

Roy looked back at Edward warmly. “You’re welcome. I’m glad you’re happy with it.”

Edward nodded shyly. “I’ve not had anyone buy me a gift like this before.’”

Roy turned back around as his eyes darkened. This gift should have been something Edward’s father would give the ghost. But that would never happen now. It wasn’t that he felt as if he was a replacement father to Edward, he knew neither of them felt remotely that way. But still… it should have been Hohenheim’s moment, to give Edward a bike. “Don’t get used to it. I plan on making you my slave for a month to pay me back.”

Edward could only grin and laugh, not needing to hear the teasing tone of Roy’s voice to know the man was joking with him.
Roy smiled as he listened to Edward’s laughter, disrupting it every now and then by pitching the bike off to the right or left to cause the ghost to gasp or growl at him before the laughter began anew. He was beginning to believe Edward was now what was called “slap happy”. He found he didn’t mind it at all.

Finally they reached the gate of the fence around Roy’s home, and he opened it to let them in. At that point Edward finally got off the bike and walked with Roy around to the backyard where he propped it up against the tool shed.

“I can’t wait to get started!” Edward declared even as he followed Roy towards the backdoor of the house.

Roy laughed and tossed a smile at Edward. “Don’t worry, you’ll be falling off of it soon enough.”

Edward gave a haughty sniff. “Just you wait and see, Roy Mustang.”

They entered the house together, and Edward followed Roy into the kitchen, watching as the man poured the berries out into a bowl and then stuck them in the refrigerator for later. And as Roy rummaged next for some dinner he found his gaze attracted once more by something resting innocently enough on a countertop.

That cake.

Edward frowned as he stared at it, “Roy?”

Roy straightened from pulling out some chicken from the fridge, intending to fry it up. “Hm?” He asked back as he began to pull the things he’d need.

“May I get rid of that cake now?” Edward turned to him, silver eyes glittering with a sort of steel to them.

Roy blinked, and looked over to where the cake had sat, forgotten by him, actually. “Cake…”

“Yes, the cake.” Edward repeated in exasperation. “Have you had your trophy sitting there long enough? Can I get rid of it?”

Roy opened his mouth, about to ask why Edward wanted the cake gone so badly, when he thought better of it. It really didn’t matter why… Edward didn’t want it around. And as he’d forgotten it was even there… “you may.” He allowed.

Edward lost no time in triumphantly stalking over to seize the offending confection and dump it unceremoniously into the trash bin.

As Roy watched him, it suddenly dawned on him when he saw how pleased Edward was that it was gone. The ghost didn’t want to have any reminders in the house of the people he’d bedded. For all Edward taunted him about the manwhoring, the ghost didn’t want any sign that one might linger on for more than a night. He was a bit confused as to why… but it was making him smile.

“What?” Edward asked, as he saw Roy smiling at him. “If you wanted it gone you could have done it yourself.”

“No…” Roy shook his head, “it’s not that.”

“Then?” Edward arched a curious eyebrow.
Roy turned away, still smiling. “Nothing.”

Edward stared at him in curiosity and some confusion a moment more before smiling as well. Roy seemed glad the cake was gone too. So quite happily he floated over to sit up on a counter next to the stove Roy was working at. “She probably saw right through you and poisoned it anyway.”

Roy smiled up at the ghost, “probably. And besides,” he tilted his head as he considered the apparition. “I’m making a cake with you.”

Edward was silent for a time as Roy went back to his cooking before he spoke up again. “Did you mean what you said earlier?” And knowing that was hardly fuel for an intelligent answer, added, “about me being your friend? You said friends do nice things for each other…”

Roy smiled as he gazed down at the chicken he was cooking, taking a moment before looking up at the ghost once more. “Yes, I meant it. Very much.”

“Even though I’m dead?” Edward asked in a voice laced with hope.

Roy shook his head quietly, “you’re not dead to me. Not in that way.”

Edward blinked, temporarily speechless. And then like a dormant geyser springing to life once more, the overpowering urge to just hug the man shot through him. But he couldn’t… yet his eyes were shining like silver stars as he finally found words again. “I’m glad you’re here with me, Roy.”

Roy stirred his chicken some more, feeling how happy Edward was. And it made him wonder for a moment just how lonely Edward had been… and had the ghost not believed they were friends by now? It was evident that perhaps Edward had been waiting for permission, or something. But as Edward said those words to him, he looked up once more, captivated in those shining silver eyes. “I’d be nowhere else.”

Neither knew how long they held each other’s gazes before the chicken sizzling in the skillet gave a warning menacing hissing sound that would have preceded a charcoaling like never seen before. And Roy immediately jumped into startled action to rescue his meal.

It was barely rescued in time, but rescue it Roy did, and soon he was sitting down to eat.

“So tomorrow you’re going out…” Edward bit his lip before changing his words, “Thursday, I get you all night?”

Roy nodded, “yes, on Thursday.” But wanting to see what this news would do, added, “also Friday. I can’t be showing up for an early train if I’m hung over and tired. I want to enjoy this weekend with you.”

Edward brightened considerably. For more than the reason he’d be getting Roy all to himself for two nights in a row. They were also going on a weekend trip somewhere together. “And you still won’t tell me where we’re going?”

Roy shook his head with a secretive smile. “It’s not like you have to pack.”

Edward scowled at that, but it was short-lasted as he began smiling again. Everything had gone amazingly right today. Grand had gotten injured some more, he’d gotten a bike, the cake had been dumped in the trash, he was set to make his own cake with Roy, and he was approaching his weekend trip with Roy.

Roy knew where Edward’s thoughts must be, and he quietly laughed to himself as he finished
eating. And once he had the two of them finally headed upstairs. Roy intending to get in a hot shower to relax him, and Edward intending on picking up that book again and finishing it tonight.

And Edward flopped onto Roy’s bed to pick up his book and contentedly begin to read as he heard the shower start. He wasn’t sure that anything could wipe the smile off his face tonight.
Chapter 17

Roy was smiling as he cooked his eggs, the sizzling in the pan background music to Edward’s chattering. The ghost had been so pleased this morning, the minute that he had showed signs of being awake Edward’s voice had been in his ear, telling him all about the book he’d read.

He gathered it had been good, but for the life of him, he could barely manage to follow all the technical stuff this early in the morning. Give him a few more hours and three cups of coffee and it would be no problem, but at this hour? Well, he wasn’t displaying too many outward signs of being as intelligent as he was regarding alchemy. And he was, he couldn’t be where he was with his alchemy if he wasn’t.

So he just smiled and cooked, adding his input in when there was a pause that demanded his opinion, or when his tired mind was actually comprehending.

At the table, however, Edward seemed to have finally run out of things to say about the book.
“Tomorrow can you change the color of the paint on my bike? Since you’re going out and all tonight.”

Roy stabbed a piece of egg as he nodded. “And then you can fall off the bike to your heart’s content.”

“You’re so generous.” Edward rolled his eyes and settled down cross-legged onto the table while he watched Roy eat. “Don’t you have any faith in me at all?”

“You, and gravity.” Roy grinned.

Edward huffed haughtily, and renewed his vow to show Roy that he could master riding a bike. He would do it, and do it soon, for the motorcycle awaited. And that was an incentive that he couldn’t ignore. “I’m a ghost, I’m not affected by gravity.”

“But the bike will be.” Roy smirked, “so you’ll learn to ride it without cheating. Promise?”

The silver eyes widened in incredulousness, “cheat?” Edward echoed in his shock, “I would never cheat. I’ve got a sense of honor you know.”

Roy smiled at the ghost’s indignation at the implication. “That I do know.”

“I’m going to succeed on my own, no ghostly aids involved.” Edward declared firmly, “and you can just watch in awe.”

Roy chuckled through a mouthful of egg, yes, he would certainly be watching. And most likely laughing a great deal. “I’d rather be doing nothing else.”

“And no trying to sabotage me.” Edward rolled his eyes.

Roy looked up from pushing his eggs about his plate, a frown beginning to shadow his brow. “I wouldn’t have thought of it. Besides, I’m not brave enough to make you mad at me.”

Edward smiled at him cheerfully, “unlike Grand, I want you around.”

“And speaking of my notable colleague,” Roy took note of Edward’s snicker, “what do you plan to
do to him next?"

“I’ve not decided yet.” Edward admitted, “these things rather come to me in the moment, not as a product of careful study. If only he could have an alchemy accident. That would be convenient of him to get rid of himself for us.”

Roy’s lips drew into a thin line, “very unlikely. I doubt that his alchemy has ever misfired on him. It would probably have been catastrophic.”

Edward mulled over what he wanted to ask for several moments before deciding that he may as well. “Has yours ever gone wrong against you?”

“When I was first learning, yes.” Roy never would have admitted it to anyone else, not even Maes knew, but with Edward? With Edward he seemed to have no qualms about sharing anything and everything. “It takes a great deal of willpower and focus to do alchemy as I do. And one day when I was seventeen, I think, my focus slipped. I’d not slept in several days… and I lost control of the flames.”

“What happened?”

“I found out how fast my mom is with a garden hose.” A wry smile cracked across Roy’s face. “I thought she’d be mad about it, that I endangered myself like that…” and then his expression softened, “but she just held me until we were both wet from the soaking she gave me. I realized she wasn’t mad at all, I’d really scared her. I’m all she has left since my father died. And ever since then I’ve never allowed myself to lose focus on controlling my alchemy. Even if it is a more passive effort now. I don’t want to ever scare her like that again.”

Edward remained silent for some time, watching Roy even as the man became lost in memories. “I’m sure she knows just how much you do for her sake.”

Roy snapped out of his thoughts and looked up into silver eyes. “I’d like to think so. Not much escapes that woman’s notice.”

Our mothers have something in common then.” Edward smiled nostalgically.

Roy said nothing to that, letting Edward have this moment just for him. And he finished his eggs before he said anything more as he walked his plate to the sink. “Just remember to be careful when your next bright idea about Grand comes to you.” He glanced over his shoulder towards the ghost. “I would be surprised if after the next injury he doesn’t begin to grow suspicious.”

Edward nodded absently, “I know what I’m doing. You just work faster at getting what you need to slide into his position. I can take care of myself.”

“Still,” Roy turned to him, dark eyes serious, “be careful.”

Edward didn’t respond at first, but finally he slipped down to stand on the floor in the middle of the table. “I promise I will be.”

Roy nodded in acceptance, “we should be going. I’ve a perfect record going now, I’d hate to mess it up by showing up late.”

“It’s thanks to me you’ve become more responsible.” Edward reminded him, floating after the man who was heading for the front door.

“Partly.” Roy agreed as he grabbed his keys and wallet. “But I’d been planning showing up on time
every day before we met. When I was transferred to Central it was time to abandon some acts I’d been putting on. My completing work early though is purely all you.”

Edward smiled cheerfully, knowing why Roy did. And the man didn’t even have to. Roy didn’t have to be and do a lot of things that he was now, just for the sake of a ghost. Yet, he was, and he did. “Maybe the others should have requested chess games with you daily as well.” He teased, chuckling at Roy’s face.

“I think it wouldn’t have worked so well.” Roy gave a quiet laugh and opened the front door. “They don’t have the enthusiasm you do about it.”

Edward followed him out the door thoughtfully. “I better not lose my enthusiasm about chess then until you’ve retired from being Fuhrer. Otherwise the country is screwed.”

“Yes, Ed.” Roy chuckled as he locked the house up and turned to make his way down the stoop stairs. “The entire future of Amestris depends on you.” Rather ironic, really, the jesting thought that thousands of lives might depend on someone who was already dead.

“I knew you’d admit it one day.” Edward bantered back with a grin.

Roy could only grin and shake his head, not able to actually speak to the ghost at the moment. Not when he could be easily seen by the other people who were out and about in various places on the cool morning. So he continued to walk to work, flanked by one cheerful ghost.

Once they got to Headquarters it was clear that a great amount of people on the floor where Roy worked were in a tizzy. And as Roy glared his way through their ranks with an iciness that seemed in great conflict for one heralded as the Flame Alchemist, it became clear why.

General Grand was coming back to work today, and by the snippets Edward was catching in the corridors, wasn’t in a good mood.

“How do they know this before he’s even here?” Edward frowned as he tagged along after Roy, relying on the man’s parting of the crowd to get through without having to pass through anyone.

Roy waited until they’d turn down a corridor that was less central to where Grand’s office area was. Thus, it was empty and much quieter. “Because his maids call ahead and forewarn those who are in a position of ‘need to know’.”

“So why were those people all frantic?” Edward frowned, “and how do you know about the maids?”

“I know because it pays to know ones enemies.” Roy explained, “as for why they’re frantic… Grand in a bad mood isn’t a good thing for anyone working directly under him. He’ll take it out on them, and hard. They’re rushing around trying to catch up on work, or anything else that might set him off.”

Edward wasn’t sure he liked the sound of that. But he didn’t feel guilty for doing what he’d done to the man even so. If he had to pick between Roy and people he’d never met, and never would meet, he’d choose Roy to keep Grand away from. “You don’t do that to do you? Take things out on the others?”

Roy’s eyes were wide in surprise as he looked over at the ghost. “Why would you even think that? Even if I could get away with it considering one of them is my best friend.”

“I was just checking.” Edward pacified with a smile. “So are you safe then from Grand today? Or do I need to take inventory of potential projectiles that are in your office.”
Roy rolled his eyes, wondering how in the world he’d ever begin to explain things being thrown at the general from out of nowhere. “I don’t report to him. I report directly to the Fuhrer, part of the package deal of being considered a hero.” His lips drew into a thin line as he shook off his thoughts about that. “Even if I’m not a general, I still get privileges.”

“So why did Grand stop by that one day then?” Edward frowned as he floated up into the air to keep up, momentarily tired of walking.

“To incur your ghostly wrath.” Roy smirked just a bit. “Because I used him to help get me transferred here. Unfortunately any privileges I have do not apply to location of placement. Naturally he must now think he holds some sort of power over me in the principles of equivalent exchange… but the only show of gratitude he’ll be receiving from me is an ousting.”

Edward thought that over for a moment before asking, “he wouldn’t suspect this of you? After everything you’ve told me about people wanting to spy on you because you’re dangerous.” And as an afterthought added, “apparently.”

Roy chuckled to himself at the correction to the ghost’s statement. He wasn’t in a hurry though to prove to Edward that he was dangerous, they’d be together for the rest of his earthly life. He knew there would be more than plenty opportunities for such demonstrations. “If he’s half as intelligent as he was when I first knew him, then he does. But it doesn’t matter. He won’t win against me.”

Edward nodded slowly, but made a silent vow to keep doing what he could to get Grand out of the way. He couldn’t just be idle when that monster was still in a position to harm Roy.

They reached Roy’s office areas, and found it empty as per usual aside from themselves.

“I know I’ve been showing up a few minutes early and all because of you,” Roy said as he let them into his personal office, “but I’m starting to wonder if they weren’t showing up on time before either.”

“You could always mess with their heads for a few days and show up late again, just to see what would happen.” Edward suggested with a grin.

“You mean stake the place out?” Roy laughed.

Edward smirked at him, “don’t tell me you’ve never wanted to do a stake out on your own team?”

“We’ll see how bored I get come winter when the weather is crap.” Roy walked over to flop into his desk chair with a bit of a sigh, and turned it at a tilt so he could look out over the courtyard.

Edward floated over to look out the windows as well, now that he could finally see past them and the world beyond was no longer white and shapeless. He still wasn’t entirely used to it, the experience still gave him a little thrill inside. “Does bad weather affect your alchemy? Rain and such?”

Roy smiled a bit, giving a little laugh deep in his chest. “If my gloves get wet, yes. But that’s the only time. Which is something very few know, I can count the number even including you on one hand. Even Riza believes I’m washed out if it rains, even if my gloves aren’t wet. It’s one of my trump cards I don’t care to reveal until it’s absolutely necessary to my mortality.”

Edward thought about it for a moment or two, the confusion of how fire could still overcome water enough to be worthy of a trump eventually giving way to a startled understanding when he considered what water was made out of. “I’ll bet that’s something to see…” he whispered in an awed voice, “is it even controllable though?”
Roy’s smile was wryly amused as he briefly looked over to the silvery ghost before glancing back out the window. “Impressed already even though you’ve not seen?” But he did not pause there, he wasn’t fishing for compliments. “I wouldn’t call what happens control… not like my usual control. If I attack into the rain, I have to put everything I am into focusing on directing it. Control isn’t truly possible, all I can hope is to give it some semblance of direction when I snap my fingers.”

Edward could imagine what would happen… all that extra hydrogen in the air? And the way rain formed as it fell? It was a recipe for an explosive chain reaction. He could see how it would be something Roy would want to keep to himself as a trump card. “When did you first realize what it would do?”

“In Ishval, actually.” Roy’s masked expression would have betrayed nothing to most who saw it, but Edward wasn’t fooled. “There was one night it was raining, yet we still had to launch an offensive attack on this town. Homes really…”

Edward knew he was thinking of the innocent people that must have been inside of them, but he kept quiet, letting Roy speak.

“I was directed to attack despite the inclement weather… we’d been transported there in a covered vehicle so my gloves were still dry. And so I did as I was ordered.” Roy fell silent for a moment, but Edward didn’t interrupt. “The vehicle protected me from the explosion, but none of the others who’d been sent with me survived. They’d all been making their way towards the town to prevent escapees while I stayed dry for demolition. The town was leveled into ash, as was most of the surrounding desert. In my report I had to make up a credible story to protect myself, and ended up claiming that the town had been housing gunpowder for armaments production.”

“You were safe though.” Edward pointed out, “say what you will, I know how you still feel about that part of your past… but I’m glad you were okay.”

Roy’s face broke slowly into a smile as he looked up at the ghost floating at his side. But anything he might have said was forgotten when the door to his office opened, announcing Hawkeye’s presence, as well as that of the day’s work.

“I see you made it through the crowd,” Roy greeted amicably, “what’s the status of the ‘wounded in the line of duty’ list now?”

Riza smiled angelically as she dropped a stack of paperwork onto Roy’s desk with a satisfying thump. “I’m sure I have no idea what you’re referring to, sir.”

“I’ll just bet you don’t.” Roy gave a deep chuckle as he faced his chair forward again. “But I wager if I asked you to hand over your weapon and checked the chamber, you’d be emptied of bullets.”

“Then it’s fortunate you know better than to relieve me of my gun, just in case.” Riza nodded at him as she moved to take her leave.

Roy however hadn’t quite had enough fun yet. “What, no salute? What if someone were to walk in here and see that on a day like today?”

“I’d have faith in you to come out on top.” Riza smirked at him, but offered a salute anyway, which caused Roy to laugh as she made her way from the office.

As soon as the door closed Roy’s laughter abruptly died down into a groan, and he leaned forward to let his head connect with the stack of paperwork.

Edward eyed him in bemusement, one of his eyebrows quirking just a bit. “You okay? You’re not
having a mental breakdown, are you? Those eggs not sitting right?”

Roy let his head fall to the side, jostling the papers in the process, to look at the ghost. “The eggs are fine. Don’t mind me; I’ll just be happier when the majority of the forms I have to look at aren’t in regards to minor damage claims.”

“I’m going to go read a book.” Edward decided suddenly with a grin, and fairly zoomed through the air to do so.

“Rub it in.” Roy grumbled and lifted his head off the stack with a sigh before grabbing his pen and getting to work.

The hours drug on for them both. For Roy it was because of minor damage claims, for Edward it was because it soon was passed eight o’clock and beyond, and he knew Grand was present in the building. It was difficult to resist leaving to do something to the man, but he knew that he must. Another accident so soon would begin to look suspicious. He’d done things to the occupants of this office before Roy, so he knew when it was time to retreat for a time. Even if he didn’t like it for many reasons.

So he sat quietly on one of the black couches and read his book.

On Grand’s end, however, things weren’t so peaceful as minor damage claims and alchemy texts…

General Grand was standing stiffly in the center of his office, a small ice chest containing baggies of ice for his various injuries was set at his feet. One such baggie was hanging limply from one of his hands, as he was unwilling to show a sign of weakness when facing anyone. And currently there was someone else in his office.

The General’s secretary had just finished reading to him the list she’d created of repairs to the office that would be needed, including a replacement chair and shelf, and the estimated cost of it all. “Is there anything else you would like put on it?”

“I’ll be needing new picture frames, obviously. As for my personal effects that were broken, add an amount to the cost needed to repair the wall and skim it off the top when it comes in. Place it in my personal account.” Grand instructed, and when he saw her taking notes, “you’re not writing that last down are you?!”

She looked up and fixed him with a withering look. “I’m not stupid, sir.”

Grand returned the look with equal intensity. “That’ll be all for the list. And Beth,” he called after her when she turned to leave, “send a few janitors up to clean up this mess.” He waved a hand back at the disaster that still cluttered the floor behind his desk.

“Yes, sir.” Beth gave him a quick nod and strode purposefully from the office to do so.

Grand sighed, and then groaned as he lifted the ice pack up to apply it to his shoulder. He’d been having to rotate where he put the ice packs, now that he really only had one good arm with which to move his hand about. “I almost think I prefer that prank Kimblee played on me to this.”

Back before the Ishval war, at one of his birthday parties, Kimblee had been the one to pass him his slice.

…never again did he trust Kimblee with his food. Not that now it mattered. But he learned that day just how dangerous exploding cake was. And that candle atop his slice had just been a bonus.
Eventually he was roused from his thoughts when a knock sounded on his office door and Beth poked her head around it.

“Sir? There are two janitors here to clean up.”

Grand nodded, and hobbled stiffly over to one of the stiff-backed chairs set in front of his desk and lowered himself into it. “Send them in.” He said, dropping the baggie of ice to his desk.

“Yes, sir.” Beth withdrew, and some moments later the door opened again to admit the two janitors.

Michael and Gil filed into the room, a bucket and a broom with dustpan between them. They were trying not to show their displeasure about being called to do this, their shift had been nearly up, and now they’d be going home late. But the moment that a call for some janitors to attend to cleaning Grand’s office had been received, suddenly all their esteemed colleagues had become missing.

“Get it all cleaned up,” Grand snapped at them as he pulled some of his files of paperwork across his desk to begin looking through them, “and be quick about it. Some of us actually have important jobs to do and this mess isn’t conducive to it.”

Though he was hoping they’d give him reason to snatch them up for more of his lab rats. There were plenty of people in the world to fill menial positions like theirs. But there were only so many people from the sects of life that could go missing before it began to attract unneeded attention. And he had yet to go after the janitorial sect.

“Yes, sir.” Gil nodded, and Michael followed him over to where the mess lay.

Grand glared after them until they’d gotten down on the floor to begin cleaning, only then did he turn to his paperwork and begin to flip through it. At the first hint of noise barking at them sharply to keep it down, while inwardly smiling to himself.

Down on the floor meanwhile the janitors had switched to barely a whisper as the continued to clean up the mess. And they were exchanging uncertain looks in between.

“This doesn’t make sense.” Gil murmured as they worked.

Michael was in agreement. “It looks like something that ghost would have done.” He looked up at the wall where the shelf had fallen from. “But this isn’t the right office.”

Gil nodded subtly. “You don’t think that the ghost is haunting the rest of Headquarters too now, do you?”

“Seems that way. But I guess we’ll be finding out.” Michael knew that the signs were certainly there that whatever ghost had been haunting the office Roy Mustang now was in seemed to be active again.

First the cleaning supplies incident, and now this? Years ago all the janitors had learned the commonalities of the paranormal happenings, and what was before them now didn’t seem to suit anything but those commonalities.

The only thing that didn’t seem entirely right was the fact that there had been an injury on Grand’s behalf. Never before had anything that whatever had haunted Mustang’s office, and now apparently more, harmed someone to the extent the general had been.

“Let’s just hope that we do not attract its attentions.” Gil muttered as they finished tidying everything up again.
The two worked fast, both in case the paranormal being that seemed to be active again was present, and the fact that no one liked to stay in Grand’s presence for long when he was in a mood like he was currently. They’d been on the receiving end already of quite a few scathing remarks about how slow they were working.

And when they were done they grabbed up everything that needed to be disposed of, even if it was a load that should have been carried in two trips, and quickly beat a retreat.

Grand sneered after them, the wheels in his mind turning for a reason other than what his paperwork entailed.

Michael and Gil meanwhile disposed of the ruined items into the trash dumpsters at the loading docks around back of the mess hall. But they didn’t immediately head for home afterwards, as they could have, they headed for the small lounge that was set aside for the janitors’ use.

“In one piece I see.” The head janitor smirked from the small sofa, over the top of his magazine, as he saw the two enter.

“No thanks to you.” Gil scowled, and walked over to put away the bucket of cleaning supplies.

Michael however was less keen on being offended straight off. “You remember what we told you guys about the office being haunted again? The one Colonel Mustang’s in now?” He asked as he flopped onto one of the other sofas, looking about at the small group of other janitors that were present.

For a big place like Headquarters, many were needed to take proper care of all the grounds and buildings.

“What about it?” Asked one of the other janitors now, a woman named Kim. And she was not the only one in the room looking wary.

“The shelf didn’t fall on its own, and the chair wouldn’t have collapsed like that either. It all looks like things that have happened before to the occupants of that office before Mustang.” Michael divulged.

The head janitor frowned at that, but not in disbelief. No, they all here believed that something not of this world was in that office… but to have finally ventured into another one after so long? It was even more unnerving than it had been the first time they began to realize there was something unnatural in the office that was now Colonel Mustang’s domain. “But the general was injured…”

“No one else has ever been.” One of their fellows mused aloud.

“No.” Michael shook his head from where he stood. “It’s never harmed anyone before. It makes you wonder though, why it finally chooses to haunt other offices now, of all times. And why it’s harmed the general.”

Kim looked down at her clasped hands worriedly, “it must be unhappy about something… it’s a gentle spirit. Whatever it is. Something the general has done, or is doing, must have upset it greatly to make it set something up to cause harm.”

“But what?” Michael mused from his place on a sofa.

The head janitor looked at them all sternly then, “it’s not a question of what. Not for us. I don’t want to see any of you become the general’s plaything just because he gets suspicious that you may know something about what happened. As far as anyone outside this room is concerned,” he let his eyes
drift towards the door, “we don’t even believe in ghost stories. Don’t let them think otherwise.”

“You’re right,” Gil agreed as he slumped against one wall, “whatever made the spirit angry, it must be something big. It’s safer if we just keep cleaning up the messes, and not incur its anger by trying to interfere.”

And with that, it was decided. They would act as if they knew nothing. For their own safety.

Meanwhile up in Roy’s office, Edward was grinning in amusement as he watched Roy and Maes.

“Come on, Roy!” Maes wheedled, half lying on Roy’s desk as he brandished a large wallet album of pictures all centered on one subject – Elysia. “Do it for her sake! She’s so cute! How can you resist those doe eyes?”

Roy stared at the pictures with a deadpan expression. “The same way I resist them when women and even some men try to convince me to stay longer than the night.”

“You just lie and leave them anyway.” Maes frowned, “are you telling me you’d lie to me? To my daughter’s eyes?” He waggled the photos pointedly. “And since when do you associate my daughter in such a way, with that riffraff you pick up? You better not be waiting to settle down until Elysia is eighteen, because I’d hate to ruin our friendship by killing you. And I would.”

Roy rolled his eyes, “that’s just gross. My morals may be warped, but they’re not that warped.”

Maes snorted, but didn’t argue it. “Do it for Elysia?” He returned to his original plea that had been going on almost four entire minutes now.

“No.” Roy adhered to his earlier answer quite calmly.

Edward was snickering softly from the couch arm where he had perched himself when Maes came in.

“Even just a hint?” Maes’s expression was steadily turning bewildered. He’d never had such trouble extracting something from his friend before when he truly wanted to know the answer. “You can give me the first letter of the place you’re running off to this weekend, and I can do the rest myself and get a map!”

“Absolutely not.” Roy smirked a bit. “And don’t let me catch you trying to follow me or any such nonsense. You’re allowed to pull passenger records on Sunday, but that’s it. I’m not telling you myself, and I don’t want you stalking me.”

Maes was not to be so easily dissuaded though, he still had to at least make one last attempt. “Gracia told me I couldn’t come home tonight if I didn’t find out.”

Roy chuckled at the feeble effort, “you and I both know Gracia better than that. But on the very, very slim chance you’re telling the truth, you can come out drinking with me tonight. I’ll find you a nice girl for the night, and then I’ll go find myself a nice guy for the night. I’ve had too many girls lately.”

Maes’s expression was as unsympathetic as Jean’s had been when Roy had said something similar to him just the other day. “Find yourself someone nice to spend many nights with. At the point you begin to think you’ve had one too many of something, it’s time to just find one.”

Roy shuddered at the mere thought. “Don’t say such things. Marriage and I don’t see eye to eye.”

“I’m not saying you have to get married, though it’d be nice to finally return the favor of being a best
man at a wedding.” Maes straightened up a bit and began to fold up the many pictures in their plastic sleeves draping from his wallet.

“Maybe Havoc will get hitched soon.” Roy mused thoughtfully.

Maes rolled his eyes, “Havoc isn’t like you. He wants to find someone, one someone. You might consider thinking one of these days that committing to one person is hardly the most frightening thing you’ve faced in your life.” And he stood up, placing a picture he’d pulled from its plastic sleeve onto Roy’s desk. “That’s for you.”

Roy picked up the picture, smiling in defeat as he saw Elysia beaming up at him from it and waving. “Oh fine, I’ll keep one.”

“That’s better.” Maes smirked and tucked his wallet back into the inside pocket of his uniform jacket. “Just know that one day I’m going to say ‘I told you so’ about the commitment thing.”

Roy snorted softly, “fatherhood has made you delusional.”

“Some delusions are worth making reality.” Maes retorted with a smile and gave his customary half-wave and half-salute gesture as he turned to leave. “I’ll be getting back to spying now. And reaffirming why I’m so happy you know how to control your temper with us.”

Roy chuckled and smiled as he watched his best friend leave through the door, shutting it behind him.

Edward floated over to peer at the picture Roy held clasped between a thumb and forefinger, smiling as he saw who it was of. “Has he tried giving you pictures before?”

“Too many to count.” Roy nodded, and tucked the photograph away for safe keeping. “He thinks that up until now I’ve just thrown them out.”

“And you’ve not?”

“No.” Roy looked up at the ghost, “I’m actually quite the sap about such things. I guess it’s because I’m glad my mother took so many pictures of us as a family, before my dad passed away. All I have now are pictures of him… but I’m really glad I have them. So I keep pictures.”

A flicker of sadness passed through the silver eyes, and Edward turned to look out the window. “I don’t have any pictures. Well,” he forced a lighthearted laugh, “obviously.”

Roy’s lips drew together in a line as he debated what was on his mind, before finally deciding that he’d let Edward choose. “If you’d like, I have an old photograph from years ago. I told you the day we met that I knew your father a long time ago. I know you don’t think much of him… and in my own way through knowing you I have some similar sentiments, but if you’d like I still have that photograph. You can have it. The way I see it, you should have things of your own.”

Edward stared at Roy long and hard for some time, until Roy began to fidget under the piercing silver stare.

“I think I’d like that.” Edward said at last. “I may be angry with him even now for abandoning us, but…”

Roy shook his head, “you don’t have to explain. I’ll find it for you and let you have it.”

Edward smiled faintly, “thanks.” And he hesitated for a moment before going back to something
Maes had said. “So you’re really that against commitment? Though Maes is right, you know, you
don’t have to get married to whoever it is.”

“I’m happy with the way my home life is now.” Roy waved it off, but didn’t add that he didn’t want
to bring anyone else into his life now that he had Edward as his constant companion. They’d rarely
ever get to talk or just spend time as the two of them if someone else was in the picture.

He didn’t say it, because he knew that the ghost would feel guilty, or try and devise a way to allow
both things.

“Do you have any pictures of your parents at home?” Edward asked, he’d been thinking about
everything, and realized that Roy’s home life didn’t seem to include family photographs on the walls.

“Not a one.” Roy leaned back in his chair and stared up at the ceiling. “Safer that way. I like people
to be under the forgetful impression that I don’t have a family. Certainly not a dad anymore, but I’ve
still got mom. And just in case my place were ever broken into, I don’t want her to be
compromised.”

“I bet she’s careful anyway though.” Edward floated up back into Roy’s eyesight, hovering in the air
now above the man and positioned so he appeared to be laying face down. Sweeping his silver hair
over to one side he made as if he were propping the side of his head up on his hand.

Roy chuckled knowingly. “Careful and dangerous. It’s not just her personality that makes her strong.
Kind-hearted though she is. Apparently my grandfather taught her to shoot a gun. I’ve never tried
testing her… but I do know there are guns in the house.”

“There are guns in your house?” Edward asked, suddenly curious.

Roy took one look at the curiosity on that face and immediately his eyes widened in alarm. “I’m not
letting you near any guns. That’s all I need, a ghost with a trigger finger.”

“Oh like I’d shoot you.” Edward scoffed.

“Don’t default Hazel like that!” He hissed, cracking a smile as Edward began to laugh.

“Not for him!” Edward denied between laughs. “Just for the sake of knowing!”

Roy wasn’t too sure he believed that. “There’s one. And don’t you be tearing apart my house to find
it. Goodness knows you know where the kitchen knives are, not that you’d ever need something like
that.”

Edward smirked and suddenly floated off to the couch, still horizontal to the floor. “Just provide me
with plenty of cast iron coat racks.” And he sank into his seat, right side up, and picked up the
alchemy text once more. “Now quit slacking off, I have a new strategy I want to try against you at
chess.”

Roy straightened in his chair and glowered at the ghost even as he picked up his pen once more.
“I’m not slacking off, I was accosted by a relentless best friend.”

Edward glowered back at him mockingly. “And what am I?”

“I’d say a waste of space, but you’re incorporeal and quite small as it is.” Roy grinned, and promptly
ducked as the thick tome came flying at his head.

It bounced off the window, somehow not shattering, and fell to the floor with a thump and angry
“Now, Ed,” Roy pacified through his grin as he tried not to laugh under the silvery glare he was receiving, “that isn’t how we should treat books.” And he bent over to pick it back up and dust off the covers.

“Oh, shut up!” Edward scowled and flounced over to snatch the book from Roy’s hands.

Roy was silently shaking in laughter as Edward went back over to the couch to resume reading. It was a good thing that his hands were so steady though, else his signatures never would have come out as anything legible.

Meanwhile Edward was pretending to read as he smiled while watching Roy covertly out of the corner of his eye from behind a curtain of silver hair that had fallen forward when he’d bowed his head over the book once more. He was glad to see Roy so happy…

…but that it would last long once he faced off against the man in a game of chess.
Chapter 18

By the time the lunch hour came around, Roy had successfully finished over half of his workload for the day, and Edward had gotten through nearly an entire book. Which boded well, at least on Roy’s end, for the rest of the day. Even despite Maes coming to harass him, he’d finish in plenty of time for a session of chess games with his ghostly companion. A fortunate circumstance, for Edward was on his last book.

It was about the time that Edward turned to the last chapter that a knock sounded on the office door.

Roy looked over at Edward quickly to check that the ghost had dropped the book to the couch and it was no longer floating in midair, before calling for whomever it was to enter.

And Breda did so, shutting the door behind him before walking promptly up to his commanding officer’s desk. “Sir, we were going to have lunch out in twenty minutes, and were wondering if you’d be joining us again?”

“Go with them.” Edward replied promptly, already knowing that Roy would be waiting for his opinion without needing Roy to mimic the act of thinking about it.

Roy withheld the smile that wanted to slip through at Edward’s immediate response. “I’ll be joining you.” And this time he didn’t ask where they planned to go, as Edward didn’t seem concerned about it. Which meant that the ghost was truly beginning to recover from the culture shock of being exposed to a larger world. And that was something to celebrate.

Breda seemed pleased by the response, and he nodded quickly with a broad smile that nearly left the size of his waist to shame. “I’ll let the others know.”

But Edward was not the only one who instantly became suspicious of that grin Breda was sporting, and before the man could even do an about-face, Roy was speaking again. “One moment, why do you look so happy about this?”

Breda gave him a scandalized look, “sir, I am merely glad you’ll be joining us again. I have no ulterior motives.”

“Yeah.” Roy rolled his eyes, “you don’t, but Hughes does. So what’d he put you all up to? Sodium pentathol administered by an accidental bump into me and hope I don’t feel the needle?”

If Breda had looked scandalized before, now it was warring with apprehension. “I wouldn’t say he went to that extreme, sir…” he said slowly.

“Good!” Roy announced grandly, “because I built up a resistance to it a long time ago and I’d have to charbroil everyone involved for testing otherwise.”

Breda blanched.

Roy smirked devilishly as he linked the very tips of his fingers together and stared piercingly over them at Breda. “So… what did Hughes say?”

“Only asked that we might have a waitress spike your drink with Everclear…” Breda trailed off, before adding quickly, “not that we were going to! Hawkeye nearly shot him between the eyes!”
“You needn’t look so worried.” Roy began to laugh. “Even if you did, it wouldn’t have worked. I’ve drunk so much alcohol in my life that if Hughes thinks even a spike of Everclear will get me, he’s sorely mistaken. But I admire his ingenuity. Everclear is colorless… tasteless… but I assure you that all the stuff will do to me is make me very happy, but not at all loose of tongue for his nefarious motivations.”

Breda breathed a sigh of relief. “I was just glad you were going because then maybe he’d believe we had and stop pestering us to try getting you to talk. You’re the interrogation specialist though!”

Roy chuckled and nodded briefly before lowering his hands. “If he questions you about it, just say that you have. I’ll deal with him myself so he stops trying to harass everyone else into doing what he cannot.”

“Yes, sir.” Breda smiled, but more naturally this time. “Thank you, sir.”

Roy gave a slight wave of one hand. “You sound like an obedience manual, go away before you make my head hurt.”

And Breda did so looking cheerfully amused, shutting the door behind him gently.

“You were supposed to say ‘dismissed’.” Edward reminded helpfully from where he still sprawled on the couch.

Roy gave the ghost a withering look, but smiled. “You’re dismissed too. Go on, shoo, spirit.”

Said spirit smirked and didn’t budge. “You’d miss me too much, I think I’ll stay here.” And then he looked down at his silvery hands with a twinge of bittersweet amusement. “Else I’d miss you.”

Unsure of whether or not he was supposed to have heard that last part, Roy slowly smiled. “Best stay with me then. It’s what I want most anyway.”

Edward looked back up at him sharply, his expression slowly softening as a smile pulled faintly at the corners of his lips. “I wouldn’t be free otherwise.” He replied quietly.

Roy didn’t say anything, just continued to gaze back into the silver eyes that even at this distance, seemed to be all he could see. Yes, Edward beside him was what he wanted most out of anywhere the ghost could be. And Edward had so many more places he could be now. So to still have the ghost here with him now? It was an indescribable sort of happiness.

“So…” Edward ventured a bit hesitantly into the silence that had settled between them to broach something that was still on his mind, though not once did they break their gaze. “Do you think that they’ll not try and do something to you to help Maes? Or do you want me to keep a watch on things.”

Roy absently picked up a pen to begin twirling it between his fingers as he studied the ghost. “They shouldn’t. If they do, I can handle it. But if you want to keep an eye about for me, I wouldn’t say no. Hassles avoided are no longer hassles.”

“Even if something did affect you adversely,” Edward replied with growing seriousness, “I wouldn’t leave you on your own. Ghost or not, I’d do whatever I could to help you.”

“I know.” Roy replied simply, though he was still grateful for the fact that they both seemed to have unconsciously accepted. They relied on each other and they’d both do whatever it took to stay together. “But you’re not obsolete as a ghost. No one but I may be able to see or hear you, but you still can touch most things. Maybe not living things, but at least that’s something.”
Edward smiled faintly, a chuckle stopping halfway in his chest. “You don’t realize just how much being able to touch even just inanimate objects means, when it’s all you have left of what it once meant to be alive. It’s not just something to me, it’s everything.”

Roy slowly smiled back as he twirled his pen a bit faster. “You’re right. That would mean a great deal.”

Edward nodded airily. “Especially if I have to rope you and drag you back home. I think that it would work.”

Roy rolled his eyes at the mental image, but grinned nonetheless. “Why do I get the feeling you’re eager to try it, just to drag me over all the bumps and sharp rocks possible?”

“I would never!” Edward exclaimed, affronted, but it was a reaction that was somewhat compromised by the widening grin on his face.

“Well let’s just hope we don’t need to explore that situation anytime soon, if ever.” Roy grimaced a bit and shuddered before turning his gaze back to his paperwork, wanting to get a bit more done before lunch… something that only last week would have sounded very odd.

“Spoilsport.” Edward muttered under his breath, but knew Roy had heard him judging by the slight smirk that came and went. And as Roy got back to work, he turned back to the last chapter in his book feeling more than a little amused.

Eventually the minute hand on the clock shifted to the ‘6’, and Roy stood up while laying his pen down on the desk. He didn’t even need to say anything, and Edward was marking and laying his book aside. Roy only yawned a bit and reached his hands up over his head for a languid full-body stretch that popped his left shoulder and at least three vertebrae.

Edward gave him an amusedly bewildered look, “I thought you were only twenty seven.”

“Shut up.” Roy growled as he lowered his hands and walked around his desk. “You try sitting at a desk doing paperwork for that long when you’ve got a body like I do.”

“An old one?” Edward smirked, trying not to laugh just yet.

Roy swatted in the ghost’s direction, though he knew it’d do no good. “My body is meant to be doing things that induce rippling muscles, that there at the desk is the exact opposite. So it affects me adversely.”

Edward couldn’t help but start laughing, though he tried to stop... he really did. “Rippling muscles? Please, I don’t need that visual, thanks.”

“You live with me.” Roy reminded him pointedly.

“Ah,” Edward agreed grandly, his laughter at a halt, “well, I guess I can’t have everything.”

Roy rolled his eyes at the ghost’s silliness, and shook his head with a smile. “You’re feeling a bit bratty today, aren’t you.” He observed as he left the ghost’s side to go over to the coat rack and fetch his coat.

Edward hitched his knees up so he could fold his legs up under him while floating over to Roy. “I’m always bratty.” He corrected with a prideful smile.

Roy paused, as if he were thinking about it, before he nodded side-to-side with a quirk of his lips.
“That is true, even when you’re being sweet you’ve still been a brat somewhere in the day. Or you will be.”

“You know me so well.” Edward laughed.

“Mmm.” Roy hummed as he turned to the door now, resting a hand on the knob as he looked over his shoulder at Edward. “I know friends, and I know enemies. But knowing you is worth more to me. And very few people are in that category.”

Edward couldn’t help but smile, and though he wasn’t sure what was good enough to say to that, he still knew one thing that couldn’t be incorrect, “thank you.”

Roy gave him a swift smile before turning to open the door and let them out.

It was in that moment that the very thing to come next to Edward’s mind, was quickly said. “You’re the only person I know.”

Despite where he was, Roy turned sharply to look back at the ghost who was still floating there in the office behind him.

Edward smiled almost apologetically, “sure, I know people, I observe them… but you’re the only person I actually know. Without you, I’m alone again. So you’re the only person in that category.” He said, toying a bit at the last with what Roy had just said.

Roy knew he couldn’t say anything here, as much as he might want to, but as something inside him softened in an almost sad way for the ghost, he smiled. He knew it would have to suffice as an answer, and by the look in the silver eyes, it sufficed.

“Sir?”

Roy turned now, seeing Edward shoot by his head before he shut the door. “I’m coming. Thought I saw something.”

“Say that you thought you saw a ghost.” Edward prompted eagerly.

Roy nearly burst out laughing right then and there, and was only saved by Havoc leaning to one side to peer at the door. “A shocking lack of paperwork, perhaps? You’ve been doing a lot of it lately, sir.”

Roy didn’t dignify that with an answer. “Are we ready?”

“Yes.” The answer came from Hawkeye who snapped the chamber of her standard military issue handgun shut. And she holstered it with a slight smirk as she ignored the paled complexions of every single man in the room.

Falman however was older, and thus seemed to feel he had less to lose in life as he eyed her warily. “Did I miss a memo? Are we going into battle against the school children?”

She chuckled mirthlessly as she righted her uniform so it partially concealed the weapon once more. “Just as a deflective measure for a certain missing member of the Colonel’s team.”

Roy gulped, for both he and his missing best friend as he edged towards the door a bit cautiously. “He must have really irritated you all. But try not to kill him, he’ll be all normal again come Monday.”
“It was more the new pictures of Elysia, sir,” Hawkeye corrected quite calmly, “than anything to do with you. I couldn’t care less what you’re doing this weekend.”

Roy was still trying to figure out whether or not that could have been an insult as he headed the group out of the office and down the hallway. He wasn’t too sure where Edward was, and couldn’t exactly look around for the ghost, but he trusted that he was somewhere behind him… or above. One could never tell when it came to those who weren’t bound by the laws of gravity.

Meanwhile Edward lagged behind the group, though he still went along with them. Each step closer to the stairs was one more towards Grand’s office, and he was having to restrain himself from floating on over to see how things were going. And such restraint made him force himself to go slower.

There was less chance of getting carried away.

When the group finally passed through the foyer of Headquarters and out into the open towards the main gate, Edward floated up and over to be on Roy’s right hand side which was open and free of the others. And the only inclination towards recognizing Edward’s presence that Roy gave, was a slight upturn of his lips before his mask was once more back in place.

“So where is it you all have planned to go this time?” Roy asked as they passed through the main gate and onto the public sidewalk that wrapped around the towering gray brick walls.

“There’s a sandwich shop about two blocks from here that I tried last night,” Havoc said as he more or less led the way. “Good food… cute waitresses,” he mentally ticked the pluses off before giving his commanding officer a grudging look, “cute waiters for those of us who’ve had too many women recently.”

“Oh, good!” The cheerfulness of Roy’s tone only served to further make Havoc glower at him, but he didn’t notice, he was too busy trying not to smile at Edward’s muttered “you’re hopeless” than anything else.

Perhaps many did view it as being hopeless… but as for his own opinion? He viewed it as if it were the most normal thing on this world. The spectrum of normalcy not including the ghost at his side, just for the sake of this one time.

When they reached the sandwich shop of cute staff and good food, which was self-seating, they found a table near one of the many windows and sat down while grabbing menus from the center stand. And once again, there were not enough chairs for Edward.

But knowing that he wasn’t in a position to truly complain, as only Roy could see him, he settled for hovering at the man’s side, grateful that at least he’d had the foresight to take a chair on an end.

Roy meanwhile was perusing the menu when a silvery, and mostly transparent finger jabbed at the menu to indicate one of the sandwiches. He chanced a glance over to where Edward floated at eye level with him and gave him an amused, but questioning look before quickly turning back to the menu.

“It sounds good.” Edward said in response. “You should get it.”

Roy grunted noncommittally, continuing to look through the other choices.

Edward huffed, and yet again wished he could touch Roy, for he’d dearly love to smack the man over the head right now. “Indulge me this once in a vicarious experience?”
Roy had to wonder if that was a form of extortion.

Edward could see that Roy was debating something about it, which meant that he had half of the battle already won. All that was left was the final push to achieve victory. “I’ll name the shape of what my favorite dessert is.”

Now that there sounded like a good offer, it wouldn’t narrow it down much, but it would some. At least now if he knew it was square in shape, he could stop trying to guess things that were triangular, or circular.

Edward watched Roy carefully, and when he saw the slight inclination of Roy’s head, he couldn’t have grinned wider if he tried. “I get to have my first vicarious experience.” He elated with the happiness only a ghost who’d been by all rights alone for seven years could achieve.

Roy couldn’t help but smile a bit, though he covered it with the very top of his menu as he continued to look through it – now at drinks. When the ghost was happy about something, it was difficult not to be carried along for the ride. And maybe after time, and the long years they’d spend together, that would begin to fade… but he hoped not.

“Get iced tea. Stop looking at the wine list, I know you are.” Edward told him as he saw the general direction of Roy’s eyes. The non-alcoholic drinks were at the top right, those with on the bottom right, and the bottom right was exactly where Roy’s eyes seemed to be looking. “It may be past noon, but you’re still on duty.”

Roy adjusted his eyes accordingly as he tried to hold back another smile. He couldn’t exactly tell the ghost that he’d been looking to see if they had a specific wine, for a reason other than drinking it. But it impressed him that Edward was so observant of him… and made him realize that the ghost must be staring at him, something that he would have noticed and minded with anyone else. But strangely enough, the idea of Edward staring at him didn’t unnerve him at all.

Not long later one of the proposed cute waitresses came over to take their orders, thus forcing a scowling Edward to dart back as she took his spot by Roy. “Is everyone ready to order?” She asked sweetly, casting her gaze around the group but settling it on Roy who was clearly the highest ranking officer at the table. “Sir? Will you be ordering first?”

Roy looked up at her as he set his menu back into the stand in the center of the table. “No.” And he pointed at Havoc, “but he will.”

Havoc’s was not the only jaw to drop, or eyes to widen at this sudden turn of events. And Havoc couldn’t think that perhaps Roy had been telling the truth, he’d had too many women lately. But whatever the reason, he wasn’t about to let this opportunity pass him by, and he turned to the waitress with a smile. “Yes. I’ll have the…-”

Edward was staring at Roy in surprise as he floated there behind the man, and then with a smirk he lowered his head to whisper into his ear, “Maes will never let you live that one down.”

Roy knew how true it was, but he carefully hid his smile. When at last the waitress came back to him, he gave her his order… rather, Edward’s vicarious order, and added on a blackberry iced tea to it. And when the waitress moved away to place their orders, Edward quickly resumed his spot beside him and didn’t look inclined to move again anytime soon.

Not that he minded.

This was where he wanted Edward anyway, beside him.
Edward looked around for a bit, as he wasn’t at all interested in the conversation that had begun at the table. Honestly, he’d had enough of military matters after spending seven years locked up in a military office at Headquarters. But looking around got old after a while and he sighed as he realized there were only so many times he could catch people digging up their nose, sneezing onto the pepper shaker as they shook it onto their meals, or in the case of some of the women, looking down their shirts to find a piece of lettuce that had dropped down it, before it just got old.

So he did the next best thing and nudged the leg of Roy’s chair with his foot. “I’m bored.”

Roy snorted before he could help it, and as more than one pair of eyes turned to him questioningly, he made as if he’d sneezed. Only once everyone was satisfied he wasn’t up to anything strange did he give a small shrug of his shoulders. There wasn’t much he could do about Edward being bored.

Edward sighed and took to standing on the floor. “I’m going to go amuse myself while I keep a watch on our waitress. Just in case Maes called ahead for her to sneak Everclear into your glass.”

Unable to really say anything in return, Roy could only watch as Edward floated off, wondering what exactly the phrase ‘amuse myself’ meant in a public setting to a ghost with a tendency to pull pranks. All he knew was that he’d shortly be finding out.

He was admittedly less worried about the Everclear, than he was about the upcoming state of the patrons.

“Sir?”

Roy tugged himself back to the company at the table at Fuery’s questioning tone. “Yes?”

“We were wondering how long Hughes is going to continue being absent for the majority of the day.” Fuery posed once more.

Roy shrugged at the question. “However long it takes for him to complete his task. Hopefully it’s before either of us retire.” He grumbled the last under his breath.

Hawkeye studied him with slightly narrowed eyes, though she didn’t speak what was on her mind. She knew better than to mention that whatever Hughes was doing, it wasn’t any sort of official work. They all knew better than to mention it, or to ask just what it was that Roy had put the man up to. After all, they’d all done work like this before for their Colonel… she did have to wonder though what it was this time, so soon after moving to Central at last.

She supposed that all she could do was wait, it was all any of them could do. Wait, and see what resulted from it.

“So what’s with the change?” Havoc asked as he poked at his spoon.

Roy knew that Havoc was directing the question at him, but for the life of him he didn’t know what the man was talking about. “Change?”

“Yeah.” Havoc nodded with a curious yet somewhat perplexed look. “In-”

But whatever it was regarding, Havoc never said as a sudden clattering of silverware and the clanging of various other table adornments hitting the floor filled the air.

Roy barely even jumped, unlike everyone else. But like everyone else he turned to see what had happened. However he already knew approximately what he’d find.
Edward was floating above the wreckage of the table, the tablecloth floating from his hand as he observed the scene with a studious tilt of his head and pursed lips. It was clear that he still needed more practice, and he delighted in the fact that there were still plenty more tables with which he could try to remove the tablecloth without shifting anything resting atop it.

He was forced to float up from the scene though as several waiters and waitresses hurried over to clean up the mess while calling out apologies to the patrons. It was at that point that he looked over to meet Roy’s eyes, knowing the man would be looking at him. And he wasn’t disappointed, by that, or to see that Roy was trying not to laugh.

“I think maybe if I tug the tablecloth more sharply?” Edward posed with a devious grin.

Roy tried as best as he could to communicate with his eyes that no, that was not a good idea, and knew it must have worked for Edward only laughed.

Raising his hands in a gesture of innocence, Edward floated a circuit around the room before beginning to descend towards yet another unoccupied table. And he took the tablecloth in one hand, but did nothing as he looked over at Roy who was still watching him closely. “So you think I should find something else to do?”

Roy nodded as subtly as he could, not that it mattered much for everyone else was still either staring at the scene Edward had just caused, or mentioning it to their neighbor. And as Roy was still staring, no one was paying attention to him.

“It might be more troublesome than this.” Edward warned, devious grin only widening.

Roy rolled his eyes and tore his gaze away from Edward as he stood up. “I’ll be back in a moment. Don’t drink my tea.” He told his team firmly before making his way to the bathroom. He didn’t need to look to know Edward was following him.

Only when they were safely in the bathroom and Roy had made sure that no one else was inside to overhear him “talking to himself”, he faced the cheerful ghost. “You’re such a brat.” He accused fondly.

Edward nodded in mock rueful acceptance. “Guilty as charged.” But then he smiled brightly. “I hope they don’t spike your drink while we’re in here.”

“If Maes thinks even something like Everclear could loosen my tongue, he clearly hasn’t been out drinking with me in far too long.” Roy said frankly. “As for you though… you’re bored?”

Edward nodded with a groan. “Maybe it isn’t as bad for you because you’re willingly in the military, but I was unwillingly stuck around it for seven years of my life. And while work really doesn’t follow you home, hearing about it at lunch is just… if I wasn’t dead already I’d say that you people could talk me to death.”

Roy chuckled and walked over to the mirror to examine his hair critically while keeping an eye on Edward’s reflection. “I have a proposition for you then.” He barely waited for a sound of interest to come from Edward’s direction before continuing. “You behave for the rest of lunch, and tomorrow we’ll go out to lunch alone. I’ll do what I can to shift the conversation, but I don’t want you to rattle those elderly people at the corner table so much that the population ends up abruptly being decreased by four in the time it takes all of us to eat.”

“I’m that good?” Edward asked interestedly, but when Roy shot him a reproachful look via the mirror he raised his hands in submission. “Right, got it. I’ll behave.”
Roy smiled and ran his hand through his hair again to be sure it was lying just right. “You should have just told me it was the conversation you were bored with.”

“That’s the easy way, and far less like something a ghost would do to express boredom.” Edward sighed and floated over to sit up on the counter as Roy drew away from the mirror, and he leveled a silvery gaze at the man. “Can I still come with you tonight to the bar until you find someone else to keep you company?”

“Of course.” Roy couldn’t think of any reason why he wouldn’t want the ghost around. “And I know it’ll be a temptation while you’re waiting for me at home, but no riding that bike yet. I want to be there for all of it.”

Edward chuckled but nodded in acceptance. “I’ll wait, don’t worry. If I get to spend tomorrow night with you, all of it, I want to make as much of it as I can. And that includes proving you wrong about the bike riding thing from stage one. Just make sure you have the keys to your motorcycle on hand.”

Roy groaned at the thought. “Remember you still have to ask to use it after you’ve learned to ride a bike. And I retain the right to hide the keys from you as well as any books regarding hot wiring.”

“Oh damn.” Edward chuckled good naturedly.

“Bike first.” Roy reminded him further as he leaned up against the counter a bit while still gazing at the ghost still sitting there, just inches away from where he was leaning. “But I have a feeling we’ll talk more about this tomorrow.”

Edward smirked at him, “undoubtedly.”

Roy smiled faintly back, just gazing at him for a time before he drew away as the knowledge that he’d been gone a while and didn’t want anyone to come looking for him finally became too irritating to further stifle. “I’m hungry, and the food is probably there by now.” He said as he backed away.

Edward nodded and floated off the counter to land on the floor and walk with Roy towards the door. “At least let me throw one pickle at the waitress for encroaching on my spot.”

Roy only snorted in answer as he made a beeline back for the table where as he’d predicted, the food had arrived.

And as he sat down, he tried not to laugh in between bites of eating his sandwich as Edward hovered nearby to watch and be vicarious. But his good mood brought the change in conversation Edward had been wanting, and by the time everyone’s sandwiches were gone, save one pickle on Roy’s plate, the ghost was looking much less bored.

So quite covertly as they began to ready themselves to leave, Roy slipped Edward the slice of pickle for their dear waitress who was bringing over the check. And as soon as a shocked Edward had taken it, he sipped on the last of his non-Everclear spiked blackberry iced tea.

“Really? I can?” Edward grinned at him, being careful to hold the slice of pickle under the table and thus out of sight.

Roy gave a slight nod to the ghost, though anyone else would have thought it meant for the waitress as she handed him the check. “Thank you.” He smiled simply at her and turned his attention to everyone else.”Okay, pass me your souls… I mean money.”

They began to do so, with some grumbling, but for Edward’s part, he didn’t notice.
As soon as the waitress had turned and began to walk away, Edward zoomed after her with the slice of pickle so he could get the angle he needed to achieve his mark, and threw it at her ear.

Roy didn’t even look up as he counted out the bills that had been passed to him, when from his right the waitress let out a bloodcurdling shriek. And though everyone else was instantly looking, or rushing over to ask her what had happened and be directed towards a slice of pickle lying innocently on the floor, Roy acted as if nothing had happened.

All he was paying attention to was the money, and Edward’s slight chuckling while saying “my spot”.

Oh the things that should have seemed childish, but when done by a ghost, were entirely normal if not expected.

When at last they all filed out of the sandwich shop, Havoc couldn’t help but remark, “it wasn’t so noisy in there last night.”

“That was very odd.” Falman added in a perplexed sounding voice.

Edward strolled along behind the group whistling a cheerful tune that only Roy could hear, and it brought a smile to the man’s face though the ghost didn’t see.

“Teenage ghosts.” Roy murmured under his breath, smile still tugging at his lips.

When the group reached Headquarters again they quickly made their way back to their respective areas, not wanting to be spotted by General Grand in the case that he was out and about. This time even Edward went along quickly, though he kept looking over his shoulder with an almost tortured expression.

Only once he was in Roy's office with the door shut behind him did his curiosity abate enough to let him breathe. Well… in a manner of speaking.

“It’s just eating at you, isn’t it.” Roy grinned as he resumed his seat.

Edward groaned and floated over to seat himself on top of the remaining stack of paperwork.

“You’ve no idea.”

“You could go over there and see what he’s doing, you know.” Roy pointed out. “No one would see you. Unless of course you’re worried that the temptation to do something to him would be too great.”

“Very great.” Edward agreed, and picked up Roy’s pen. “But it’s easier when I’m in here. Probably because as much as this office could have been labeled a prison for me, it also has this… I don’t know… this stability I guess. Out there I see so much more, and can do so much more. And in here, I’m used to this already.” And he glanced up to the window while fiddling with Roy’s pen. “Aside from actually being able to see outside of course.”

Roy smiled faintly at the expression on Edward’s face. “I think I understand. All of this is still so new to you, it’s only natural you’d feel curious about things. Things that wouldn’t affect you like this otherwise.”

Edward looked back down at him, beginning to kick his legs from where he sat with Roy’s paperwork as his seat, and twirled Roy’s pen absently. “Is there ever anything you’re this curious about?”

“Besides yourself?” Roy asked with a gentle smile and reached up for his pen. “No.”
Edward relinquished the pen more from surprise at Roy’s words than anything. “Me? Why me?”

Roy leaned back in his chair so he didn’t have to crane his head back so far to look up at Edward, and tilted his head thoughtfully as he considered the silvery apparition. “It’s not what you’d think… the obvious. Yes, you’re the only ghost I’ve met, and yes, only I can see you. But what intrigues me most about you, is why those things are what they are. I can’t help but wonder why it’s us. What is it about you, or about me, that made it turn out this way?”

Edward stared back at him, lost for words. He didn’t know himself… all he knew, was that in the beginning he’d thought fate was having a last laugh at him. But not anymore. He truly liked Roy, and wanted to stay beside him even though he could go almost anywhere now.

“I bet you’re glad you asked me now.” Roy chuckled after a moment.

It was then that Edward smiled at last, a genuine smile. “I am.”

Roy smiled back, laughter beginning to fade as he did so until he finally tore his gaze away with an abrupt clearing of his throat, trying to jerk his mind out of the relaxed state it had been in just moments ago when he’d known nothing but silver. “I should get back to work, else our chess games will be cut much shorter than I ever want them to be.”

“And then what would happen to the country?” Edward joked.

“In that case it’s fortunate I’m not yet Fuhrer.” Roy grumbled and promptly took his chances of what Edward would do to him as he reached through the ghost’s butt to pick up the next file awaiting his attention.

“Hey!” Edward glared at him as he shot into the air as if electrocuted. “A little patience!”

Roy smirked as he glanced up at the indignant ghost innocently. “You want chess, I want to be Fuhrer, and for that to happen you should know already to keep your ass off my paperwork.”

Edward scowled at him, but as soon as he turned he was fighting back a smile as he floated haughtily back to the couch where he’d left the book. All the while muttering “unwanted physical contact” under his breath.

Roy tried his best not to smirk too much about it… he tried.

Yet smirking or not, the paperwork did get done at exactly an hour until the end of the workday, and Roy gathered the finished documents up into his arms so he could bring them out to Hawkeye. As he did so he saw Edward dart over to his desk, no doubt going in search of the chess set.

“Colonel,” Hawkeye posed as the stacks thumped down onto her desk with a rather satisfying rustling of papers.

“Yes, Lieutenant?” Roy allowed as he dusted his gloved hands off primly.

She looked up at him with a slight frown, “what is it you do now after you finish your paperwork? Because you’ve not had me order window cleaner since we got here, and back at East Central you went through a bottle a day.”

Roy waved a hand grandly, “my obsessive compulsive activities are a thing of the past thanks to intensive therapy at Hazel’s hands… err, paws rather. I thought he was beginning to show signs of allergic reactions to the residue that would get on my uniform.”
“You expect me to believe that?” Hawkeye leveled him a deadpan look.

“Actually, no.” Roy smiled at her and half-turned. “But if I told you that I spent the remainder of my day reviewing strategy via chess games with myself, well, let’s just face it and say that doesn’t sound nearly as dramatic or interesting.”

Hawkeye raised a neatly manicured eyebrow at that particular confession which she did have a much easier time believing… though hard it still was to do so. “And what side of your conscience usually wins more? Black or white?”

“Right now?” Roy quickly tallied up the scores and then promptly grimaced. “Black.” Figuring he really needed to change that soon, he made his way back into his office leaving behind a somewhat bemused Hawkeye and a large stack of neatly finished paperwork.
“Your move.”

Roy glared at the smug ghost before directing his attention to the chess board which clearly showcased what looked to be another impending loss on his end. “It’s unnatural you know.” He stated as he mentally tried to decide between knight or rook.

Edward tilted his head in a confused manner. “That you’re losing to someone only you can see?”

“That I’m consistently losing to someone who before last week hadn’t played chess in…?”

“Eight or nine years.” Edward filled in for him automatically.

“Eight or nine years.” Roy stated firmly. “There’s just something unnatural about you being so good so fast. You were only ten or eleven when you would have last played before you died.”

Edward smirked and looked down at the rook that Roy had moved with studious interest and more than a glimmer of calculation in his silver eyes. “First, I’m a genius.” He quickly maneuvered in a bishop with which to capture Roy’s sacrificial rook to prove his point. “Second, I’m a fast learner. Or in this case,” he looked up from Roy’s impending doom on the chess board, “relearner.”

Roy stifled a groan and considered the chess board with near desperation. “Unnatural.”

“You can always surrender.” Edward offered evilly.

Roy shot him a withering glance, “I’ll take my chances, thanks.” And he promptly moved the knight he’d been debating about earlier into place.

Into place for a capture Edward’s now unguarded queen that could not move at the risk of leaving the king out in the open to be taken by his last remaining rook.

Edward blinked down at the move, his mouth opening slightly before it closed while silver eyes blinked several more times. “Huh…”

“Now let’s see how you and your genius self get out of this one.” Roy suggested with a wicked smile. He knew that Edward could chose to move the king, but with the way the pieces were set now on the board it would only become a game of tag until Roy could corner him.

“Were you bluffing me?” Edward’s expression could nearly be called gaping.

Roy spread his hands in a gesture of innocence. “Bluffing? My dear, sweet ghost, that was called luring you into a false sense of security.”

A muffled groan escaped Edward’s lips as he contemplated the chess board frantically.

“A muffled groan escaped Edward’s lips as he contemplated the chess board frantically. “I believe the phrase you’re looking for is ‘I surrender’.” Roy whispered in a conspiratorial manner.

Edward could only glare even as he began to quietly laugh in amusement and knocked his king down, knowing that he was in a corner with no way out even if Roy hadn’t even called ‘check’ yet.

“Ready for round two of me kicking your ass?” Roy asked cheerfully as he began to reset his side of
Edward’s look was unreadable, but the smirk on his lips revealed all. “No. There won’t be a round two.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Ed.” Roy smirked back and with that, they began a new game.

Their next game was neck-in-neck for nearly fifteen minutes, with both sides losing an equal amount of pieces and little advancement across the board in either direction. And neither of them were intending to lose to the other after the conclusion of the game before. Despite the almost aggressive scene on the chessboard, the conversation between the players was far more relaxed.

“Are you ever going to tell me what shape your favorite dessert is?” Roy brought up idly. “You did promise.”

“Straight to the hint before more of your terrible guessing?” Edward arched an eyebrow.

Roy rolled his eyes and gave a sharp nod. “Out with it.”

“Circular.” Edward smiled.

However Roy was not entirely convinced, “is it meant to be circular, or are you just saying that because it’s possible for it to be circular.”

Edward only smiled mysteriously.

“Ghosts…” Roy grumbled.

“I’ve only had it as a circle.” Edward offered, but it was all he would offer.

“Works for me.” Roy decided and turned more of his attention back to deciding on how to win the chess game. “I know I already guessed apple pie… but any kind of pie?”

Edward gave an expansive shrug of his shoulders. “I did like pie, but it wasn’t my favorite dessert.”

Roy gave him a thoughtful look, “you weren’t a child who preferred pancakes or something for dessert, were you?”

“You can have pancakes for dessert?”

The look of intrigue on the ghost’s face clearly answered that truthfully for Roy. “Yes, you can. You never had a dessert pancake?”

Edward shook his head. “Aren’t all pancakes the same? Even if you covered it in powdered sugar and such I doubt it would qualify as a dessert item.”

Roy’s smile was almost apologetic. “A lot of the recipe changes to allow for something lighter and fluffier, thinner too. I always had mine with strawberries and whipped cream on top. Sometimes chocolate sauce as well.”

“Almost like a crepe?” Edward’s brow was slightly furrowed as he tried to picture this.

“A bit you could say.” Roy nodded, and then gave Edward a mischievous smile. “Were crepes your favorite?”

Edward laughed, “I always preferred my crepes rolled and with filling. Definitely not plain circular.”
Roy grinned a bit at that. “That answers all my questions then.”

“I had a normal sugary dessert. No pancakes involved.” Edward smiled back.

Roy slowly nodded as he filed the information away to begin thinking more on what it could be. Until then though, he continued to play their current game of chess with a fierceness that seemed out of place with his otherwise pensive state of mind.

It was when they were cleaning up after Roy’s subsequent loss of the game – in which Edward had gleefully accepted his win – that he tried again.

“Macaroons?”

The look on Edward’s face would have been enough to answer that, but as it was the ghost still made a gagging noise while going, “euch.”

“Guess not. Sugar cookies?”

Edward leveled a deadpan look at Roy that made the man shudder and nod.

“No to that too.” And he gave Edward a hesitantly curious look as he placed the game inside his desk. “What kid never liked sugar cookies?”

“The one who thought they were disgusting.” Edward informed him. “When I say I can live without them, I really mean it.”

Roy wasn’t quite sure how to take that little bit of irony, “did you ever miss being able to eat?”

Edward chuckled quietly, “when you’re not hungry you’d be surprised how easy it is to forget about eating. As for missing the taste of things, well, cravings began to go by the wayside after the first few months. I no longer can taste anything anyway, so it’s hard to remember now what food tasted like.”

“You have got to be the most well-adjusted ghost to ever exist.” Roy decided as he contemplated the spirit who looked at him with mild interest in his opinion. “I know I’ve said similar before, and I know the reasons why…but you grew up not turning insane when I believe that in your place, I would have become so.”

Edward offered a wry smile and shrugged, “it’s all what you make of it. I didn’t know I’d become a ghost, but I chose to die. Even if I didn’t know I would. I was willing to pay any price to save my brother.”

It was at that moment that Roy couldn’t help but wonder all of a sudden if Alphonse had any inkling as to why he had survived that night. Why Edward had died and he had lived. Did the younger Elric even suspect for a moment that his older brother had made the ultimate sacrifice for him?

“Come on.” Edward requested without pause as he floated nearer towards the office door. “Let’s get out of here, I have more of the world to see… and you to laugh at tonight.”

Roy gave him a half-hearted scowl and came around the desk to follow after the apparition. “So I’ve been demoted from friend to entertainment on nights like these?”

Edward’s bright smile matched the slight ethereal glow emanating from his body as he slightly shook his head. Seemingly he still hadn’t quite become indifferent to the fact that Roy considered him a friend, a sentiment he returned wholeheartedly. “I prefer you being my friend, who happens to be entertaining.”
“That’s a bit better.” Roy had to concede, and got the door for them both.

Edward could only smirk a bit as he waited for Roy to say his goodbye to Falman who was just finishing up and then followed the man out into the hallway.

“Now then,” Roy announced grandly as they exited out one of the lesser used back doors to Headquarters and began to take a sidewalk that would lead them out into public territory, “just be sure you keep an eye on where we are so you can find your way home.”

“I’m not so hopeless.” Edward grumped, though his voice lacked the conviction of sounding truly disgruntled.

With a short laugh Roy jerked with his head to motion Edward to follow him, as if the ghost would have done otherwise, and set off in search of a good time for the night.

“You however…?” Edward murmured to himself thoughtfully and then gave a decisive nod, “completely hopeless.”

“What was that?” Roy frowned back over his shoulder to where the ghost’s voice had originated.

“Oh, nothing.” Edward smirked cheerfully. “Just wondering where you’re going to whore yourself out next.”

Roy only rolled his eyes, not believing that there was any argument he could make that Edward would not refute. He knew quite clearly how Edward viewed these escapades of his.

Instead the two of them began to wander the streets of Central, widening Edward’s world out of the whiteness that otherwise plagued it, and searching out a venue for the living individual of their duo.

Approximately ten minutes later Roy finally decided on a location with which to stage his ploy to gain himself some entertainment for the night. And while he bit his tongue at announcing to Edward that their aimless wanderings were over, his steps led the way clearly to the façade of a rather sizeable restaurant.

“This isn’t a bar.” Edward cast a confused look at the building they were approaching. Giving Roy a look the man didn’t take notice of, he darted up from the ground to hover in the air as they got into the more crowded area near the front of the restaurant.

Roy merely smiled and opened the door, taking extra care to make sure that upon opening it he took a decent amount of time to get from where he was, to past the threshold.

Edward hesitated as he saw a glimpse of the crowded interior, however it did seem less noisy than a bar. But as he saw the door that Roy had been dallying with beginning to close, he darted in after the man – above his head – to take advantage of the courtesy. “Find a place to sit where I can sit too?” He requested as he tagged after the man.

Roy kept the request in mind as he nodded politely to the hostess and informed her he’d just be frequenting the bar. He noted her flirtatious smile, but did not return it as he made his way to the bar counter near the center of the restaurant.

Edward had since floated to the floor to walk once more, finding it easier seeing as how most everyone was seated this far in. The only people he had to watch out for, he didn’t have to watch out for, as Roy was easily weaving around them. He noticed that quite a few eyes followed Roy for longer than an offhand curious look, and he rolled his own eyes.
“The way that one waitress was looking at you, you’d think that she thought you were on the menu.” He grumbled.

Roy chuckled deep in his chest, barely letting the sound be heard.

As Roy found an empty seat at the fairly crowded bar area, he eased himself onto the stool second from an end with an air of regality before glancing towards Edward who had claimed the empty end stool. Clunking his elbows to the counter he clasped his hands in front of his mouth before replying softly for Edward’s carefully listening ears alone. “I’m not on her menu. I’m looking for a ‘his’ menu tonight.”

Edward snorted and leveled a deadpan look at his living companion. “Well, as far as you’re concerned you’re hardly the fresh catch of the day.”

Roy didn’t even care if anyone would see him glaring at, by all appearances, nothing, he glared at Edward anyway. And he tried not to smile or even let himself think of laughing as the ghost merely smirked at him in a smug manner.

“Sir?” The bartender began as he approached Roy now, having finished dealing with the last drink order. “What will you have?”

Roy looked away from Edward, who had an odd challenging look in his silver eyes, and met the bartender’s eyes instead. “I’ll start with a bourbon and we’ll go from there.”

“Of course, Colonel.” The bartender nodded agreeably with a smile, and moved to begin.

“Wait,” Roy called after him.

“Sir?”

“A glass of bourbon,” Roy said quite firmly, “not just a shot or two. I want to only see a minimum half inch between the drink and the rim of the glass.”

The bartender seemed to smile with more appreciation, his head seeming to give a manly approving nod. “Of course, Colonel.”

Roy watched as the bartender moved to go fetch the bourbon, glad that he wasn’t being second guessed.

“Are you sure you want to start with a whole glass?”

At least not second guessed by the bartender.

“You haven’t eaten a thing since lunch, and I know you usually drink on an empty stomach,” Edward didn’t even pause as Roy pointedly popped a nut from a dish into his mouth while making a show of chewing it while staring at him, “but it really can’t be good for you long term.”

Roy smiled as he swallowed the nut, “I came to a restaurant and not a bar for a reason.” He whispered in hushed, amused tones to Edward before facing forward and raising his voice once more. “Could I get a menu too?”

Soon the bartender had placed a glass of bourbon and a menu before Roy who nodded his thanks.

“You’re just doing this to have fun at my expense.” Edward grumbled and itched to grab Roy’s drink and put it up in the rafters where the man couldn’t reach.
Roy rolled his eyes, “I’m not.” And he ran a gloved finger down the menu entrees with interest.

Edward leaned over so that he could see as well, smiling faintly when Roy flattened out the menu more so that he could see easier. “Thanks…” and he scanned the options, following the path of Roy’s finger. “You should get the beer-braised short ribs. Or is beer a step back from bourbon?”

Roy tipped his head forward once in what Edward knew to be an affirmative reply to his question.

“Have them braised in bourbon?”

Roy merely lightly tapped a finger at the selection for a steak bordelaise and then nodded to the bowls of pinwheel peppermint candies scattered about the bar counters like their nut brethren. “Shallots.” Was all he muttered.

Edward’s mouth formed a silent ‘ah’ of understanding, before he shrugged. “I suppose it sounds good too.” He said as he took a closer look at the description.

A slight smile tugged at the corners of Roy’s mouth as he tipped a fair amount of bourbon from the glass past his lips. Why yes, he supposed it did. Just because Edward had seen him typically drink more on nights like this didn’t mean he didn’t know how to eat too.

Although he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t intrigued by Edward’s suggestion of braising the short ribs with bourbon.

“If I had money I’d make a bet with you on how far through your steak you’ll get before someone approaches you.” Edward said with an air of disappointment that he couldn’t.

Roy chuckled under his breath and tipped the menu up to hide the lower half of his face from every view but that of Edward’s. “Be fair, I won’t even have the steak in front of me yet.”

Edward grabbed a cashew nut out of the dish and pelted Roy with it, smirking as the man shielded himself with the menu.

Roy sent the ghost a mocking glower as he lowered the menu while the cashew nut skidded across the bar counter and off onto the other side. “Brat.” He mouthed through a ducked head which quickly raised as one of the waitresses came behind the bar counter.

“Have you decided yet, sir?” She asked with a dually interested smile.

“Yes.” Roy lay the menu into the hand she reached out.

“And what would you like? Ala carte or perhaps something a bit more off the menu?” The pen hovered above her notepad, poised in much the same fashion as the woman who wielded it.

“How generous of her.” Edward rolled his eyes, and wondered if Roy would get too mad at him if he smacked the entire bowl of mixed nuts at her.

Roy smiled, though unbeknownst to the helpful and accommodating waitress, he was not smiling because of her. “Steak bordelaise, medium rare, for my a la carte selection, and as for off the menu,” he flashed her a cunning smile, “if you’ll be so kind as to send that gentlemen over there-” he leaned onto his elbows against the bar counter while pointing to a table set past the other side of the bar counter where three men were sitting presumably having a few beers and a meal together after work, “the brunette one, another of whatever he’s having and put it on my tab.”

The waitress, to her credit, recovered from her momentary whirl to see, and then gaping at Roy
rather quickly. And her smile became one of a more forced nature as she jotted it down on her notepad with a nod. “Of course, sir.”

“Thank you.” Roy smiled at her cheerfully, choking down his amusement as the waitress turned away to go speak with the bartender first. And when she had finished and turned to head to the kitchen next, he took a smug looking sip of his bourbon.

Edward was staring at him, openly gaping as he began to lose his control not to laugh. “As stupid as I find all this to be, that was rather…”

“I know.” Roy chuckled and flashed him a quick grin as he lowered his glass to the counter again and flagged the bartender. Once the man had come back over he nodded to his empty bourbon glass. “I’ll take another.”

“Of course, sir.” The bartender agreed.

And when the bartender turned, Roy quickly got up from his seat and jerked his head to motion for Edward to follow him.

Edward quickly did, confused, but all the same intrigued as he floated after Roy to the men’s restroom which they ducked into. He went to sit over on the counter as they waited for the man who’d already been in there to vacate the facilities.

Roy pretended to be fixing his hair at the mirror next to Edward.

Once the man had finished using the urinal and had washed his hands followed by a long drying session with about ten paper towels, Roy quickly darted over to lock the door.

“What’s going on?” Edward frowned at him as the lock slid into place. “Won’t you get in trouble for that during evening dinner at a busy restaurant?”

Roy shrugged, “I’m a colonel, a State Alchemist, and a war hero. I won’t get into trouble.”

“So why are we here again?” Edward asked as Roy wandered back over to him.

“Because,” Roy grinned, “it’s part of my plan. And I wasn’t about to just ditch you out there, I might as well have some company while I forward the plan.”

Edward would admit without hesitation that even his exceptional IQ didn’t comprehend Roy’s “plan”. But then what of Roy’s manwhoring tendencies did he understand? “And what plan is this?”

Roy leaned his hip against the edge of the counter as he looked up the short distance to the silver eyes watching him. “Nothing like a little bit of momentary panic and a bit of intrigue about who could have sent him that beer. A man mysteriously not there all of a sudden?”

“So won’t he think that you changed your mind and left because you came to your senses?” Edward frowned.

“Hardly.” Roy disagreed, “he’ll go over to check it out. Trust me on this. And what idiot would leave a brand new bourbon waiting for him, and not intending to come back and drink it?”

“You should.” Edward muttered, but shrugged. “Okay, have it your way. So how long are we going to stay in here anyway?”

Roy quirked an eyebrow up, “eager to leave?”
Edward didn’t miss the teasing in Roy’s tone, and wasn’t about to be outdone as he smiled. “By all means, let us continue forever the tender moments we have together in seedy public restrooms.”

Roy chuckled, “then you’re eager to see who will win the bet then that we never shook on?”

“I have nothing to offer with which to shake on it.” Edward corrected, “even if I could shake your hand.”

“The former is a technicality.” Roy decided and mirroring the ghost’s smile offered out his hand slowly. “The latter however… must we be so literal?”

Edward tilted his head to one side, silver eyes gazing luminously at Roy. “A bet for the sake of betting?”

Roy’s smile only grew as he nodded once. “No penalties, no rewards. Just gloating rights for one of us.”

Edward laughed, funny how he considered gloating rights as both penalty and reward, respective of how this would turn out. “To gloating rights.” He gave in as he extended his hand towards Roy’s, pausing only at that thin line that kept his hand from passing through Roy’s own.

Roy was grinning as he kept eye contact with the silver eyes, “to gloating rights.” And he glanced away at last to look down at their hands that were so close to touching. A faint, shadow of a smile replaced the grin on his lips before he quickly looked away. “Time’s up, time for me to show you a thing or two.”

“That’ll be a first.” Edward remarked, smirking, before he floated up into the air and after Roy as the man walked back over to the bathroom door and unlocked it to let them out.

Roy merely glared at the two men who had been waiting to use the restroom he’d effectively commandeered and went on his way back to the bar.

Edward reclaimed his stool next to Roy as the man sat down, and eyed the glass of bourbon he picked up distastefully. “One glass wasn’t enough to line your stomach against the inebriating effects of steak?”

Roy chuckled into the rim of the glass before he took an obligatory long swig. And he didn’t dare humor Edward with a response as he caught sight of movement from the table he’d had that beer sent to. He would be under very close observation now from more than the man he was trying to pick up. The man’s friends would be watching him too, and he didn’t dare risk slipping up trying to talk to Edward without them seeing.

It was then that Edward realized he was dangerously close to losing their bet.

The only thing Roy had in front of him was his glass of bourbon. The man he’d sent a drink to was en route. And the steak bordelaise was still missing.

He knew he needed to do something, and fast. After all, Roy hadn’t placed any restrictions on his ghostly activities. So before Roy could say or do anything to stop him, he darted backwards off the stool and pelted for the man who was making his way stylishly around the u-shaped bar counter.

Roy nearly choked into his bourbon as he bit back a choice word. Eyes widening as they stared into the alcohol in his glass he knew he was about five seconds from having a brain aneurism in the struggle not to look to see what the ghost was going to do.
And damn it! The clever brat of a ghost was exploiting being under no controls of how this bet would be won.

Edward glanced over his shoulder once to the swinging saloon-style doors leading to the kitchen but could see no sign of Roy’s steak. But he felt reasonably certain that he could stall this guy long enough. So taking advantage of his surroundings, he bade his time, watching as the brunette man walked unknowingly into his trap. And when he was within striking distance, Edward quickly whacked a woman’s large purse onto the floor directly at the man’s feet.

A sharp yell nearly made Roy clunk his head against the bar counter as out of his peripheral vision he saw his potential date for the evening topple out of sight with a flail of arms.

“Did I do that?” Edward asked with a fake gasp before falling into laughter as he watched the man try and untangle his feet from the strap with the aghast purse owner’s aid.

He left them to it as he turned with an air of pride and floated back over to Roy’s side.

“You still won’t win.” Roy hissed, taking advantage of the distraction his ghostly companion had caused to address the ghost from behind his glass of bourbon.

Edward smirked at him smugly, “oh no?” He enquired sweetly.

“No.” Roy stated firmly, “but thanks, I get to play ‘doctor and patient’ later tonight.”

Edward grimaced, a slight gagging noise escaping his throat.

Roy merely smirked and took another sip of his bourbon while pretending he hadn’t noticed the tripping incident. He wasn’t too worried he’d lose the bet… even as Edward gloated as the same waitress approached with a tray bearing a plate of steak.

“Still think I won’t win?” Edward pressed as he glanced back to see the brunette on his feet now, but occupied with reassuring the woman that he wasn’t hurt and that he didn’t fault her at all.

Roy didn’t answer, instead turning his attention to the waitress who approached him with that smile that still looked forced. As she reached to lower down the plate, at which time Roy would have lost, he raised a hand. “I changed my mind, I’d like it cooked medium instead of medium rare. Toss it in the oven for me for a few more minutes.”

She could only smile and nod, lifting the plate back onto the tray. “Of course, sir. I’ll have it back out in a few minutes.”

Roy smiled devilishly as she walked away and Edward made a noise like a wounded animal. “Two can play at your game, Ed.”

Edward silently seethed, too much in shock and astonishment at what Roy had just done to notice the brunette finally making his way to them.

“Hi,” the newcomer said, leaning against the counter between Roy and the empty stool – void of Edward – next to Roy. “I wanted to thank you for the drink, mind if I join you?”

“Yes.” Edward grumbled as he let his head fall to the bar counter.

Roy smiled, mostly from Edward’s reaction as he waved a hand in permission. “Please. I was hoping you’d come over. It seemed to be the only way I could get you alone.”
The brunette man grinned slightly, eyeing Roy with interest as he sat. “And why would you want to do that?”

“You’re over here, moron.” Edward grumbled as he raised his head and propped it in the heel of his hand to glower at the brunette. “Don’t ask stupid questions you already know the answer to.”

Roy bit back on a chuckle at Edward’s grumbling. “Well…” he began with a sultry smile…

Edward stopped listening at the point Roy began with his pathetic explanations, merely settled for glaring daggers at the invader to his time with Roy, an invader apparently named “Steve”.

When Roy’s steak arrived, Steve left momentarily only to grab his own food so he could bring it over and eat with Roy whom apparently he had taken to quite swimmingly.

“You can’t be serious, Roy.” Edward sighed expansively. “He may have never done more than some fumbling in the locker room, but have more pride in yourself.”

“It’s not about pride. It’s about sexual fulfillment.” Roy muttered back, and chanced a pacifying glance to the ghost. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you don’t have to stay.”

Edward rolled his eyes, “I’ll stay a bit longer. You are my entertainment after all.”

Roy gave him a slight smile and turned back to his steak.

“He’s taking a long time over there.” Edward observed as he watched Steve chat with his friends while the group of them threw looks Roy’s way.

Roy’s answer was a noncommittal grunt and a flick of his eyes towards the bunch.

Edward watched a bit longer before he saw Steve head for the restrooms. “He’s making a break for the bathroom… with one of the other guys.”

Roy glanced up again and frowned momentarily before looking towards Edward while giving him a look that plainly said “and?”.

“Aren’t you even the least bit curious, or even suspicious?” Edward asked as he floated up off his stool.

“No.” Roy said under the cover of raising his bourbon glass to his lips.

Edward snorted, “well I am. I’m going to go check it out.”

Roy nearly fumbled his bourbon glass into his lap. “What?” He hissed under his breath.

“Oh please, they can’t see me.” Edward reminded him. “I’m going to go spy on him.”

“What? No!” Roy hissed as discreetly as he could, eyes wide as they tried to implore the ghost to listen. “Edward, don’t!”

“Come with me if you want.” Edward offered with a laugh, knowing Roy couldn’t. Not unless he wanted to be labeled some sort of stalker along with being a needy manwhore.

Roy could only watch helplessly as the ghost darted away, and he groaned into his bourbon.

Edward was feeling quite pleased with himself as he headed to the bathroom which had only recently closed after the pair. He hesitated at it once before taking a bracing breath to steel himself
and passed through the door.

“-you going to?”

Steve was leaning against the wall, and he gave his friend a smirking little smile. “Jealous?”

Said friend rolled his eyes. “I know the man’s reputation. He wouldn’t sleep with someone like me. But fuck, you may as well. Even if he dumps you come morning at least you had him for a while.”

“He won’t dump me.” Steve said in assurance. “I’m not like all those others. He won’t give me up once he gets a taste.”

“That’s gross and yet a cool thought.”

Edward snorted, “try just gross.”

“And he’s supposed to be rich.” The friend of Steve’s grinned. “Catch him and you’re set for life. So I guess I can only say good luck. But just remember, he-”

“Has a reputation.” Steve interrupted and smiled. “I know. Give me some credit though, I’m not the top salesmen in the company for nothing. I know how to grab and keep someone hooked.”

Edward glared at him, and shook his head before turning and bolting through the bathroom door without a second thought to staying longer. And he floated up towards the ceiling until he was in range to plop down onto his bar stool broodingly next to Roy.

Roy glanced over at the apparition, raising an eyebrow slightly. “You okay?”

“He has high hopes of keeping you, and his friend mentioned that you’re supposed to be rich.” Edward informed him.

Roy nodded slowly, and smiled wryly into the bourbon that had found its way into his hand and up to his mouth again. And once he’d taken a sip he only brought the glass a few millimeters away. “It’s nothing I’m not used to knowing that people probably think.”

Edward bit his tongue against immediately telling Roy what he thought about it before he finally looked at the man and said, “I think I’ll go home now. I don’t think I’ll ever find entertainment past this point where you try to fool yourself. Enjoy your winnings.”

Roy could only whip his head around to watch as Edward vanished from the restaurant with the speed only a ghost could achieve. Finally he turned back to his meal and bourbon with a sigh he didn’t bother trying to hold in. He was accustomed to these sentiments, and opinions that he was trying to fool himself into something by having a binding one-night stand policy. He did wish, however, that Edward had stuck around a bit longer.

It felt oddly empty to be sitting here without the ghost by his side, and his date still missing.

At least one of those was about to change…

“Hey, sorry it took me so long.” Steve said as he reclaimed his seat next to Roy. “I was being given the third degree by my friends.”

Roy chuckled as he turned a smile on him, “I hope they didn’t ruin your appetite.”

“Hardly.” Steve laughed, “just introduced me to anxiety wanting to get back to you…”
Meanwhile outside the restaurant the streets were beginning to thin with foot-traffic. And so Edward had taken to walking his way home, at least for now.

He didn’t know a direct way home from where he was, so he retraced his steps back to Headquarters feeling rather melancholy. On one hand he hoped that Roy wasn’t mad he’d left so abruptly… but on the other hand he didn’t care enough to go back. He’d said only the truth after all, he couldn’t find entertainment after a certain point.

“At the very least if he has to have only one night stands, why can’t he be more selective about other qualities?” Edward shook his head. “No wonder he has commitment issues, no one in their right mind would commit to the people he sets himself up with.”

And so he continued on his way home, trying not to regret that he hadn’t locked Steve in the bathroom and broke the lock lever itself off so he wouldn’t have been able to get out. Yet it was an idea he filed in the back of his mind as a possibility for trying on a later victim. Unfortunately, he sensed there would be plenty of potential people to try it on.
Chapter 20

When Edward at last reached home he paused at the door. Like before, he felt his uncertainties come to light. Reaching out a hand he let it rest against the wood, feeling the solidity of the door. The same solidity that every non-living entity had to him. It was a small comfort.

Yet Edward bowed his head as he went no further. Out of all the progresses he had made with acclimating back to a world that did not consist of only what that office could hold, and with being able to leave Roy’s side to go on his own through other closed doors… Edward looked back up at this one with untrusting silver eyes. He was still wary of passing through a door when Roy was not in the immediate vicinity.

Taking a deep breath that his body could never need again but for the sense of comfort it gave him, he stepped forward.

The hallway of Roy’s home materialized in front of him, and he cast a wry look about it as he hovered in the foyer. It didn’t feel the same without Roy anywhere nearby, as familiar as it was to him. But knowing that there was nothing he could do about it, and he couldn’t expect Roy home until many hours later, he floated down to step onto the floor and begin walking across it to the sitting room.

He found one of the lights still on, as planned, so he could read or do other things without attracting unwanted attention to the house. Lights turning on and off while no one was supposed to be home would just be a hassle if the authorities were called out to investigate it.

On the top center of the couch, Hazel was sleeping. The squirrel was curled into a tight, furry ball, with his tail wrapped around him to keep his nose and ears warm.

Edward smiled faintly at the furred rodent, and carefully kept his distance so as not to wake the squirrel with his presence as he made his way around the room towards the bookcase where he had set Roy’s research when they’d been unpacking. He’d not had a chance yet, and as he located one of the leather bound documents, he knew that now was as good a time as any.

So flipping the cover aside he floated up to hover in a corner of the ceiling to begin reading.

Not even a full page in, he could already tell that Roy was, for lack of another word, brilliant. His research on flame alchemy, and the trials he’d gone through with it whether to come out with error or success was not anything an amateur would conduct. He was beginning to understand why the Flame Alchemist garnered so much healthy respect and a goodly amount of fear as well, Roy knew what he was doing.

The detail and processes were of the level he recalled vaguely from his own father’s personal work. It suddenly came as no wonder to him why Roy had once said so assuredly that he was the best alchemist, since they both in their own ways believed Edward’s father dead.

And he’d not even seen the man fight yet! Although he doubted that he’d never see such a thing, it was only a matter of time.

Pursing his lips he continued to flip through and read what Roy had written. Finding some amusements here and there at the cataloguing of what had occurred with the failures, but for the most part remaining intrigued and more than a little impressed.
He wasn’t sure what time it was getting to, only that he was about halfway through the journal he was on, when the sound of noisy chatters broke through his concentration. Looking up in the direction of them, he saw Hazel was now awake – and on top of the bookshelf staring his way and still chattering excitedly.

“Your owner is a smart man.” Edward told the squirrel, though he knew Hazel could not hear. “At least with his alchemy.” He sighed and looked towards the grandfather clock in the corner adjacent to him, and his lips quirked in a disappointed seeming smile for the briefest moment upon seeing the time. “Not so much with his love life.”

Hazel only continued to chatter in his excitement at no longer being alone, even if he could not see whoever was here with him.

Edward looked back at the squirrel, paused a moment, and then shut the journal with a fond smile. “Have it your way.” Floating down he set the bound research documents back where they belonged and then sped off to the laundry room, Hazel bounding after him eagerly.

Grinning as Hazel leapt onto the dryer and began to chatter excitedly up on his hind legs while reaching with both front paws towards the plastic bin that contained his toys, Edward picked it up as the squirrel began to bat his tail up and down through the air impatiently. “It’s probably a good thing you’re not a flying squirrel, I’d have a much harder time tiring you out.”

And he opened up the box, being sure to keep it away from Hazel’s scampering and questing paws, rummaging through the rainbow of colors until he found a large, clear plastic ball that upon touch, lit up different neon colors each time. Selecting that, he put the lid securely back onto the box and waved the ball around in the air to further cement Hazel’s rapt attention, then suddenly darted off into the hallway to toss it towards the front door.

Hazel flew off the dryer to pelt down the hallway at breakneck speed, and as the ball smacked into the door and ricocheted back, he leapt to snatch it in mid-air and tackle it down. Once he’d sufficiently wrestled and kicked the ball into submission he began to bat it back down the hallway towards the presence he could still feel.

Edward obliged as the ball rolled under his feet, sinking down through the air to snatch it back up again. Giving it a few waves to be sure Hazel was paying close attention, he then sent it flying again. And with a satisfied smile he watched as Hazel zoomed after it.

And so began their playtime as they waited for Roy to return home to them.

The moment Roy must have been approaching the doorstep, Edward knew.

Not because he’d heard the man stumbling drunkenly about, but because all of a sudden Hazel’s attention flew from the bouncing ball towards the door, and with matching swiftness of redirection, he bolted for it.

“Don’t knock him over!” Edward called fruitlessly after the squirrel as he dove through the air to catch the absently bouncing ball. And then his head tilted to the side in contemplation, “on second thought, if he’s that drunk go ahead.”

Turning around as he heard the key shoved roughly and most likely without coordination into the lock, he floated into the laundry room to take care of putting Hazel’s toy away. He had been told the rules about the toys, and he for one wouldn’t enjoy searching the house top to bottom to discover where the squirrel had hidden the thing.
Roy entered his house with slight worry furrowing his brows, though surprise chased it away as Hazel suddenly leapt at his head as he was locking the door behind him. “Hazel…” he growled as the squirrel, now perched on his shoulder, began to chatter in reprimanding tones into his ear while grooming paws through his hair. “You’re worse than my mother.”

Hazel might not have understood the words, but he understood the tone, and chirped indignantly. Roy listened all of a second more before he swung his opposite hand around to clamp firmly over the squirrel’s head to muffle, but not suffocate the furred rodent. “Shut up for a minute!” And he released his pet with a scowl before stepping further into the house with a worried expression swiftly returning. “Edward?!”

When no answer was immediately forthcoming, Roy quickened his step as he made to search the sitting room first. “Ed?!”

“I’m here.” Edward said, popping out of the wall next to Roy.

“Fucking hell!” Roy swore as he stumbled to the side in shock.

Edward smirked, crossing his arms across his chest as he watched Roy pull himself back together. “You really are drunk if I scared you doing that.”

“Shut up.” Roy growled, unable to help himself. “I didn’t know where you were, usually I have a general idea.”

“I told you I was going home.” Edward pointed out, although he knew what Roy meant. The last time he’d waited outside for the man until he’d gotten home. And then his face lit with another understanding, his eyes a bit surprised as his mouth began to twitch in a teasing smile. “Were you worried about me?”

Roy flushed, denial rising to his tongue only to be bit back when he saw the look in Edward’s eyes… as if the ghost were pleased about it. It made the truth a lot easier to say. “A little.”

Edward nodded magnanimously as if agreeing with something not fully the truth, a teasing gleam entering his eyes as his smile turned happy. “I’m trying to get over my lingering fears… and crossing through a door without you being somewhat close to me is one of those.”

At that, Roy broke into a grin that was most likely lopsided. His motor skills were a bit iffy even though it had been almost five hours since his last bourbon. But then, he had had a lot of bourbon before the one that became his last.

“What?” Edward tried not to laugh at the man. “Your grin is creepy when you’re still a bit wasted.”

“Shut it, ghost.” Roy admonished.

“You look like a lecher with that grin added to your reputation.” Edward furthered with a growing wicked enjoyment.

“Edward!” Roy swatted at the ghost, though he knew it’d do no good for all that his movements were more stumbling than coordinated even if he could touch his bratty companion, but even he was laughing as Edward floated aside chuckling. “I was just proud of you. I wasn’t trying to pick you up.”

“You couldn’t anyway.” Edward smirked through his amusement. “But thank you.”
“Damn ghost.” Roy muttered without conviction, before looking over at Hazel to disturb the squirrel out of the grooming he was still being given. “I happen to like the sex hair look, thanks.”

Edward’s face twisted into a grimace as he laid eyes on the squirrel as well. “Eugh, get off of him. He’s all slobber from drunken kissing.” And he jabbed an incorporeal finger at Roy, “shower, before you go around spreading that guy’s slobber with others. It’s common courtesy.”

Roy rolled his eyes but smirked, “I need one, trust me. That Steve guy was one active fellow, you weren’t joking when you said he had plans to keep me. Took me forever to tire him out instead of the other way around… had to be quite vigorous about it.” He added as an afterthought.

Edward followed after him cheerfully enough, “I started reading through one of your personal alchemy research journals before Hazel found me.”

Roy felt himself flush a bit at the mention, and pointedly kept his eyes ahead. “And? What did you think?”

“You’re brilliant.” Edward told him passionately. “You really are! You work at a level I only grew up knowing from my father’s alchemy work. No wonder people are frightened of you.”

Roy was in a full blush now under the zealous praise, and he glared half-heartedly at the ghost now at his side. “Easier to believe now that I’m the best?”

Edward grinned at him, “don’t get cocky… but so far? I think you’re brilliant.”

“Thanks.” Roy mumbled in embarrassment that caused Edward to laugh. “What’d you and Hazel get up to?”

Edward smirked at the quick change of subject, but let it slide. It was more amusing that way. “Just playing with a ball.”

Roy snorted immaturely on cue. “Just one? Two is more fun.”

“Roy!” Edward protested in a scandalized manner.

“Stop babbling.” Edward admonished with a fond smile. “I’m actually not sure. I’ve never thought about it, it’s always seemed a pointless endeavor. I suppose it would depend on the person, not the gender. I mean, love is love. Right?”

Roy nodded with an absent smile as he considered the ghost. “Yep, you are old fashioned.”

“Shut up, Mustang.” Edward growled through a smile he was failing at restraining. “I may be old
fashioned and would have wanted love over lust, but at least I’m not a manwhore.”

Roy didn’t even bother correcting the ghost this time. His explanations of a healthy sexual appetite were probably the next fodder for psychoanalysis. Except… wait… they already had been, when Edward had been asking if he’d been unloved as a child and thus the reason for all the bedding of multiple partners, and never the same ones. “Nothing against your views, but if I were to wait for love… I’d never get laid. Lust is easier to find and collect on.”

“You have a tendency to make it sound unattractively like a business transaction.” Edward noted.

“In a way, I suppose it is.” He shrugged, and let them into his bedroom. “I’m going to take a shower.” He announced needlessly, “and then I am crawling into bed. I’m tired as hell.”

“You’ll look like hell too come dawn in three hours.” Edward pointed out helpfully as he floated after the man.

“Shut it.”

Edward laughed, and went to go perch on the bed as Roy disappeared into the bathroom with Hazel who was now asleep on his shoulder. As he waited for Roy to be finished he gazed out the window with a smile playing at the corners of his lips.

Technically, it was already Thursday… which meant that he had Roy all to himself after the man went to work in about four hours. And he planned to utilize that time to the fullest by learning to ride his bike. After all, he had excellent incentive to learn fast.

He really wanted to try out Roy’s motorcycle.

When Roy had finished with his shower and had pulled on his pajama pants, he carefully scooped the sleeping Hazel off of the bathroom counter and carried the squirrel who was nestling in the crook of one arm out into the bedroom.

“The man and his manly pet.” Edward grinned saucily from the bed.

“It takes a real man to own a squirrel.” Roy informed him haughtily as he walked to the bedside and gently deposited Hazel on the section of bed between his pillow and the drop to the floor.

Edward chuckled as he turned to watch Roy climb into bed and draw the covers over himself with a groan of satisfaction. “Just don’t ever get one of those tiny dogs. I’m not sure I could stand the high-pitched yapping.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Roy chuckled sleepily before he was cut off by an enormous yawn.

Edward smiled at the man who after yawning, was by all appearances, instantly asleep. Shaking his head in humored exasperation he floated forward to flop onto his back next to Roy and stare up at the ceiling. “Just two days left now… two days, and I’ll finally see where you’re taking me.”

The excitement was building inside him.

But even so… Edward didn’t notice when his eyes began to slip closed.

At dawn the next morning, Hazel awoke like clockwork.

And like the alarm clock he was, he scurried to his feet before pouncing onto his human’s pillow and beginning to systematically groom the black locks of hair between his paws while chattering
enthusiastically.

Roy groaned as he began to stir awake, his ears already ringing from the racket Hazel was making, his entire head feeling as if it were being crushed in a vice coated in lemon juice. Rather pathetically he reached a hand up to try and bat Hazel away. “G’ on a-a-a-” he yawned widely, “away.”

Hazel nipped at the offending fingers.

Roy yelped and whipped his hand back, suddenly fully awake as he pushed himself up to round on his squirrel. And he’d just about opened his mouth to scold the furry rodent for nipping at him, despite the suddenly demure pose the squirrel had adopted to try and charm him, when he caught silver out of the corner of his eye.

Slowly, he readjusted so that his body was facing down, propped up on both his hands, and he stared disbelievingly at the sight beside him.

Edward was asleep next to him on his bed.

“I thought he didn’t dare risk sleeping anymore now that he could stay busy.” Roy murmured as he stared at the apparition.

Carefully, so as not to jostle the bed too much, Roy scooted himself into a seated position as he gazed down at the slumbering ghost. “That’s the second time you’ve laid there on my bed…’ though granted, the first time that Edward had been asleep, “trying to stake a claim?”

Muffling his chuckle Roy quickly turned and clamped his hand over the lower half of the squirrel’s head to stifle the noise Hazel was once again making. “Hush, let him sleep.” And plucking the squirrel up he hefted the light body onto a shoulder and quite carefully got out of bed so he could get ready for work.

He didn’t even bother to wonder where the immediate pain of his hangover migraine had gone, merely grabbed a painkiller and headed down to the kitchen to get some breakfast too.

Edward was still sleeping when he left the bedroom.

In fact, he’d finished with breakfast and had just ventured into one of his old photo albums before Edward made an appearance.

“You wake up okay?” Roy asked immediately as soon as he spotted the ghost come into his peripheral vision.

Edward was more than a little perplexed about having fallen asleep, in a manner of speaking. He’d been highly confused when he’d woken up. But as he floated over he gave a short nod. “Yeah… no nightmares. Which is strange. I’d have thought that the first time I lose touch with reality again that the nightmares would come back immediately to make up for lost time.”

Roy smiled up at him, and then the ghost was sinking down to kneel beside him where he sat on the floor. “Good. Did you mean to do that? Or did it just happen?”

“Just happened. Out of nowhere. I didn’t even realize it had until I’d come back to.” Edward’s face was shadowed with his confusion about the whole thing. “I think from now on I’ll always bring something to read. I dare not risk it again… I’ve enjoyed not having those nightmares.”

“So I’m guessing the right side of the bed is yours?” Roy grinned at him then.
Edward would have blushed, were he able, but that didn’t stop the embarrassment from showing in his face anyway. “Shut up. You always seem to migrate to the left.”

Roy laughed openly, but gave the ghost a reassuring smile. “I’ll just apologize in advance if I flop around in my sleep and pass an arm through you or something.” Before Edward could get any more embarrassed, however, Roy turned back to his flipping through the photo album. “Ah!”

Edward was grateful for the opportunity to focus on something else as he directed his gaze down to what Roy was doing. “What are you –?”

Roy smiled faintly as Edward abruptly stopped talking, the silver eyes riveted now on what he was holding up for the ghost to see. “I promised I’d let you have it.”

Edward slowly reached forward to gingerly take the photograph from Roy. There on the aging photo paper, was a picture of his father. A younger version than the man he remembered, but he’d know his father anywhere. “When…?”

“When I was just starting the military.” Roy answered gently. “It was taken at East Central, in one of the courtyards. Maes was going camera happy getting pictures of everyone. I saved that one though… I told you that I knew your dad briefly? Figured it was worth hanging onto.”

Edward studied the photograph. His father there standing on a grassy lawn, looking quite self-assured but still smiling. The man was a great alchemist, that he knew. But a terrible father. “He seems happy.” Edward observed quietly.

“We had no idea a war was on the horizon in less than five years.” Roy replied in a subdued tone. “We were all happy back then. Happy in our ignorance of what was waiting for us all.”

Edward looked up from the photograph then to look into the distant black eyes. “Are you no longer as happy as you once were?”

Roy snapped his focus back to Edward, becoming aware of the silver eyes he’d been gazing off into. “Not the same sort of happiness. It never could be.” He began to smile at the ghost as he relaxed into the spirit’s presence. “But I am happy, yes.”

Edward smiled brightly at that, “good. You sound too much like an idiot when you’re not.”

“Hey!” Roy protested through a smile.

“Well you do!” Edward laughed, before turning his gaze back to the photograph with pursed lips. Roy shook his head with a roll of his eyes. “Where do you want to keep it? I don’t mind making a part of the house yours for things that you want. I mean, you live here too.”

Should he feel so domesticated by saying such a thing? Hell, he may as well offer to let Edward have half of his closet too. But with a roll of his eyes, he abstained.

“I’m not sure.” Edward admitted as he contemplated the photograph in his grasp. On one end, he harbored anger towards his father, and on the other… well, the other was the side of him that didn’t have anything to remind him of family. Until now.

“Well,” Roy began as he thought about it, “how about for now we leave it in the album until I can buy a frame to protect it in. And then we can worry about where to put it.”

Edward nodded after a moment, taking a last look at his father before offering the photograph out to
Roy, “Thank you.”

Roy knew exactly what Edward was thanking him for, and he accepted the photograph with a smile and an understanding nod. “You’re welcome.” And slipping the photograph back so that it could be protected, he put the photo album back away and then stood up. “Are you ready to go to work with me?”

Edward floated up off the floor instantly. “Of course I am. I’m sure not staying here.” He stated adamantly. “Besides, without me there your work won’t get done on time, I won’t get my chess game, and I’ll drive myself crazy here by myself waiting to ride my bike!”

Roy laughed, “point taken. Okay, let’s go.” And he led the way, Edward close behind him. “By the way, when did you want to make a cake with me? Tomorrow night? Or after we get home from our weekend trip?”

“Tomorrow!” Edward declared excitedly. “I’ll forego bike riding to make a cake with you. Trust me, we’ll need the entire evening.”

“Just what kind of an exotic cake do you have planned?” Roy asked in well deserved curiosity.

Edward merely smirked at him. “You’ll find out tomorrow night.”

“Oh, so it is exotic.” Roy noted with a grin. Well, he was all for it. He did promise after all… and honestly, he was looking forward to eating something he’d made with Edward.

The walk to Central Headquarters was a silent one by necessity, as was the walk up to Roy’s office complex, but they eventually made it. On time as well, despite their non-rushed attitude about it this morning.

When they got there it was empty, as they’d come to expect, and Roy let them into his office. Edward immediately zoomed through the air to plop himself in Roy’s desk chair with a delighted smirk as he reclined back with a satisfied exhale of breath.

Roy snorted as he made his way over. “Come on you, up.” He demanded of the ghost. “You know that’s my chair.”

“Your office, my home for the past seven years. I think I trump you there.” Edward argued with a devious smile.

“Well in case it slipped your notice, I relocated you into a proper home.” Roy smirked back, and waved a hand flippantly at the ghost. “Now up.”

Edward floated off with grumbling growls so that Roy could take possession of the chair while he went over to sink down onto his preferred black leather couch. “Just make sure we have enough time for chess.”

Roy glanced up at the ghost who had gone in search of a book, smiling quickly in amusement before he turned to checking his phone messages while he waited for Hawkeye to appear with his daily work.

Not long later, she did.

“Sir,” she began as she walked in to see the sight she still hadn’t quite gotten used to, “you say it’s not because of a date that you’ve been getting all your work done, and early for that matter… but just
what has gotten into you?”

Roy barely blinked as the stack of paperwork thumped to his desk, reflexively grabbing a pen to begin. “Sometimes, Hawkeye, you just have to let a good thing be. No matter what caused it. It’s like the sun rising every day. It’s a good thing, but you needn’t analyze why it deems to do so.”

She snorted, “yes, you’ve such a sunny disposition.”

“Of course!” Roy grinned at her cheekily. “Now to work with you.”

“Well just so you know,” she said, midway between beating a retreat, “in the gambling pool, my money is on your mother harassing you more than usual to make you want to get a move on.”

Roy smirked at the file he was currently perusing. “I hope you aren’t wagering too much then.”

Hawkeye only laughed before making her way out of the office, closing the door quietly behind her. “You should affect their bets.” Edward suddenly suggested from where he’d retrieved his book from the floor upon Hawkeye’s entrance.

“How do you mean?”

“None of them are going to guess what it really is.” Edward pointed out needlessly, “but, that doesn’t mean you can’t have fun messing with them all. Say… for each person find out what the wager and idea is, and then influence them all secretly that they might be right so that they lose more money."

“And place a bet myself that it’ll be proven to be none of those things if they launch an investigation at the end of the betting period?” Roy guessed with a growing evil glint to his eyes.

“Exactly.” Edward laughed. “You’ll come out with a lot of money.”

Roy looked up then to contemplate the ghost with a growing smile. “You’re positively wicked sometimes, do you know that? Troublesome ghost.”

“As you said,” Edward grinned back, “I am a ghost. Therefore, being troublesome and positively wicked is rather in the definition.”

Roy couldn’t help but grin through his laughter at that, and turned back to his paperwork with a shake of his head. Sometimes Edward came up with the most tantalizing ideas.

The hours passed, filled with the sounds of flipping pages and the scratching of pen across paper. Until at last Roy noticed that it was nearing that time of the day where he’d probably be under siege by someone of his team wanting to know if he was going to join them for lunch.

“Edward?”

No answer. The ghost still read on, and Roy smirked as he tried again.

“Ed?”

Nothing. Roy fought back a chuckle.

“Eddie?”

Edward’s head jerked up from the book that had been resting across his lap to glare at the man. “I
was trying to finish that paragraph, and *don’t* call me Eddie!”

Roy grinned at him unabashedly, but raised his hands in submission to the request. “It’s about lunch time.”

“That’s fantastic, but if you recall I’m incapable of consuming food.” Edward retorted back sassily.

“Did you want me to order in, or did you want to go out to eat again with the others?” Roy asked, ignoring Edward’s cheek.

Edward tilted his head in consideration before saying, “out... it lets me see more places.”

“Then it’s settled.” Roy leaned back in his chair with a partial yawn and contemplated the ceiling tiles. “Hey, Ed?”

“Hm?” The ghost hummed in response, eyes not lifting from the book.

“Did the ceiling tiles ever get dirty too?”

Edward looked up at them with a thoughtful expression as he thought back through the duration of the seven years he’d spent trapped here. “I can’t ever recall anything being splashed up onto them. Just normal dirt and dust. The one guy who tried to aim for the ceiling, I’ll let you fill in the details… he fell kind of short and got the window instead.”

“Amateur.” Roy muttered.

Edward heard him anyway, eyes narrowing. “Don’t *you* be trying something like that! We may live together now, but there are parts of you that should stay covered in my presence.”

“Calm down.” Roy chuckled and righted himself in his chair. “I’ll always keep my socks on.”

Edward didn’t even dignify that with a response as he rolled his eyes and went back to his book.

Not long later the door to the office opened, and Breda was ushered inside.

“Yes, I’m coming with you all out to lunch,” Roy informed him before he could be asked. And smiled as the startled look graced his team member’s face. “Well you lot *have* gotten rather predictable.”

“Well Fuery got a muffin down at the mess hall this morning and is still in the infirmary filling buckets,” Breda told him with a sympathetic grimace. “We’re all a bit wary now of the food there.”

Roy grimaced a bit too. “Well I won’t be too surprised then if he doesn’t show up tomorrow. Good thing it’s a Friday.”

“He’s not the only one grateful for that.” Breda muttered before giving a sharp nod. “We were planning to leave in about ten minutes.”

Roy nodded, waving him off, and as soon as the door shut he turned to Edward. “So will he be backed up for a month too?”

“He just doesn’t know it yet.” Edward agreed with a sympathetic nod of his head. “There’s a reason the food is cheap down there. So cut him some slack if you make them run laps or do pushups or anything for punishment if they misbehave.”

Roy grinned at the mental image of having them do that. “Actually not my normal routine, but now
I’m tempted to try it. Shame they’re usually very well behaved.”

“Not like me?” Edward grinned at him wickedly.

“Definitely not at all like you. As much as they’d love to attack General Grand, they wouldn’t. You on the other hand…”

“As I told you before,” Edward jumped in with a warm smile, “I see no reason that just because I’m dead, I shouldn’t be allowed to protect what matters most to me.”

And like before, Roy couldn’t help but feel that warm flair of happiness rise within his chest. The knowledge that he was what mattered most to the ghost… he’d never had that sentiment come from anyone who wasn’t family before. It was a feeling that he couldn’t compare to anything else, only that it made him feel light in a way he never had before.

“You’re…” Edward continued hesitantly at first, but then brightened with another smile, “you’re my world. You brought it back to me.”

Roy was motionless a moment longer before he pushed back from his desk. And ignoring the curious look he was being given, crossed the room to sit beside Edward on the couch, whereupon he caught the gaze of the silver eyes with his own. “I’ve never given anyone an entire world before… but,” he smiled faintly, “if anyone were ever to deserve it, it’s you.”

Edward blinked, unsure of just what to say to that. He felt rather dumb, just sitting there staring back at the man while his mouth began to gradually pull into a smile.

“Come on,” Roy said, suddenly self-conscious as he ducked his head away from that penetrating gaze as he rose to his feet. “We should go meet them, perhaps it’ll hurry them along.”

Edward quickly floated after the man after a second’s delay.

Roy made sure the door stayed open long enough for Edward to slip through, but his attention was already on his staff. What of it remained with Maes off spying and Fuery off hurling.

“Give us two minutes.” Hawkeye admonished him fondly, “we’re not all as crazy as you at powering through work these days.”

“By all means, continue slacking at your glacial pace.” Roy grinned at her, his grin not once wavering under her scowl.

“They don’t have ghosts to play chess with, give them a little bit of room to breathe.” Edward smirked over at him, feeling less off-balance in the switch of environment.

Roy could only smile in agreement.

Once the few minutes had elapsed, Roy ushered them through the doors so they could go seek out some lunch. Now that his stomach was informed that it would be on the way, he was getting quite hungry. Besides, he’d exerted a lot of energy last night, and not eaten much at breakfast, so a large lunch was definitely looking up to be a good thing.

Especially considering he doubted an excited Edward would let him take his time cooking a large dinner and sitting down to properly enjoy it. No… the ghost would likely want to start trying to ride that bike right away.

And he didn’t want to miss a single solitary moment of that.
A devious smile beginning to play along his lips, he led the group out and off of Headquarters’ property before turning to Havoc at his shoulder. “So where to this time? O’ genius of the sandwich shop from yesterday.”

“Don’t tease him like it was a bad thing!” Edward piped up from where he floated above their heads, “that place was fun!”

Roy barely kept from laughing, but as it was, he was unable to stop the wide amused grin that took over his face. Yes… for them, it had been fun. He couldn’t say the same for the others… but they’d had fun.
Chapter Twenty-One

As Roy Mustang and his group of loyal subordinates trailed by one incorporeal being trooped down the sidewalk intent on getting lunch, Roy was quite careful in dropping back to the rear of the group so that eventually he was picking up the tail end of the line while Edward floated along beside him.

And Roy gradually began to drop back a bit more every few feet until he was able to whisper. “I’m afraid I’ve a confession to make.”

Edward frowned at him, “this should be good. What’d you do this time?”

Roy chose not to protest that this time nonsense, although it was an effort not to. “We’re about to make a break for it at that alleyway there coming up.”

“That’s an odd confession.” Edward informed him, but received only a look that told him he’d get an explanation soon enough. Not that he really minded the change of plans, wherever Roy went he was content to follow.

Roy bided his time patiently as the group approached the alleyway he would soon be vanishing down with his ghostly companion, and as soon as they’d reached it, he ducked into the alleyway with a triumphant smile as he began to quickly put distance between he and the others.

Edward darted after him without a second thought to it.

“Sorry, but I rather had to play along as far as they were concerned.” Roy grinned faintly as he shoved his hands in his pockets while he carefully navigated spilled trash.

“I don’t understand. What are you going on about? And what’s this confession you have to make?” Edward demanded of him as he floated along after the man, casting unimpressed looks around the alleyway as he did so.

Roy tipped his head back and to the left so he could look at the ghost. “Do you not remember? Yesterday I promised you that we’d go out for lunch today, just us.”

Edward blinked in surprise, suddenly coming to an abrupt halt in midair. How had he forgotten that so easily? “That’s right…”

Roy stopped and turned back to look at him with a smile. “Do you not remember? Yesterday I promised you that we’d go out for lunch today, just us.”

Edward blinked in surprise, suddenly coming to an abrupt halt in midair. How had he forgotten that so easily? “That's right…”

Roy stopped and turned back to look at him with a smile. “I couldn’t let them know though that I planned to go out for lunch by myself. They’re known to tail me for various reasons. And I don’t want them stalking me when I’m trying to spend time alone with you.”

Edward found himself smiling back, and slowly he floated forward again towards Roy. “I can’t believe I forgot.”

“You had a strange night last night. Don’t let it worry you.” Roy reassured him as he turned around to resume walking once again. “Between the two of us we’ll make this work.”

Edward felt his smile brighten at that last, and he darted over to fall in beside the man. “So where are we going for lunch?”

“You’ll soon see.” Roy told him unhelpfully, smiling as he felt the scowl he was being subjected to.
But it did nothing to change his mind as he eventually led them out of the alleyway and back out onto normal streets so that he could begin making his way to his true destination.

Edward tagged along as the wheels in his mind turned with possibilities.

It took them almost ten whole minutes of walking to reach their destination, and when Edward saw where Roy was taking them, he knew without a doubt that they’d be able to have a very private lunch out together.

It was another park, but one very different from the one Roy had taken him to before. This park had far more trees and other thick vegetation, no playground equipment, very few people anywhere to be seen, and the winding dirt paths that cut through it appeared to lead around a large manmade lake where ducks and geese were floating about.

“There’s a place like this in the city?” Edward marveled as they made their way closer.

“Just wait until we get further in.” Roy smiled over at him before changing his direction to intercept one of the street vendors on bicycle.

Edward floated over, fascinated, as the vendor stopped his bike with a broad grin and went back to the chilled cart he was towing along behind. He’d never seen such a contraption before!

Roy smiled to himself as he tried not to pay attention to the way Edward was suddenly floating everywhere inspecting the bicycle and its towing hitch, trying to instead focus on the vendor who was currently fixing him up a deep paper carton of nachos covered in questionable ground and seasoned hamburger meat topped by several towering dollops of sour cream.

“You want some hot sauce on top too?” The vendor asked as he finished with the sour cream and met Roy’s eyes, unaware that his bicycle and cart were under vigorous inspection by a ghost.

Roy shook his head with a grin. “Nah, but I’ll take half of that bread loaf there.” And reaching out he took both the items, tucking the bread underneath one arm as he fished out his wallet and paid the man. “Thanks.”

“Thank you, sir.” The vendor returned in kind, and with a cheerful salute returned to his bicycle to begin pedaling away.

Edward watched the man pedal away in interest. “Can I –”

“No.” Roy interrupted with a groan, already knowing where Edward was going. “You cannot have a cart to tow around.”

Edward huffed, but didn’t press the matter. “Sometimes you eat the strangest things for lunch.”

“I enjoy trying different foods.” Roy chuckled as he turned about and began making his way up one of the dirt paths that was flanked every so often with bunches of wildflowers. “Some I enjoy more than others.”

Edward hummed a moment, but didn’t give voice to those thoughts. Instead he turned his attention to the trees they were now walking under as Roy continued to lead them further into the park. “This reminds me of the woods near Risembool. My brother and I used to play in this mountain range that was only a few miles away from our house, it had this river running through it and we used to fish in there all the time.”

Roy glanced over at him in between popping one cheese-saturated chip into his mouth. He chewed
noisily a moment before saying, “I was kind of hoping it’d be a bit familiar to you.”

“What?” Edward frowned, floating around so that he was in front of the man, continuing backwards as Roy continued to walk towards him.

“I vaguely know the area. And this is a lot more… wild than the last park we were at.” Roy explained as he fished for another chip. “I was hoping that it might be familiar to you. Give you an old comfort, I suppose. Instead of all this new stuff all the time. It may not be a real wood, or the mountains, but it does its best in the middle of a city.”

For a long moment, Edward could only stare as the gratitude he felt built inside him. It never escaped his notice that Roy did a lot for him, in many ways. And what was more, it didn’t seem planned, as if Roy were forcing himself to do it. It seemed far more natural than that. As if they’d stumbled by accident onto a strange coexistence.

“You do so much for me,” Edward finally spoke, softly, “thank you.”

“You do a lot for me too, you know.” Roy replied with a faint smile. “Probably more than my male ego would ever let me admit.”

Edward laughed openly at that, “well I definitely don’t want to risk you damaging your fragile ego on my account.”

Roy chuckled quietly as he shook his head in his amusement. And still smiling he finally led them away from the path. “Come on, we’ll not be bothered over here.”

Edward followed after him, and after cutting through several bushes and trees, they found themselves at the edge of the lake on what looked like very thick, springy turf if the way Roy was stepping on it was any indication. Looking around he could see that they were mostly concealed from the rest of the bank by the low-hanging branches of trees, or small thickets of berry bushes.

Roy inhaled the overly-sweet scents of ripening berries as he eased himself down on the grass, at the edge of where the dirt under the turf went from dry to increasingly wet as it neared the bank. Letting out a contented sigh he looked around for Edward. “Now we can have a lunch together again in peace.”

Edward settled down beside him before changing his mind and flopping back onto the grass to stare up at the blue sky above them. “Do you ever worry that one day they might find out about me?”

“In the sense that they’d see me talking to myself and calling myself Edward, Ed, Eddie?” Roy smiled down at him as he popped another chip into his mouth.

Edward glowered over at him as he folded his arms beneath his head. “Don’t call me Eddie.”

Roy chuckled softly, “it’s already off the list, don’t worry. It doesn’t have quite the same ring to it as when I call you a short brat of a ghost.” And ignoring the withering stare he was given, smiled. “I wouldn’t say I’m worried about it, exactly. That’d only make them try and spy on me, if they believed there was something that I was worried about them finding out. I’ll do what I can, but I also know that if one day they do catch me, I’ll be ready to invent a very elaborate lie.”

“Or I’ll be ready to cause a concussion.” Edward muttered to himself.

Roy smiled over at him, wondering how long it would be before the ghost gave Grand a concussion. Hopefully he’d have what he needed to implicate the man in nefarious deeds before that hospital trip happened. Although if he were being entirely honest with himself, he knew that a hospital trip might
be needed for one of them when that happened, and a shallow grave for the other. “Here. I bought this for you.”

Edward looked over with a slight frown, only to quickly catch the half a loaf of bread in surprise. Sitting up he turned his frown from it over to the man sitting beside him. “Why? What exactly do you expect me to do with it?”

Roy nodded towards the lake, “feed them.”

Edward looked out over the lake, seeing various geese and ducks milling about the water. “Oh, right.” And with an uncertain expression he broke off a chunk of the bread, as if not sure whether or not this would work. But at Roy’s urging he lobbed the piece off across the lake where it plunked down into the water before bobbing back to the surface.

“Just wait.” Roy told him when he caught Edward about to look defeated when none of the waterfowl seemed to notice.

Edward glanced back out to the water, and blinking in surprise he suddenly grinned as all of a sudden one of the ducks spotted the foreign object floating on the surface. And with classic survival of the fittest mode thrumming through its system, the duck darted across the water leaving V-shaped ripples in its wake to bear down upon the chunk of bread and swipe it off the surface of the water with a quick nip of its beak.

That was all it took to clue in not only the other ducks nearby, but the geese as well.

Suddenly Edward was breaking off several chunks of bread at once to begin tossing out over the water to the birds who were swimming closer with avid hunger. “There’s so many of them.” He exclaimed. He swore there hadn’t been *this* many when he first started.

“Mob mentality.” Roy explained through a bit of a yawn and stuffing another cheese and meat covered tortilla chip into his mouth. “Ducks are a prime example of it. As soon as one gets fed, another will notice, and another will notice that other noticing, and before long you’ve got a gaggle of geese chasing their asses trying to get fed as well.”

“I haven’t seen ducks since about a month before I died.” Edward revealed as he continued to throw the chunks of bread out for them.

“Back when your mother was still alive?” Roy questioned cautiously.

Edward nodded in an absent manner as he tried to focus most of his attention on the ducks lest he succumb to the darker sides his mood could swing to. “She was sick at the time, but yes, she was still alive.”

Roy nodded, and let it be. “Well if you bring those ducks close enough I can roast one to eat.”

The statement did exactly what Roy had been hoping for. Complete distraction.

Edward’s head snapped over so he could stare wide-eyed at the man. “You want me to do what so you can *what*?!?”

“Ducks are tasty.” Roy smirked at him.

“I know that,” Edward protested as he tossed a look and another chunk of bread out over the water to where the ducks and geese were circling ever-closer. “But I don’t want you to kill one right in front of me either!”
Roy grinned rakishly and began searching for another acceptably loaded chip. “It was just a suggestion.”

“I’m sure it was.” Edward scowled at him, and pointedly applied himself to feeding the local waterfowl.

And the feeding continued to go rather well, as Roy continued to feed himself at the same time, until the point the ducks and geese had drawn right up abreast of the bank. That was when everything changed… at least, as far as the geese were concerned.

“Ah! No, no, no!” Roy nearly tumbled backwards as one goose in particular suddenly charged him. Or rather, charged his nachos.

A grinning Edward was distracted by watching Roy scramble uncoordinatedly to his feet and attempting escape. But he never got too far into seeing what Roy came up with as he felt a hard tug at the bread he was holding. Whipping back around he saw that a particularly large goose had clamped its beak on the loaf and was valiantly trying to rob him of it. “That’s mine!”

Meanwhile Roy was dodging not only one goose, but two as they attempted to corner him. And mentally he berated himself for not leaving at least one glove on while he ate, but could he help it that he commonly ate nachos with two hands? “Damn it.” Roy growled as he attempted to fend one off with his boot while not getting his foot eaten in the process.

“I’ll let Roy cook you.” Edward threatened the goose as he wrestled for his bread. It was very inconvenient that he couldn’t touch the greedy thing! He’d whack it over the head so fast it wouldn’t know what had happened!

Roy finally gave up the dancing game with a swear as he hurriedly licked the fingers of his left hand clean before diving into his pocket for his glove. The reassuring feel of ignition cloth sliding onto his hand lit a triumphant light within him as he pulled his hand free.

Several short snaps that lit temporary bomb-like fires in front of the heads of the two geese that were harrying him did the trick, sending them squawking in alarm back to the water trailing feathers in their wake.

“Roy!” Edward’s head tipped back towards the man as he continued to grapple with the goose that was still trying to rob him. “A little help?!”

Roy chuckled as he walked over, examining the sight. “Are you sure you need some?”

Edward glared a silvery glare at him, “yes!”

Roy snapped, and like its fellows, the last goose was sent scuttling back to the water in fright. Quiet laughter still shaking him he looked after their retreat. “Predictable nuisances.”

Edward paid him no mind as he examined the damage done to the remainder of his bread with a moody face. “It took a huge chunk.”

Roy looked down at him with a smile as Edward began to throw more chunks out to the ducks who had hung around to watch the entire display and were now more than happy to resume eating. “Did you have geese as well in Risembool? I’m surprised you didn’t try to get away when they first made to come onto the bank.”

“Of course we did, but my mom always chased them off with an umbrella when they got too bothersome.” Edward explained with a faint, melancholic smile.
Roy shuddered at the mention of those accursed objects. “I hate umbrellas. Fire works just fine too.”

Edward looked up in surprise then. “You don’t like umbrellas? Why not?”

“I have this fear, a very silly one, but still!” Roy groaned as he settled back down onto the grass to resume finishing what was left of his lunch. “I have this fear that they’ll,” he waved his hand around, “close in around my head.”

Edward blinked at him owlishly, “but that wouldn’t kill you.”

Roy snorted to himself, “I still don’t like them.”

“Well now I know what to give you as a prank gift for your birthday.” Edward smiled, and catching the look of lackluster enthusiasm on Roy’s face, pelted the man with a bit of bread. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

Roy chuckled quietly as he fetched the piece of bread from the creases of his uniform jacket, and tossed it to waiting ducks. “You’re welcome, short brat of a ghost.”

Edward pelted him with another chunk of bread, causing Roy to laugh louder. But he said nothing as he went back to feeding the ducks with a content smile. It really was relaxing to be surrounded by nature again, and to be there with Roy this time.

He wasn’t sure what would have happened had he lived and met Roy, but he did know that he only hoped they’d have ended up like this anyway.

They stayed until Edward had exhausted his bread supply. Only then did they begin to head back to Headquarters together, both curious for different reasons about what the reaction from Roy’s team would be when Roy showed his face after suddenly skipping out on them for lunch.

And it wasn’t long at all until they were about to find out.

Roy took it all in stride, however, sauntering into the main office as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred at all. He knew he wouldn’t get far though, and wasn’t disappointed when he heard the safety on a pistol click off.

“What happened to you?” Hawkeye demanded suspiciously.

As was the case with most things, hell, all things regarding Edward, Roy knew the truth was out of the question. So when he turned to her with a reproachful frown in place, he was prepared with a lie. “I went and got lunch by myself.” He informed her without hesitation. “It’s not my fault I lost track of you when I saw a pretty girl in the flower shop.”

“Not Heidi! You stay away from her!” Havoc exclaimed, bolting to his feet.

“Easy, Havoc.” Roy smirked at his panicking subordinate. “I have no desire to do anything but. This one’s yours.”

And with that, Roy fully embraced the new ambiance of the office, that of Havoc’s rapid-fire mood swings, and sauntered unscathed into his own personal office where he shut the door with much satisfaction.

“Now they’re going to be wondering why you’re not interested.” Edward pointed out as he floated after Roy who was heading for his desk.
“If Havoc’s seeing her, that’s reason enough. You remember the types I go for.” Roy pulled his chair out to sit rather sloppily.

Edward shook his head with a sigh, “I can’t help but think that with as many people as I’ve been led to believe you’ve bedded, you might not be as good as you think at finding virgins. There can’t be that many.”

“You’re not the only one to suggest that to me.” Roy yawned as he pivoted his chair to face his desk. “And maybe that’s why my toy box is bigger than Hazel’s.” And he was rewarded with some kind of high-pitched noise from a certain silvery ghost who suddenly shot to the other end of the office with a book.

Leaving Edward to his book-therapy, Roy got to work.

The rest of the day passed fairly quickly, even their multiple chess games seemed to go by in a flash. And by the time Roy was packing the set up so that they could leave, he not only had lost the majority of the rounds, but still hadn’t had any luck in guessing Edward’s favorite dessert.

Something the ghost seemed to find highly amusing.

Now, as they made their way through yet another new way home to expand Edward’s world, said ghost was currently overflowing with excitement as thick as ectoplasm. And Roy was stuck in it.

“Can’t you walk faster?” Edward chastised as he darted about through the air, changing direction at such speed as to give Roy whiplash if he were to try to actively watch.

Roy couldn’t help but smile even more as he shook his head.

And the entire walk home was filled with similar excitement that doubled remarkably as they finally reached the house.

Roy could only watch as Edward fled for the backyard with that same noise that the ghost had made when they’d gone to the park with the swings days ago. That same noise that he was beginning to believe actually was a squeal.

With a smile and a shake of his head, Roy followed at a more sedate pace.

When he reached the backyard where Edward was currently examining his bike with a seriousness that made Roy burst out laughing, he was instantly under attack by his incorporeal companion.

“Remember, you said you could turn it black.” Edward informed him.

“And so I can.” Roy grinned at him. He really did adore the childish enthusiasm that Edward embraced so naturally. And the ghost was practically bouncing in the air beside him as he walked over to the bike. “I’ll turn it black, and while you wheel it out front I’m going to grab something to eat. Wait for me, okay?”

Edward nodded agreeably. He could be patient for a few more minutes at the very least.

Roy reached the bike, and without much thought pulled out a stick of chalk from his pocket. And meeting Edward’s eyes as he began to draw the transmutation circle, explained. “I don’t want to continue my non-fire alchemy experiments on your bike. Safer this way.”

Edward could only agree.
Roy finished with the array and pocketed the chalk before laying his hands on the transmutation circle he'd drawn onto the seat of the bicycle. A flash of bright, bluish white light shot up from both the array and the bike, nearly encircling Roy in its radiant glow before it suddenly was gone. “I am just that good.” Roy smirked successfully as he dusted his hands off.

Edward snorted, “maybe your ego *does* need a bit of damaging.” He muttered through a smile. Just as promised, his bike was now completely black, the paint molecules rearranged perfectly.

“My ego is just as it should be.” Roy retorted fondly before turning about. “I’ll just grab something from the fridge and then I’ll meet you outside for your lesson.”

Edward barely remembered to nod that he’d heard before he was eagerly pushing the bike towards the front yard. And upon reaching the side gate that separated the back from the front yard, he made sure there were no visible people before he pushed it out the rest of the way, all the way to the fence next to the front gate.

It was not long that he had to wait before Roy reappeared.

Roy shut the front door to make sure Hazel didn’t get out to try to chase Edward down the sidewalk – it’d be difficult enough to explain a bike moving on its own – and stooped down to set his plate of two sandwiches and his cold beer down before trotting down the short flight of stairs to cross over to where Edward stood eagerly beside the bike.

“It won’t matter that I don’t weigh anything, right?” Edward asked as Roy approached.

“It’s balance, not weight, that matters.” Roy assured him. “And the fact that you’ll be able to touch it, which implies some amount of pressure, will take care of any potential weight issues.”

“How exactly are you planning to explain this if asked?” Edward asked then with a hint of amusement.

Roy chuckled, glancing around to make sure they were still alone before answering. “The excuse of alchemy is always very useful. Don’t worry, I doubt this is the strangest thing I might need to make up a lie for where you’re concerned.”

Edward nodded solemnly, he did know. But then he brightened with a smile. “So I just get on and peddle, right? Use the handlebars to steer?”

“That’s the generics of it.” Roy agreed as he reached forward to grip the bike at the center of the handlebars to tilt it straight up and down. “Hop on. I’ll wheel you out onto the sidewalk. It’ll be a lot smoother than grass, and while you may never notice the difference, the bike will.”

Edward immediately floated into place before allowing himself to touch the inanimate object. Gripping the handlebars and raising his feet to the pedals he looked up to nod at Roy.

“This is more a learn by doing thing.” Roy said as he steered them out through the gate and onto the sidewalk. “So what I want you to do now is exactly what you did before when we were bringing it home. Start pedaling, and keep yourself centered.”

Edward nodded eagerly, and without any hesitation at all, began to work the pedals just as Roy’s hand released the bike. He had pedaled maybe two feet on the rocking and shaking bike when out of nowhere he tipped sharply to the right.

“YEEEE!”
Roy cringed through a wicked grin as Edward tumbled into a heap with the bike resting inside his near-translucent body. Trying his best not to laugh he quickly hurried over to the befuddled looking Edward. “Well? What do you think?”

Edward jerked his head over to level a deadpan stare at the broadly grinning man. “I think I need to try that again.”

Roy burst out into laughter then, reaching down to grab the bike up and haul it out of Edward’s body. “I think you’re right.”

Edward floated up to sit astride the bike once more as Roy held it anchored. “Any suggestions?”

“What foot do you normally lead with when you act like you’re walking?” Roy asked patiently through his random bursts of laughter.

“My right.”

“Okay, then left foot down on the sidewalk. I want you to push off with it at the same time you start to peddle with the right. You’ll have to learn the timing to catch the pedal for your left foot, but it may help you start out smoother. And I won’t always be here to get you going.”

Edward adjusted his feet as necessary before nodding at Roy. “Ready.”

Roy released the bike so that Edward held it propped, and quickly backed out of the way as Edward pushed off from the ground. And he eagerly waited with a wicked grin for what would come next.

He didn’t have to wait long.

With another shriek of alarm, Edward suddenly pitched sideways after having gone only four rotations of the wheels. The bike clattered down around and through him. Yet as he lay there, dumbfounded that it was this difficult, he had to commend himself, he’d gotten a bit farther that time!

So with new energy he darted up to grab the bike up and mount it again.

Roy supposed he’d been forgotten in Edward’s determination, and so, still laughing to himself, he made his way up to his porch to sit down and continue overseeing the progress. Grabbing his beer he flipped the cap off with his thumb as he watched Edward push off again and begin stubbornly pedaling.

“AAAAH!”

Roy nearly snorted his beer as arms windmilling about, Edward toppled down again. But he was smiling through his carefully quieted laughter as Edward recovered almost instantly and set off again. “Determined brat of a ghost.” He murmured smilingly to himself as he watched, thankful that said ghost wasn’t on his motorcycle.

Edward consecutively crashed and burned five more times before he felt he was finally starting to get the hang of it. And so with his determination still in place, and the incentive that he wanted to use Roy’s motorcycle, he righted the bicycle again and set off once more.

Roy watched with interest and his mouth full of a bite of peanut butter and honey sandwich as Edward suddenly went double the distance he had previously before, suddenly, the bike began to veer once more, sending both it and Edward toppling into Roy’s fence.

With a smile, Roy watched as Edward picked himself up off the ground and out of the fence to go
examine the bike as the ghost pulled it upright again. At the same time noticing that it had finally happened.

His neighbors across the way were in their front yard staring in shock at a bike that was by all appearances, moving on its own.

He said nothing, merely chuckled to himself some more as he turned back to watching Edward try again.

Edward pedaled determinedly as he tried to focus on keeping himself centered and steering to keep the bike going forward all at the same time. He was getting better, but he wasn’t good enough yet. He wasn’t good enough yet to satisfy Roy and earn the right to try out the motorcycle. And it was working well until he hit a lip in the sidewalk that he’d not gotten far enough before to notice.

Roy watched with a cringe as Edward flew head over heels with a shriek over the handlebars, the bike clattering to the sidewalk behind him as the ghost landed on his rear end.

Edward looked back at it with a frown before he was right back to it again. And this time he’d be aware for bumps like that along the way, and learn how to ride through them. So not at all dissuaded from pressing on, Edward did so with vigor.

Now Roy could hear the children of the neighbor to his right as they came out to play after having eaten dinner, and he looked over at them with a bit of a smile as they exclaimed over the bike moving on its own, gasped whenever it fell judging by the loud noise and a shriek, and generally gawked.

“Mommy! Mommy!” One of them called in amazement. “That bike’s moving by itself! I want one!”

“I want a magic bike too!” Another chorused.

Roy watched with a grin as one of them ran off, most likely to fetch their mother who would most likely not believe them. And then he turned back to watching Edward.

“Sorry kids,” he whispered to himself as he tipped back his beer before riveting his gaze back on Edward, “this magic bike is mine.”

Quickly Roy finished off his sandwiches before plucking his beer up from the ground and sauntering down the path to let himself out through the gate which he latched behind him. And approaching Edward who was just dusting himself off after yet another tumble – although granted the ghost had gotten almost a whole thirteen feet before he’d tumbled – he caught the silver eyes with his own.

“Let’s go for a walk.”

Edward frowned, but circled the bike around so that he could push it off after Roy. “Walk?”

“Get on and ride.” Roy told him quietly, masking the movement of his lips with his beer bottle as he took a quick sip, just in case someone was still looking. And that was very likely. “I’ll walk. Maybe the distraction of going somewhere else besides back and forth will help. You are getting better, I think you just get so excited about it when you get farther that it affects you and makes you tumble.”

Edward shrugged, he was willing to try. And so without further questions he hopped back onto the bike and pushed off with his left foot to get it moving again. Pedaling beside Roy he kept his eyes firmly fixed ahead as he worked on keeping himself centered – something he’d never had to really worry about before.

And to Edward’s amazement, he began to have fewer tumbles, and such was his fear of tumbling
into Roy that he began to catch himself by reaching his foot down. And once he was steadied he’d start off again.

“Roy?” Edward asked during one of the rare times he felt like the bike was traveling smoothly under his care. “Can I ask who taught you to ride a bike? It wasn’t your dad, was it?”

Roy shook his head as he continued to lead them down the quiet streets of the suburbs where families were either inside, or seemed to be occupied in the backyard. “My dad died long before he ever could have. No, it was my mom. She taught me how to ride a bike much like I’m teaching you. She never felt like life should have training wheels.”

Edward let out a small gasp of breath as he was forced to catch himself again, and setting off once more he thought about that. “I guess that makes sense. But I’ll bet you were black and blue by the time you learned.”

Roy smiled at the memories of it. “Undoubtedly. I couldn’t sit down for days. Even my balls were bruised.”

Edward rolled his eyes, casually shoving off again as he tilted to the side while noticing vaguely that he was doing it far less than he had been only one street back. “I really could have done without that bit of information.”

Grinning unrepentant, Roy shrugged. “I’m only being a thorough instructor.”

Edward shook his head with a faint smile, but said nothing. Instead easy silence seemed to stretch between them as Roy casually led them around the neighborhood as Edward increasingly got better. And it was Roy’s guess that it would only be a matter of one more session before Edward was getting more adventurous about it.

Dusk was settling over the city as they finally made their way back home, and the two of them saw that the bike was put away safely before they headed indoors to relax.

One of them feeling oddly contented, the other still bubbling in excitement that didn’t seem to ever become dampened.

“I was doing really good on the last two streets back.” Edward exulted as he trailed after Roy into the kitchen. “I barely had to catch myself at all.”

“I’m glad you’re to the catching yourself stage.” Roy agreed as he opened his refrigerator to pull out another beer. “Although don’t get me wrong, you crashing and burning was fantastic to watch.” He grinned as he toasted Edward with the bottle.

Edward rolled his eyes. “Just you wait, I’ll haunt you one day.”

“Forgive me for thinking I wouldn’t mind that.” Roy grinned at him as he uncapped the beer and took a hearty swig of the amber liquid.

“You wouldn’t.” It had been meant to come out as a threat of a promise, but it didn’t escape either of them that it was said far more fondly than to imply any sort of threat. And Edward looked away, embarrassed.

Roy merely smiled as he stepped around the ghost, his eyes never leaving the silvery spirit. “Come on. We still have some time for a game of chess if you like, or to play with Hazel before I’d like to get some sleep.” And then with a wolfish grin, added, “and of course you’re welcome to come sleep with me again as well.”
The implication was not lost on Edward, who were he capable of it, would have colored spectacularly. But as it was he pelted after Roy who had suddenly fled for it with a peal of laughter. “Roy! Get back here you damn pervert!”
“Friday…”

Roy didn’t even bother glancing at Edward as they walked along together across the sidewalk in the early dawn hours, making their way to Headquarters. He’d heard this ‘Friday’ nonsense with nothing further added for the past three blocks, and his curious looks had gotten him nothing more.

“Friday…”

But that didn’t mean he wasn’t about ready to begin wishing he could smack the ghost.

He managed to last it out up until the point they got past Headquarter gates, thereby sharply decreasing the number of people who might actually be watching him. And this early in the morning? He doubted anyone here early on a Friday morning would be feeling up to looking at him too closely.

“What the bloody fuck are you going on about?” Roy growled after another repetition of ‘Friday’.

Edward was unconcerned about Roy’s slight aggravation, only continued to look thoughtful. “Last day of this week that I can do something to Grand. Hopefully something debilitating enough that it’ll keep him occupied while we’re gone.”

“The floors aren’t carpeted.” Was all Roy said in response to Edward’s explanation.

At first, Edward was delighted by the idea that popped into his head, but as he thought about it, the more he began to frown. “I may be able to go through walls, and floors and such if we’ve seen them together, but that doesn’t mean I can see the in-between. Pipes and such. I just seem to fall right through, like a strange crack in the rules.”

“If there are rules governing this, I’d love to have a look at them. Make a few alterations.” Roy grumbled to himself. “You were thinking about flooding the place somehow?”

“At least make it slippery.”

Roy smiled, it was a simple plan, and if history were anything to prove, effective. There was a reason that ‘Caution: Wet Floor’ signs had been developed. “You don’t need water to do that. All you need is a trip into Hawkeye’s desk. So it’s fortunate we’re here before her these days.”

Edward’s frown made a comeback. “Why do I need to get into her desk?”

“She’s a true markswoman,” Roy explained with a nonchalant wave of one hand, “if I know that woman, and I do, she’ll have at least a bulk pint of oil in her desk with which to clean her guns. And trust me, that oil will work far better than any water.”

An instantaneous grin took over Edward’s face as he regarded Roy with happiness. “I knew that I stay with you for a reason.”

“Oh, is that the reason?” Roy feigned hurt as best he could, but ended up failing to restrain the entirety of his laughter.

And as soon as they reached the office complex, Roy wasn’t the least bit surprised when Edward
shot off to land on top of Hawkeye’s desk and stare at him pointedly. But as insistent as the ghost was that he find this oil, and now, he took his sweet time sauntering over to the desk. Only because it made Edward glare at him.

“Now remember,” Roy said as he finally reached the desk, stopping before it as he fixed the ghost with a stern look, “you can’t be seen floating around with this stuff, so look before you go around corners to make sure you have enough time.”

“Yes, yes, I know.” Edward nodded his head along impatiently.

Roy merely smirked at him before stooping to begin rummaging around in Hawkeye’s desk as unnoticeably as possible to find where the woman kept her gun cleaning supplies. And he knew he shouldn’t really be surprised when he found them in the deepest drawer next to several cases of ammo.

Edward grinned gleefully as Roy pulled free the half-empty bottle. “This should work perfectly. I do hope he gets a concussion from his fall.”

“Just make sure you do it in a non-suspicious area. Not too close to the door. And not too much.” Roy informed him as he surrendered the bottle into Edward’s possession.

Edward gave him a reproachful look, but smiled at him reassuringly. And quickly, so he’d have enough time to do this and not be seen as Headquarters became more crowded with officers straggling in, he darted off back into the hallway.

Roy watched him go with an amused shake of his head, and wished the apparition well before turning to make his way into his private office. He was determined to look as unsuspicious and busy as possible when Hawkeye would come in. He’d hate for her to pin the blame of her gun oil disappearing on him.

It had been at least three years since he’d gotten drunk and hidden all of her things in a scavenger hunt that had ended up… well, not quite as he’d drunkenly foreseen it going.

Meanwhile, Edward was quite cheerfully darting about the corridors of Central Headquarters.

At several points he had to bide his time, waiting for the path to be clear before he zoomed ahead, but overall, he ran into little in the way of difficulties. It was still far too early in the morning for most people to be here. Those who’d stayed overnight to work would be too bleary-eyed to think of getting out of their chairs, and the maintenance crew seemed absent in the area.

Not that he needed to worry about them. They knew he existed.

It was just everyone else.

But without trouble, he shortly reached Grand’s personal office. And only taking a quick glance around to ascertain that no one was about, he poked his head through the door to be sure the office was empty.

It was.

A smirk beginning to crawl onto his face, Edward darted through the door. Once inside he began to take catalogue of the best potential places to lay the oil. A place Grand was sure to walk over at one point during the day, a place that wouldn’t look too suspicious for oil to be found – which unfortunately wasn’t many – but it did help narrow down the possibilities.
So floating over to the new chair that had been installed for the general, Edward flipped horizontally onto his back, and floated down to be able to see the mechanisms holding the chair together. He was only too pleased to see that the new chair had been well greased and oiled for the health of its turning apparatus.

“I think though,” Edward chuckled to himself mischievously, “they might have oiled it too much.”

Flipping so that he now faced down, Edward pushed down the tab of the lid to flip up the small spout from which to pour controlled amounts of oil. And paying careful attention to how and where he was applying the oil, he began to puddle some on the floor.

Only enough to do what he wanted, not enough to be just impossible for the cover he was planning for.

Setting the bottle aside, Edward lowered his right hand to the puddle to make contact with what he assumed was a wet, slippery substance. And with careful strokes of his hand, he began to spread it in a logical looking pool out towards the path he knew Grand would take to sit in his chair. Not a long one, but a decent length and size. Once he’d accomplished that he began wiping upwards and applying some of the excess onto the near legs of the chair and upwards along the supporting column until he reached the other oil and grease. Taking care to try blending the substances some, he finally pulled away with a satisfied smile.

It should work nicely.

And reverting back to not being able to touch inanimate objects, Edward watched the excess oil fall from his silvery hand. Only then did he grab the bottle of oil, recapping it. Then floating up he was about to leave when he gave the chair a bit of a thoughtful look.

Reaching over towards the back of it, he pivoted it just enough so that the hard, wood arm of the chair was angled more for where he hoped a part of Grand would come crashing down on. Any part would do. He just hoped the man fell forward and not back.

Although Edward found himself snickering to the potential result of Grand doing the splits.

He supposed, either way, he’d just be pleased the man went to visit the floor again.

Edward lingered only a moment longer before he began to make his way carefully back to Roy, he needed to get the gun oil back still. And then he could go back to watch Grand’s little tumble.

He arrived back at the office before everyone… but Hawkeye, and he swore to himself as he hoped she’d go in to see Roy soon, before any of the others showed up and it became impossible to get the oil back unseen!

And at long last, just as he was thinking about going for it anyway while she seemed preoccupied, the woman rose from her desk to make her way over to the closed door of Roy’s private office. Thanking no one in particular, Edward wasted no time in dashing for her desk the moment she’d let herself into Roy’s office.

He could hear the two of them in Roy’s office discussing something, but he paid no attention to whatever the conversation was as he darted around to the correct drawer and heaved it open.

Quickly, before she came back and spotted her desk drawers opening and closing on their own, he put the oil back where it belonged before slipping the drawer back shut as quietly, but quickly, as he could manage.

Only then did he breathe a sigh of relief, especially when the woman appeared not seconds later.
Floating around her, Edward cast her a quick grin before darting through the closed door of Roy’s office.

Roy jumped and swore, before shaking his head at his stupidity. He should be used to Edward zooming randomly out of walls and doors! And ignoring Edward’s snickering at his fright, he leveled a lazy look at his silvery companion. “Is everything all ready then for your parting prank of the week?”

Edward sank down to sit on the edge of Roy’s desk, his legs swinging back and forth through it. “As well as I could without making it seem too impossible to have happened naturally.”

“Are you going to go watch?” Roy asked then, returning his attention back to the files on his desk.

“I want to.” Edward shrugged, “I’d like to see for myself that he does get hurt, even if Maes will probably be in here within hours after to tell you about it.”

Roy chuckled, that the man would. And he’d get absolutely no work done during that time. “Dare I even ask yet just how you’re hoping he’ll hurt himself?”

“I expect death is a little extreme.” Edward sighed regretfully. “I’ll settle for a concussion though.”

Roy couldn’t help but think to himself, ‘of course you would’, and with a slight smile he rather happily began marking up the file in front of him with harsh corrections to be made. And as he settled in to keep working, such did Edward settle in with a book to while away the remaining time until Grand was due to arrive.

He had extra incentive today to make sure all his work was done by the normal end of the day. There was no way he’d leave anything hanging for which he might have to spend part of his weekend doing. His weekend, this weekend, was for his trip with Edward. And he was determined that it would stay that way.

Edward was the last individual he ever wanted to break a promise to.

The clock on the wall had only recently struck the 7:52 marker, but it didn’t matter. Edward was eager to waste not one second more, and zooming down through the air to discard his book on Roy’s desk with a haphazard dog-earing of his place in the book, he was whirling away to make for the door when Roy’s voice called after him.

“Have a good time!” As if Edward were merely going on a lunch outing with friends.

Edward shifted to float backwards through the air as he sent a bit of a grin Roy’s way. “You know I will if he gets hurt. Don’t wait up for me.” And he fell backwards out through the door where he soon righted his direction of travel and headed off to Grand’s office.

Still in the office, Roy finally looked away from the door. With Edward now fully gone, he leaned to the right to pull open one of his desk drawers and extract a massive rolled map.

The papers currently on his desk fluttered slightly in disruption as Roy snapped the map open and laid it across his desk. It was a complete map of the city; down to every last brothel, down to every last alleyway. Everything was drawn in and labeled. And on a good third of the map, the freestanding buildings had been marked out with a single diagonal line.

It wasn’t that he was trying to hide what he was doing from the ghost, so much as he felt that right now, he shouldn’t burden Edward with this any sooner than was necessary. He wasn’t nearly to the point he wanted to be before he involved the ghost further with this vendetta to remove Brigadier...
General Grand.

Edward was doing nicely with his own devious ambitions, he didn’t want to distract him.

And so knowing he had at most, five minutes left before Edward came crowing back, Roy picked up his pen and began to slash through several more buildings that had been ruled out as possible bases for this laboratory that Grand had in operation.

If Grand was trying to create a viable, *true* philosopher’s stone, then he needed to stop him. And soon.

…because if Grand succeeded, and turned that stone on him, Roy knew very well that his life expectancy would drop sharply. And he couldn’t allow that to happen. He couldn’t allow Ishval to happen again, but ten times worse.

He couldn’t allow Edward to be left alone again so soon.

Closing his eyes briefly, he let out a slow breath. “At least Edward was able to tell me… and not let it come as a surprise.” But he was still concerned on just how big a head start Grand had. He knew that the creation of the stone required a great many sacrificial lives… he could only hope that Grand was still shy even a hundred said lives. At least that would give him enough time to find where the hell the man was secreting this up at.

Making his last marks on the map, voiding out possibilities that Maes had told him were dead ends, he quickly rolled the map back up and stuffed it back away in his desk drawer.

It was time to get more paperwork done while he waited out Edward’s return.

The ghost in question, however, was not planning on returning just yet, not when he’d just gotten himself to Grand’s office.

And finding it still empty, and prepped as it should be, Edward floated over to sit on the desk and wait the last few minutes until his entertainment arrived. But just to make sure he kept himself occupied, he began to carefully flick through the papers on the man’s desk, being sure to keep them as they were.

What kind of ghost would he be if he didn’t engage in some spying every now and then?

But he hadn’t found much of interest by the time he heard the door begin to open, and he quickly abandoned his snooping in order to float up off the desk.

Grand swept in only a second later, the door slamming shut behind him as he stalked around over towards his desk. Completely unaware of anything amiss in the room. He was far too preoccupied with glaring as he thought about the current issue facing him to pay attention to something as familiar as his office for the past many years. In his office, he was on autopilot.

“Bunch of incompetents.” He muttered under his breath as he rounded about his desk to make for his chair, fully intending to flop dramatically into it and take his frustrations out on a stack of papers that he was fairly certain no one would miss if he shot them to smithereens.

And then, out of nowhere, his boot hit something slick, rocketing out from under him and sending him careening forward. The next thing he knew he was smashing head first into the arm of his chair, brain synapses firing a bit too slowly to cause him to react in time as his hands came much too late to the rescue.
And with a last crash, Grand’s knees, having slammed down onto the same slick surface, shot out from under him backwards from the propulsion he’d hit the chair with, and he slammed into the floor violently enough to make his desk rattle.

The seat of the chair revolved around in a blur; and from above Edward had let out a victorious whoop.

“How now I can properly enjoy my vacation!” He cheered as he smugly watched Grand groan in pain.

And as the door flew open to admit the panicked secretary, Edward took his leave with a trail of laughter in his wake. He’d seen what he needed to. He knew he’d be hearing the diagnosis later today, there was no reason to stick around and watch the chaos unfold.

Not today…

He was too eager to get back to Roy.

And as he reached the main office, where Hawkeye and the others were working diligently – or in the case of Havoc, apparently taking a short nap – he smiled to think of the news that would soon be reaching them and livening up their monotonous day of paperwork… or work in general.

This time, when Edward zoomed through the door, Roy didn’t jump, only looked up to see the brilliant grin on the ghost’s face. “I take it things went well?”

“At the very least I gave him an ugly black eye.” Edward revealed cheerfully. “I’ve never seen a person slip and fall that fast!”

Roy couldn’t help but chuckle, finding it all too easy to smile back and revel in the ghost’s happiness. And hell, he was happy too. It wasn’t as if he had any love for the brigadier general. The man was now on his ‘To Be Killed’ list, after all. “You’re a menace… not that I’m minding right now.”

Edward grinned as he floated over to flop unceremoniously onto the left corner of Roy’s desk. “You shouldn’t, I’m doing this to try and help protect you. Keep him injured if I can.” But then he sobered, his expression turning more serious. “You should know though, I think something is going wrong for him with his lab.”

“Then whoever is helping him.” Roy filled in thoughtfully. “I wonder if the alchemists he’s coerced into trying to produce him a philosopher’s stone ran into a roadblock. Seems logical enough… I just am having trouble understanding what though.” It wasn’t as if a few more lives were that different from what they’d already been doing.

Edward began to tap his fingers against the desk as he thought. “Philosopher’s stones aren’t common. I expect that at a certain point, the alchemy might not be cut and dry. Transmutation circles can be altered after all, for power, or purpose.”

Roy looked down, his eyes narrowed slightly in thought. He could only hope that the alchemists were having a conflict of conscience with what they were doing. But either way, if Grand was
starting to have problems now… he knew they needed to keep working fast to find that lab. After all, Marcoh had gotten to a certain point easily enough… and that research was still out there in the libraries for those able to decipher it. Certainly Grand or another alchemist under the brigadier general’s thumb could.

And he knew Grand wasn’t the type to show the same interference of conscience that Marcoh had.

“I’ll talk to Maes about it.” Roy finally said in their lapse of thoughtful silence. “He’ll be around soon anyway, and if there really is a problem… he’ll be going back to the lab soon. Maes could trail him when he is able to. I have a feeling Gracia will understand.”

Edward pulled his legs up to wrap his arms around them and clunk his chin soundlessly onto his knees. “Somehow I don’t think it’ll be that easy.”

“I wouldn’t consider him a worthy adversary if it were.” Roy replied, and picked up his pen to turn back to his paperwork. “But have some faith, my team is good.”

Edward worried his lower lip a moment before nodding and floating up off the desk with a sudden burst of energy. “Nothing I can really do about it right now. It’s not as if I can follow him. Even if he can’t see me. There’re still too many places in this city I can’t go.”

“We’ll keep working on fixing that.” Roy promised with a smile. “But no, don’t worry about it right now. Leave some of this up to Maes and I for a while. You’re doing quite enough already with your work on slowly killing him.”

“I am.” Edward brightened at that, and still quite happy he floated upward in an arc to lazily coast through the air on his back with hands clasped behind his head. He was waiting for Maes to appear before he bothered continuing to read his book, knowing he’d have to put it down rather soon.

Roy looked up at him with a small smile, glad the ghost wasn’t going to worry about it, before turning back to his paperwork. Sometimes he found himself wondering what it was like to not be bound to gravity as Edward was not, but he knew better than to ask the ghost.

As it was, the pair did not have to wait long for Maes to make an appearance.

The man strode over to Roy’s desk as the door swished shut behind him, a suspicious yet baffled look on his face. And he didn’t even wait for Roy to acknowledge him, falling instantly into the role of best friend instead of a lower ranking officer as he slapped his hands on Roy’s desk. “They may all be saying it was an accident, an over-greasing and oiling of the chair by the manufacturer, but I know better.”

Roy looked up at him blankly, blinking a few times for good measure. “What the hell are you going on about now?”

Edward was scoffing. “Give a ghost some credit, Maes.”

“You know.” Maes frowned at him in suspicion. “That Grand had a mishap with his chair and ended up with a fractured patella, cheekbone, and a black eye.”

From somewhere in the office, Edward whooped again.

“Sounds to me more like the klutz should be more careful sitting down.” Roy decided, before giving his friend a slight frown. “Why do you sound upset about it anyway?”

“I’m not upset,” Maes corrected as he suddenly backed up to sit roughly on the arm of a couch with
a heavy sigh. “I’m worried. This only started after you got us all transferred here. The man is blind if he thinks he can trust you, he might start believing all this has something to do with you, since the injuries first started in this office.”

Roy could see now why Maes was concerned, they were valid concerns after all. “Then let him confront me about it if it comes to that.” He said without a trace of anything but firm resolution. “But I am not behind whatever bad luck seems to be happening to him. And when it eventually comes to a fight, because I can guarantee you, this will end with a fight, you’d best duck and cover.”

Maes let out a slow breath before giving the man a strained smile. “Just be careful, Roy. Whatever it is you’re doing. I know you’re up to something that you’re not telling me about. Maybe you aren’t behind the injuries, but I get the feeling you know who is. I’m not your best friend for nothing, you know.”

Roy didn’t deny nor agree, only gave a gentle shrug of his shoulders. “Just stay alert, don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself.” And not giving Maes a chance to comment one way or the other about his declaration, “and my informant has some news for me. Apparently Grand has been going around muttering about incompetence. He’s getting frustrated by something, use it to your advantage.”

Maes slowly stood back up with a weary seeming nod. “And you really won’t tell me who is giving you this information?”

“No.” Roy answered simply. “I’ll see you Monday.”

Maes knew a dismissal when he heard one, and really, it wasn’t unexpected. He knew he needed to get back to his own duties, both as Roy’s minion and in his regular work. And it seemed that Roy had firmly turned over that new leaf about wanting to get all his work done on time. “You sure you won’t tell me where you’re going this weekend?”

Roy’s answer was to raise his left hand up off the desk – and Maes fled for it so fast that Edward was left staring in amazement as the door slammed behind him.

“I fractured two of his bones?”

Roy looked over at the silvery apparition who looked positively pleased with himself, and his smile slowly slipped into a grin. “You’re more dangerous than I gave you credit for. Maybe I should watch out for you instead of Hazel.”

“Don’t patronize me.” Edward scoffed through a return grin, and with a mutual laugh, they both turned back to other tasks in order to be able to leave at a decent hour today.

They were so involved that Roy in fact had Hawkeye bring him back something for lunch, as he didn’t want to put it to chance that he’d cut he and Edward short on time. After all, they had a cake to bake tonight, they’d need plenty of time. Beyond that, Roy wanted to be sure he got plenty of sleep before their weekend trip that started tomorrow. And as he worked, he ate, while Edward continued to read in between bursts of laughter he was trying to subdue.

Roy knew better than to think that Edward was laughing at a very dry alchemy text.

Eventually Roy did finish his work, leaving them enough time for several rounds of chess. Two of which he was proud to say that he won, in between continuing their tradition of asking questions back and forth.

And Roy was sure there was something illegal about how smug Edward was when he still came up
empty as far as the ghost’s favorite dessert. He could only hope that tonight might provide him a hint. Thus began the walk home.

And Edward was no less excited this night as he had been the last. “I haven’t baked a cake in years!”

Roy knew how true that was, and he smiled as he continued to walk along silently. Needing to keep quiet for appearances, but amused all the same as he watched Edward bounce around through the air like a confused balloon with the helium escaping.

“And you’ll see,” Edward rounded on Roy, “ours will be better than that dumb thing you let me toss out before you even ate any of it.”

Roy smiled a bit wider, giving a slight shrug just because he knew it would set Edward off.

“Don’t you shrug at me! You know it will be,” and then Edward paused to consider, adding, “mostly because I’ll haunt your ass if you don’t eat it.”

Roy doubted he’d have an issue with either situation, though he would like some cake. It was true he hadn’t had any of the cake he and that waitress had baked together, and it was just as true that he hadn’t exactly minded. It was worth it to let Edward have dumped that cake, which he’d forgotten about anyway, in order to see that satisfaction on the ghost’s face.

“And leftover cake will be good for you to take as snacks on the train!” Edward added helpfully.

Roy couldn’t restrain himself from chuckling as he shook his head amusedly at the spirit. At this rate, he just might have to do some pushups over the weekend. He could already feel his abs wanting to flab as Edward continued on about cake.

When at last they reached the house, Roy let them inside before heading up to his room to change into something more comfortable as Edward zoomed into the kitchen with a one-track mind.

In his room, Roy was soon intercepted by Hazel as he pulled free a plain black t-shirt that he didn’t care about getting dirty. “Hello to you too.” He greeted with a grin as the squirrel leapt flawlessly onto his shoulder. “But I really do need to change.”

Hazel was deposited onto the bed, and he sat there fluffing his tail and chattering to his human as Roy changed out of his uniform.

Once Roy had cinched and tied the drawstring of a looser pair of pajama pants, he scooped up the still chattering squirrel to deposit the rodent back onto his shoulder. “Don’t tell me you missed me. Or do you just want food?”

Hazel’s only answer was to begin happily grooming his human’s hair.

“Well, let’s check your food, but then you’ll have to entertain yourself tonight. I can’t bake and still feel as if it’s sanitary if I have you grooming my hair and possibly shedding.” Roy announced, and made his way down into the laundry room.

There Hazel eventually abandoned his perch on his owner’s shoulder in order to dive with gusto – and the flying of several bits of food from the container – into his dinner.

Roy left him there with a roll of his eyes, muttering something about Hazel only loving him for the food. Not long later he found himself in the kitchen, staring around in surprise. Just where had Edward found all those mixing bowls?!
“There you are.” Edward turned to him with a grin. “Want to eat before we begin?”

“Leave you alone for five minutes…” Roy joked, and went to raid his refrigerator as Edward laughed.

“I was bored.” Edward explained as he floated off after Roy as the man went to sit at the kitchen table with a plate of cold chicken.

Roy glanced back to see the orderly line of mixing bowls. “I didn’t even know I had so many. Are we actually going to need so many for one cake?”

Edward smirked as he settled down on an opposite chair. “You’ve never made a cake like this in your life, Mustang. Better to be prepared. Besides, what fun is making a cake if you don’t go big!”

Roy took the advisement under consideration, and worked on eating his dinner in between chatting with Edward about just what exactly he’d done to set the scene for Grand’s latest graceful maneuver. It didn’t take him too long to finish eating, and as he took care of his dirtied dishes, Edward whirled to go grab the flour out of where Roy had told him to look.

“Okay, Chef Elric,” Roy said as he came to stand by the counter containing all the mixing bowls, “what first?”

Edward floated over with the flour and a wide smile. “We make the cake batter!” And he looked around curiously. “Where are your measuring cups?”

Roy quickly found them, as well as the tablespoon measures.

“Okay, so we need three and a half cups of flour…”

With that, a flurry of ingredient grabbing, measuring, dumping, and mixing began. And so far it didn’t seem anything too terribly complicated to Roy, as he ‘put his back into it’ like Edward had demanded and mixed the thick cake batter with only a wooden spoon.

But those other mixing bowls and the addition of pans to his stove told him that ‘terribly complicated’ might still be looming on the horizon.

Once the cake batter itself was done, and poured into two prepared pans, Roy stuck them both in the oven before grimacing as he rubbed at his sore bicep. Stirring cake batter, of all things, should not be that taxing!

“We’re not done yet.” Edward smirked at the man as he tossed the container of heavy cream at Roy.

Roy quickly caught it before it smacked into the floor and sprayed the tile with a film of heavy cream. And straightening he arched an eyebrow at the ghost. “Where to and how much?”

“Two cups; in that pan there.” Edward pointed. “And then while it starts to heat to a boil you can help me make the chocolate buttercream.”

Roy grinned as he measured out the cream obediently. “Can I eat some of this buttercream?”

“I won’t be able to stop you.” Edward grunted in answer, but was smiling.

Tactfully, Roy left the heat rather lower than it should have been… a plan forming in his mind. “Okay, what goes into this chocolate buttercream?”

Quickly they worked together, tossing in the needed ingredients with flawless synchronization. They
were both so accustomed by now to the way the other moved that it was easy to keep from stumbling, well, *through* each other.

And as Edward stirred up the chocolate buttercream, Roy lounged near the stove to keep an eye on the heavy cream as it heated.

“You know…” he began with a sudden teasing tone, “that one girl let me lick icing off of her fingers… and other things.”

Edward snorted, directing a deadpan look over at the man as he stirred diligently. “*Even if you* could lick icing off my fingers, it wouldn’t happen.”

“So what about the… _other things._” He purred teasingly, a wicked grin on his face.

“You’re starting early! The weekend isn’t here yet, you don’t get to start being “carefree” and a pervert and trying to fluster me until tomorrow!” Edward declared through a laugh and a matching grin.

“I’m not a pervert, I’m hungry! And that buttercream looks delicious.”

Edward squeaked in laughter as he dodged the man who suddenly lunged for the bowl. “You and your appetites!” He admonished, before flicking the generously covered spoon at the man.

Roy laughed as he drug his finger through the chocolate buttercream smear that had appeared on his arm. One of many. And sticking the finger into his mouth he sucked and licked the delicious, creamy substance off with a groan of approval. “Fuck, Ed, that’s some damn good stuff.”

Edward smirked at him smugly. “Of course it is. I made it.”

Roy drug his finger through yet another splotch of his being attacked with chocolate buttercream. “No wonder you said you like chocolate on your lover if it always tastes like this.”

Edward burst out laughing, and zoomed around past Roy, easily dodging the lunge the man made for the bowl. Or him. It was hard to tell. “Your cream is about to burn!” He announced.

“Shit!” Roy quickly hurried back over to the stove to rescue the cream so that Edward could pour all of the buttercream into the pan.

“Now just stir it until it’s smooth and set it aside.” Edward directed with a grin.

Once he had done so, Roy turned back to cleaning himself off, licking off the chocolate buttercream that his fingers were gathering. “Do we need to do anything else just yet?”

“Not just yet.” Edward smirked as Roy continued to lick himself, rather, his fingers clean as they continued to scoop up the buttercream he’d tossed at the man. “Do the virgins get to see you acting like a cat too?”

Roy paused mid-lick to a finger, and then grinned. “Mostly they’re on the receiving end.”

While the pair waited to be able to move onto the next step, being letting the cakes chill enough to be able to safely cut to size, and letting the chocolate buttercream frosting cool a bit longer, they got most of their mess thus far cleaned up, and prepared to fully dive into the next one.

And at long last when the cakes were cool enough to slice, Roy was laughing as he got the knife as Edward bounded through the air on a vicarious sugar high.
“Okay,” Edward began as Roy hovered the knife next to the first cake and looked at him for directions, “trim them to about eleven by seven, and then you need one seven-inch square…”

Roy quickly began to trim and cut to the provided specifications. Not knowing quite yet just what Edward was planning, except an apparently tiered cake creation. And he grinned to himself to think of how oddly fitting it was that Edward would like chocolate tiered cakes.

He seemed the sort to like extravagant things sometimes.

Afterwards came the initial icing of the cake, and Roy passed Edward a spatula as well. “Come on, ghost, race you.”

And with matching competitive grins, they dunked their spatulas into the icing and began to slather pieces of cake, smoothing out the icing, and then batting at each other’s spatula in an effort to get back at the icing first.

It was during one of these sparring matches, that Roy realized something. But he didn’t let his discovery keep him from forfeiting the battle until Edward had fairly won. And as he dunked his spatula into the icing, he fought not to burst out into revealing laughter.

And making sure he had a good glob of icing on the spatula, he flicked the utensil sharply in Edward’s direction, splattering the ghost along the cheek and neck with the chocolate buttercream icing.

“Aha! Someone is being solid to inanimate objects!” Roy cheered victoriously, and then promptly abandoned his post with a shriek that he was sure had sounded manly as Edward pelted after him intent on revenge.

“Get back here!” Edward demanded as he darted after the man, the bowl of icing cradled firmly in one arm, his spatula digging for more.

Roy looked back, burst out laughing, and fled into the living room – which didn’t occur to him as a dead end. And through many circuits of the living room he was forced to duck, dodge, and overall try and get away from a ghost hot on his heels with a relatively well-stocked supply of icing.

By the time Edward felt that Roy had been acceptably splattered in icing that was beginning to rapidly melt from body temperature, a good deal of the icing was gone. But neither of them seemed to mind as they returned laughingly to the kitchen to finish icing the remaining cake sections.

Roy tried not to flush at the fact that he’d not acted that juvenile in years… and it had been entirely worth it.

“What now?” Roy asked as they finished icing all the cake sections, and having caught his breath.

Edward looked over with a smirk at the man still covered in melting icing. “We let them chill ten minutes, and then it’s stacking and cranberry time!”

“Works for me.” Roy grinned, and after they’d piled his fridge precariously with cake sections, he leaned back against a counter to begin trying to lick himself clean again. It was a shame to waste all the icing, as long as he could reach it, he was eating it.

Edward hopped up through the air to float gracefully into the mess of the counter and sit. “You’re missing the stuff in your hair.”

“Well I’m not licking it out of my hair.” Roy informed him, “I’m not Hazel.”
Grinning, Edward watched as Roy continued to try and clean himself as best he could. And propping one elbow on his thigh he rested his chin down into his hand as he watched Roy with a smile.

Roy only glanced at him once before turning back to what he was doing with a slight blush.

For Roy, ten minutes couldn’t come soon enough, as he was battling to keep himself from blushing any further under Edward’s warm, smiling observation of him. And as soon as those ten minutes were up, he was freed from the perplexing situation and thrown back into something more familiar.

“Yeah, that one there…” Edward was directing as Roy fumbled the cake sections, trying not to crumble them as he manipulated them into place. “And then this one. No, turn it a bit more towards me. Perfect!”

And just like that, Roy began to build their tiered chocolate cake. And when he’d set the last section, a mere two inch piece up on the top, he pulled away with a grand flair of his hands as he presented his completed handiwork to his best critic.

“It’s awesome!” Edward grinned at it, before turning that grin on Roy. “Now we just need the cranberries!”

Roy stood back to observe the cake, one hand at his chin as he nodded sagely. “Yes, cranberries. There’s too much brown going on here, we need some red to spice it up.”

Edward sniggered, “you really are channeling the masculine part of your bisexual nature right now.”

“Are you accusing me of sounding gay?” Roy arched an eyebrow at the ghost, a smirk tugging at his lips.

“Or you’re just being your normal, idiot self.” Edward proposed with a wicked grin, before ducking as Roy’s hand swatted in his direction.

“Go get the cranberries, brat.” Roy ordered as he turned back to observe the cake that stood nearly two feet high from the countertop. It wasn’t as big as he’d been expecting, but it looked delicious. Running his tongue around his lips he could only believe that if the entire thing tasted as good as that chocolate buttercream icing he’d been attacked with, he wouldn’t be minding the size of the cake.

Edward came over with the cranberries, several eggs, and the container of sugar tucked under an arm.

Roy quickly helped clear room, and soon Edward was whisking egg whites to combine them as Roy poured some sugar into one of his flatter, smaller mixing bowls.

And then Edward was dipping the cranberries in the egg white to coat them before plucking them out and tossing them into Roy’s sugar dish to be coated; making them look as if they were covered in ice crystals.

“It’s actually kind of pretty.” Roy admitted as he helped Edward arrange the batch of cranberries on the cake, placing them strategically for aesthetic effect.

When they were done they both stood back to admire their hard work, and long work. A look at the clock told Roy even more than the darkness outside the windows did. It appeared as if he’d have just enough time to take care of the dishes and have some cake while chatting with Edward before he needed a shower and sleep.
And Edward helped with the dishes... although he was prone to flicking soapy water at Roy under the pretense of cleaning the mess he’d made of himself, and grinning when each time Roy pointed out that he was the reason for the mess.

Eventually Roy did get to eating a portion of the cake, carefully forking onto a plate the top two-by-two inch section and part of the one underneath. And he sat at the table, unmindful of getting melted icing on the chair as he picked up his fork and began to eat.

Edward didn’t even see the need to ask how the cake was when Roy’s eyes suddenly fell closed with a groan of enjoyment. But he asked anyway, eagerly. “So it’s good?”

Roy cracked open an eye as he sucked every last bit of flavor off the fork, working his tongue slowly between each prong a bit, before going to stab off another piece, smiling at Edward as he did so. “Even the cranberries aren’t bad. They go well with all the sweet.”

Edward rested his elbows on the table, linking his fingers together to prop his chin in their weave as he beamed at the man. “Good, because you’re eating as much as you can before you give in and bring the leftovers to work.”

Roy looked affronted, “as if I’d share.” But then he relaxed into a smile, “thank you.” And he quickly took another bite.

Edward chuckled softly, still smiling at the man. “You’re welcome.”

Once Roy had finished his pieces of cake, he bowed out of the kitchen on the pretense of taking a shower. Thereby leaving Edward alone for now, in the kitchen.

Edward didn’t move right away, but slowly he slipped up through the air to float over to where the cake sat on the countertop under the clear plastic cake lid that Roy had reshaped upwards with alchemy. And as he watched it he tipped his head with a smile, his silver fringe falling across his eyes momentarily before he brushed it away.

Casting the cake one last happy look, Edward darted up through the walls to Roy’s bedroom.
Chapter 23

Chapter Twenty-Three

It was only just past dawn when the Mustang house began to get noisy early on a Saturday morning.

Hazel had decided it was in his best interest to take refuge up on top of the uppermost post of the balustrade. Here, it seemed less likely that he’d be squashed by the flinging about of that suitcase. He’d been accidentally hit by it once before, and as his human hovered over him in horror while he’d stumbled about in drunken circles, he’d decided that once was enough.

“I’m confused.”

Roy blinked over at the silvery apparition floating beside him, but didn’t pause in rolling up a pair of jeans. “Confused.” He repeated while turning to set the rolled pair of jeans within the confines of his smallest suitcase.

Edward nodded, flipping upside down in the air to hover with his head nearby Roy’s as his silver hair hung down towards the floor. “You’re not bringing anything that suggests the remotest possibility you might get a date. Yes, I know this weekend is about us – for us, but still. You’re making me very curious as to where we’re going.”

Roy smiled faintly as he searched through his messy dresser drawers for two socks. The matching compatibility of them didn’t cross his mind. “It’s not a place I’d be likely to want to get a date. But yes, this weekend is for us. I’ve never broken my word before, and I won’t start now.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to take the whole cake?” Edward asked instead, taking Roy’s explanation at face value for the truth as far as he’d manage to get it.

“Even if I ate that cake for all my meals today and tomorrow, I still wouldn’t finish it.” But then he paused, head cocked to the right as he abruptly reconsidered. “Maybe that’s not entirely accurate, but at any rate I’d spend tomorrow night hanging out with the toilet instead of you.”

Edward flipped right-side up, legs folding under him as he gave a slight grimace. “That’s one part of mortality I really don’t miss. That and sugar cookies.”

Roy rolled his eyes and made for the bathroom to grab the things he’d need. “The cake will be fine until tomorrow night when we get back. I just need to grab some stuff in here and then we can go.”

Edward backflipped through the air, and subsequently the wall with a happy noise. He was about to get out of Central! For the first time since coming here since his death! Not that he didn’t enjoy the city. He really did! Roy was here. It was just that the idea of being able to go somewhere beyond the city was exciting!

And he’d be going with Roy.

Logically, it was the only way he could go. But he tried not to think of it that way as he zoomed from the bedroom, past Hazel who startled at his sudden presence which quickly thereafter vanished, and darted down into the living room where he searched out a book.

He’d need something to read tonight while Roy slept. Yes, technically he could go wander around wherever it was they were going, but he still didn’t like the idea of leaving far from Roy while the man slept. It was just one of those insecurities that lingered on… and he didn’t see any reason to
change it until he was damn well ready.

His finger drifted past several titles before it paused, his eyes staring dead ahead, but not really seeing. And finally, with a small smile, he reached over to tug one of Roy’s personal alchemy research journals off of the shelf. He didn’t even scan it before he was shooting up through the ceiling and walls to exit into the bathroom via the mirror.

Roy toppled down onto the floor before glaring up at the ghost who was practically spinning head over heels in laughter. Toothpaste from the toothbrush that was now dangling precariously in his hand was splattered all across his front and his face in foamy white specks and flecks of blue paste. “Damn ghost.” He spluttered through a mouthful of foamy toothpaste.

Edward was still snickering as he fled the bathroom, leaving Roy to scramble to his feet and finish. Setting his chosen reading material on top of the items in the suitcase, he floated over to sit floppily on his side of the bed and wait. “You okay there?!”

Roy walked out a minute later, dabbing at his chin with a hand towel, and needing a change of shirt. “One day I will get used to you doing that. Evidently not today.”

“Evidently not.” Edward smirked at him, watching as Roy flung the towel at him and pulled his dirtied shirt up over his head to fling that at him as well. The towel he swatted away blankly, but he snagged Roy’s shirt out of the air as it arced down at him. “I didn’t even have to pay!” He cheered, and tossing the shirt above his head he burst out laughing as Roy blushed hotly.

“Someone is in a very good mood.” Roy muttered through his blush, and giving the ghost a suspicious look, asked, “are you sure you haven’t lied to me about not being able to eat? Because you’re acting like you snuck cake last night.”

Edward was smirking again as he folded his body horizontal to the bed so he could prop himself up on his elbows and rest his chin in his hands. “Would you prefer I scream and swat your clothes away screaming about cooties?”

Roy deigned not to answer, and the laughter was evidence enough that one wasn’t needed. He merely shook his head with an amused smile and dug in his closet for a new shirt, glad to have a moment to get that damn blush under control. And when he’d tugged on a new shirt and faced the ghost, he was composed again.

“Ready?” Edward asked in eagerness.

“I’ll just grab the suitcase.” Roy announced, striding over. He merely smiled as Edward vanished down through the bed, most likely to go wreak noisy havoc downstairs. The ghost definitely kept him on his toes… just when he thought he had the ghost figured out, Edward threw him another curveball.

Downstairs, Edward was hopping from foot to foot on the floor, just to feel as if he were doing something impatiently energetic as he waited for Roy to haul his lazy ass down the stairs.

It took them almost twenty whole minutes to walk to the train station. Or rather, Roy walked with enough dignity for the both of them, as Edward bounded through the air like a ghost on a perpetual sugar high.

The train station was not overly crowded for this early on a Saturday morning, but there were people. Most of the benches surrounding the four platforms were occupied by at least one person, and two trains were in the station already beginning to pour smoke as the engines were stoked in preparation
for early morning departures.

Roy’s steps headed to the ticket office, while Edward paused a moment to stare in fascination at one of the trains before realizing Roy was gone and darting after him. He’d get a better look at the train later. He wanted to know where they were going!

“Good morning, sir!” The attendant at the ticket window greeted with customary cheer. “How may I be of assistance?”

Edward was half-wondering if Roy would start to flirt. However, Roy was entirely polite, and he smiled generically at the attendant. “Yes, I need one ticket for the 8:30 train to Risembool.”

Edward could only stare at the man with wide silver eyes, shock thrumming through his incorporeal body making him feel frozen. Unable to breathe – as if he needed to. Roy was taking him… home?

Roy could sense more than see, at the moment, Edward’s reaction when the ghost finally learned where they were going. He could sense the shock. Upon being given the ticket he turned to lock eyes briefly with the ghost, giving him a quick smile and a tilt of his head.

Edward jerked after the man, as if suddenly released from some strange time warp. But even still, he couldn’t seem to manage to say anything, and he tried. He really did try!

Roy wasn’t too unsettled by Edward’s stunned silence. He knew the ghost would either speak when he was ready, or not. In the case of the latter, Roy knew he’d be glad of the private military cabins on the train, so that he could get Edward to actually speak. But he wasn’t surprised by the silence emanating from the ghost.

And Edward floated after Roy, sinking down onto the bench beside him with a stunned expression still on his face. Now that he thought about it, it seemed almost logical that this is what Roy had had planned. And he was happy! He was! That wasn’t the reason for his silence. It was just… difficult.

He was about to go back to Risembool, and all he could do was sit here stupidly next to Roy. It was frustrating!

When the boarding call went up, Roy filed into line to get onto the train, Edward close beside him. And once they’d boarded, he waited for those ahead of him to sit down before making his way to the private cabins reserved for military personnel. All he had to do was flash his State Alchemist pocket watch to whoever came to collect the tickets and he’d be fine.

Upon reaching one such cabin, he rolled the door open on its track and let them inside before shutting it with a quiet click.

Edward settled onto one of the benches feeling rather overwhelmed.

“You going to be okay?” Roy asked gently as he took the bench across from the ghost.

Edward looked at him then, worrying his lip between his teeth a moment before launching another search for his voice. “Yeah. I… uhh… sorry. I guess I’m still – I should have expected this at one point or another, but…”

Roy nodded in understanding, offering a bracing smile. “It’s a hell of a memory to go back to.”

“Yeah.” Edward actually laughed, a strained sounding laugh. And scrubbing his face with one hand
he suddenly pushed that hand back through his hair. “I haven’t been there since I died.”

“I think though,” Roy began as the train whistle sounded crisply into the morning air, “that you need this.”

Edward felt the train lurch under them as it began to heave its way out of the station, and he felt incorporeal butterflies begin to flutter in his incorporeal stomach. Giving a shaky grin he looked over at Roy. “I don’t know what I should feel. Happiness, uncertainty, sadness, I really don’t know.”

“If you’re feeling all of those, I’d say you’re feeling what seems normal.” Roy answered.

Edward’s hands fidgeted in his lap as he nodded, smiling down at his knees in an almost forlorn manner. “I’ve always wondered, wanted to know for myself that Alphonse was okay. That he was okay, somehow, after I died. He was my only brother, and I died for him.”

Roy nodded, but didn’t interrupt.

“But… I died there, in Risembool.” Edward whispered, giving a light shake of his head. “Hell of a complication, that.”

Roy waited a moment, until it seemed that Edward was done. “But you do want to go back, right?”

“Get closure?” Edward looked up at the man, before saying with sincere firmness. “Yes.” And he suddenly jerked his hands aside to grip at the edge of the seat. “I want to see my brother again… even if he can’t see me.”

Roy smiled as he saw Edward begin to look more like himself again, and less like he’d been shocked permanently.

“Thank you, Roy.” Edward said after a moment, softly, meeting the man’s eyes. “For doing this for me.”

Roy’s smile didn’t fade as he gave a slight nod. And relaxing to one side against the armrest of his bench, he propped his chin in the heel of his hand as he continued to watch his companion.

The ticket attendant came and left, leaving the pair to their silence. Edward looking out the window, or looking at Roy; and Roy seemingly unable to take his eyes off the ghost as he caught the scenery out of the corner of his eye.

“Edward.”

Edward tore his gaze away from his fascinated watching of the verdant forest they were cutting through to meet Roy’s eyes, finding nothing in the man’s expression to tell him what Roy was thinking.

“Why did you never ask me to go to see your brother?” Roy asked, having decided he couldn’t just not go on not knowing any longer. “You say you want to see him again, and I believe you. You may not be jumping up and down right now, and I understand why… but I can’t help but wonder why you’ve never asked.”

Edward’s expression grew strained for a moment before he nodded, it was a fair question. And he attempted a small smile. “Had you not taken the initiative like you did, I wouldn’t have asked for a while. I’ve been dead for seven years. I was imprisoned in that office for seven years. Unable to be seen by anyone, except you. Can you understand that I’m scared to try and reach for too much too soon? As if… doing so would backfire on me. Maybe it’s not the most reasonable, or logical
mentality to ever exist… but I was alone, and I was trapped, for what I had come to accept as eternity. I’ve not been freed from that very long in comparison.”

Roy suddenly stood to sit himself beside the silver ghost. He hadn’t known any of this… and now that he did, it made sense. Rather like a dream, you didn’t dare to touch it lest you find it shatter. “I’ll reach for you then,” he promised, “until you’re no longer scared. I’m the one constant that won’t backfire on you, that I promise.”

Edward smiled a bit shyly at the man, warm flickers of gratitude rising within him. And at the knowledge that he’d never heard Roy talk this way to anyone else. It was nice, in a selfish way he’d keep to himself, to feel that he and Roy shared a friendship different for more than the fact of their existence as a ghost and a living man. “And I was a bit hesitant to impose any more on you so soon.” He admitted sheepishly.

At that, Roy snorted in protest and drew himself up to level a reproachful look at the spirit. “If I wanted something from you, I’d damn well ask for it. So allow yourself to be a bit greedy when you want something. I’m not such a cold hearted bastard that I’d refuse to take you to see your brother.”

Edward was grateful that he actually could let the bench swallow him whole, for he vanished a good foot into it at the look and words he was being given. “Bit greedy, right, got it.”

Roy rolled his eyes and switched seats again so that the ghost wouldn’t vanish all the way into that bench. “Make sure you remember it. Usually you’re good at telling me what you want. Just make sure it applies to everything from now on. If I can’t do it, I’ll tell you. But at least tell me.”

By the time the train was only about ten miles outside of Risembool, Edward had considerably become more enthusiastic, although the hesitation remained in his eyes. But Roy knew there was nothing to be done for it but time as he watched Edward happily look out the windows to marvel at the lakes and hills. Hell, he’d be feeling a bit uncertain yet excited too.

“It’s been so long since I’ve seen the countryside!” Edward exclaimed softly as he peered out the window, hands pressed against the cool glass.

Roy chuckled as he gazed out the window as well to be sure Edward could see. “It is beautiful out here. If you like, we can go hiking a bit. Or rather, I can hike and you can float along.”

Edward smiled over at him briefly, “I think I might take you up on that.”

By the time the train was puffing into the station at Risembool, Edward was looking more settled, but even so happy. And Roy was glad that the ghost seemed to be relaxing now that they’d gotten this far. But he knew better than to think that Edward’s nerves might reappear when he saw his brother, even if Alphonse wouldn’t be able to see him in return.

“You’ll have to lead the way.” Roy said needlessly as he stood to grab his suitcase from the overhead rack. “But feel free to wander wherever you like, so as along the way somewhere we can stop at an inn so I can drop this off.”

Edward nodded as he swung the compartment door open for them. “We’ll do that first.” He announced with excitement budding in his voice. “And then I want to go see Alphonse.”

“My eyes are at your disposal.” Roy offered nobly as he followed the ghost out and off of the train.

The next ten-ish minutes the pair spent wandering around the town. It had been seven years, after all, and Edward had been a child then, so he was rather hazy on the schematics. It didn’t help that with time, also meant growth and redevelopment.
But in the process, Edward was able to exclaim over familiar sights, or people he recalled, so Roy didn’t rush the ghost. Only stayed nearby as unobtrusively as possible as Edward darted around people and buildings while rattling off everything he remembered about the person or place.

At long last they found the inn, and Edward could barely keep still as he waited for Roy to check into a room.

“Just staying until tomorrow?” The innkeeper enquired politely as he slid the required information form across the well-worn counter.

“Yes.” Roy answered, not seeing the need to divulge anything more. And he began filling out the form with the standard needed details. “What time is checkout?”

“Noon.” Was the prompt reply. “Bar is open until midnight. And my wife serves a fairly mean complimentary breakfast in the morning.”

Roy smiled faintly, and signed his name with a flourish before passing the form back across the counter. “If the bar is open until midnight, I can only say I’ll strive to wake up in time to indulge in your wife’s cooking.”

“Roy, even in normal conversation you can sound like you’re hitting on someone.” Edward rolled his eyes.

The innkeeper, however, didn’t appear to notice. “Very good, sir.” And reaching behind him, he took a key off a hook on the wall behind him. “Room Seven is yours. I hope it’s to your liking.”

“Thank you.” Roy took the key politely and giving the man a cordial nod he turned to head up the stairs to find the indicated room. And he let he and Edward in once he had.

Edward made a quick circuit around the room, eyeing the unfamiliar furnishings. Fairly standard for a small town inn. A bed, a dresser that he doubted anyone ever used, a nightstand with a lamp, and a door cracked open to reveal a hint of a small connected bath. “Not as seedy as I’d expect. I guess as the only inn in town you have to have some standards.”

“Are you so severe on your own birthplace?” Roy queried with a hint of a smile as he stashed his suitcase on top of the dresser.

“I never lived here.” Was the wise retort.

Roy chuckled and turned to his silver companion with an expectant look. “Are you doing okay?”

Edward’s composure faltered a bit as he sank down onto the bed with a stuttered exhale of breath. “Yeah… I mean, this isn’t so bad. Sure, I’m seeing things, people, that were once familiar to me. But it doesn’t affect me like I know seeing my brother again will. If I take myself out of the familiarity, it’s just like seeing any other new place with you.”

“Until we get there.” Roy continued, not needing to specify what ‘there’ meant.

Edward nodded. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s great seeing all this stuff again. It really is! I’ve been so happy…” and he looked up to meet Roy’s eyes. “It’s hard to go there again. I never used to think I would. And then you came along.”

Roy bit his lip a moment, before suddenly crossing over to Edward to sink down on the bed in front of the ghost. “Edward, I want you to listen to me. There’s no rush, no expectations on you. Honestly, if you were acting fine and completely elated immediately, I’d be concerned what you were trying to
hide from me. Just like how we’ve taken things since we got you out of that office, you can take it slow. And I’ll be here, as I always have been, until you truly \textit{are} fine. So what if you aren’t giddy with joy when you see Alphonse again? It wouldn’t be normal if you were. Not after what happened."

Edward closed his eyes as he let Roy’s words sink in. This wasn’t quite culture shock… but it was akin to it. The last time he’d been in Risembool, was the night he died. The last time he’d been in that house, he died. The last time he saw his brother, he’d begged and pleaded for Alphonse to be spared harm, not knowing his life would be taken in exchange for his pleas. Yes… he was excited, and relieved to be able to see his brother again. To have closure on the last act he’d performed in his mortal life. But it was a hell of a night to seek closure on.

“I’ll even hum again, if it helps.” Roy added with an understanding smile as he watched an unconscious tremble make its way through Edward’s silvery form.

Edward opened his eyes then with an attempt at a return smile. “I really am grateful you did this for me… don’t think otherwise."

“Idiot.” Roy breathed before standing abruptly from the bed, offering down his hand to the ghost. “Edward Elric, I am no fool. Now, take my hand, and let’s go see your brother.”

Edward looked from Roy’s insistent face, and down at the hand several times before he reached out with a slow-forming smile to lay his hand over Roy’s as their gazes locked, this time, allowing his hand to pass slightly through the man’s. “I do want to see him again.”

It turned out that Roy didn’t have to hum as they made their way out of the town together and edged out into the rural countryside. The dirt road was well-worn, rutted by cart wheels and stamped flat by the passage of many feet and beasts of burden. On either side it was bordered by either lush fields springing into verdant hills, or the rows of neatly planted crops swaying in a gentle breeze.

Along the way, Edward would mention if he knew someone – those few people that were out and visible this far from town – and he would give Roy a quick summary of what he remembered. He knew the man must think it positively boring, but not once did Roy look anything less than interested.

And then they were rounding one of the last bends in the dirt road, having taken the correct fork.

Edward knew he wasn’t floating any slower, but he did notice he was floating closer to Roy and that his hands had taken to fidgeting. Each bit of ground they gained created a perpetual flood of questions in his mind. Would Alphonse still even \textit{be} there? Would the house still be there? The Gate hadn’t destroyed it too as part of the apparent bargain, had it? And how the hell was Roy planning to explain his being there?

All too soon it seemed, Edward was staring at a house melancholically familiar to him.

“That answered one of his questions.

“Just leave it to me,” Roy said, taking Edward’s expression as evidence enough of what house they were looking at. “I’ll get us inside. I may be military, but I can get us into a civilian home.”

Edward shot the man a wry look, “usually for nightly conquests. And I hope it goes without saying that if you even \textit{look} at my brother wrong, I’ll rain my ghostly wrath down upon you.”

Roy rolled his eyes, but started forward. Glad to see that Edward was settled enough to make such a remark. It was a definite step forward in the direction to Edward being entirely at ease. “Your brother
Edward grunted in the affirmative.

“Then you’ve no cause to worry. Not that I’d be interested in your brother like that anyway. One of you is enough.” Roy informed the ghost matter-of-factly. Not to mention the idea of flirting with Edward’s younger brother made him feel rather nauseous.

Edward glanced over at him, “good.” Was all he said, firmly. Not even caring to try and rise to the potential indignant argument of just what that ‘one of you is enough’ thing was about. He figured that Roy probably might have a good point about that. He didn’t like to consider himself high-maintenance, but he knew he did require some.

Between the needing Roy to see in order for himself to see, and the fact that he’d downright admitted to Roy at one point that he had been lonely without the man, he’d rather set himself up as a ghost that did require maintenance.

All too soon, though it had felt like eternity, the two of them found themselves at the front door.

The nerves were getting to Edward so badly that he forced himself down to the ground to stand, just to have the feel of something solid pressing up against his feet. Hell, he didn’t even know if Alphonse was still here! But he quickly stuffed his hands in his pockets to stop their fidgeting, and try and give himself a more carefree and relaxed posture before turning to nod to Roy. “I’m ready.”

Roy gave a slight nod accompanied with a smile before turning to rap loudly on the heavy door.

Edward sidestepped closer to Roy, so that he was nearly touching the man, and stared in nervous anticipation at the door handle, willing it to move.

And then it did.

The door gave a groan of protest as it was hauled open by a teenage boy with caramel-blond hair and matching eyes that stared in mild confusion at the man occupying his stoop.

“Can I help you?”

“Alphonse!” Edward suddenly cried in delight, and before Roy had even managed a response, he’d bolted forward to begin hovering and bobbing around his brother through the air with wide, happy eyes, and a brilliant smile. “You are alive! You’re alive! It worked!”

Roy was forced to muster one of his greatest acts of deception yet as he battled to keep a neutral face as Edward exulted around his brother unseen. “You must be Alphonse Elric?”

“Yes.” Alphonse frowned slightly in curiosity. He didn’t get many visitors. Fuck, he never got visitors from out of town. And this man was clearly not from around here.

“My name is Colonel Roy Mustang.” Roy began to explain as Edward finally stilled to hover in front of his brother unseen. “You must be Alphonse Elric?”

“Yes.” Alphonse frowned slightly in curiosity. He didn’t get many visitors. Fuck, he never got visitors from out of town. And this man was clearly not from around here.

“My name is Colonel Roy Mustang.” Roy began to explain as Edward finally stilled to hover in front of his brother, twitching as if he longed to throw his arms around the boy and hug him mercilessly. “Seven years ago, your brother wrote me these –”

Edward whirled around, and stared in slack-jawed shock as Roy pulled free a rubber band bound stack of envelopes. The writing just visible enough on one to cause him to recognize that it was in his hand… or, how he’d written when he was eleven. “Those are my letters… the ones you intercepted.” He murmured, his gaze jerking to Roy. “I didn’t think you still had them. Why?”
“– wanting to find your father.” Roy continued as if he hadn’t heard Edward, and really, for right now, he had to pretend as if he hadn’t. “For some reason I intercepted all of them. And then,” he flicked through the stack to show one envelope that wasn’t addressed in Edward’s writing, “I got this, from you.”

Alphonse stared at the stack of envelopes, his face rather paler than it had been. And after a long moment he swallowed hard, and gave a jerk of a nod as he forced his eyes back up to this man’s face. “Roy Mustang, you say?” And receiving a nod, he opened the door completely. “Please, come in.”

Roy graciously nodded, and did. “Thank you.”

“Alphonse!” Edward floated after his brother to hover in front of him again, anguish on his face. “Don’t be sad, Al… please… I’m okay, really.”

“Do you need anything to drink?” Alphonse asked as he shut the door.

“If you have tea.” Roy suggested, hoping to prolong his stay as long as possible for Edward’s sake.

Alphonse nodded, “I think there’s some left in the box.”

Edward followed much like a puppy after his brother, all the way into the kitchen. Which told him that Roy was close behind. And although the familiarity of his old home was affecting him, making him nostalgic and something in his chest ache, he was more affected by seeing his brother again. “I really am glad you’re alive.” He said over Alphonse’s shoulder, even though he knew his brother couldn’t hear him.

After a while the tea was ready, and Roy was waved to sit down at the kitchen table where he was shortly joined by Alphonse, Edward sank into the chair between them.

“So, Colonel,” Alphonse began as he passed over the sugar, “what brings you here only now? You’re about seven years overdue.”

Roy looked up to judge Alphonse’s expression, the tone hadn’t sounded anything more than conversational, and that was what made him wonder if the younger Elric wasn’t hiding accusation somewhere. But finding nothing but curiosity, albeit hinted with an understandable sadness, he relaxed.

“I bet he wouldn’t believe the truth.” Edward said softly from his chair, a sort of emptiness to his voice. “I just wish there were a way… a way he’d believe I was okay… but he’d just think you crazy and chase you out.”

Roy could understand Edward’s wants, wishes, but also understood as well as the ghost why he couldn’t tell Alphonse any of that, the truth included. As much as he hated the idea of outright lying to Edward’s younger brother, he knew he had to. “You really know how to pose a difficult question.”

Alphonse smiled faintly, “I’m not trying to accuse you, just curious.”

Roy took a sip of his tea to bide him a bit of time before he commenced his story, not exactly a lie, but not the real reason he was here either. “I once knew your father. I think that I was the only one who actually was on comfortable speaking terms with your father, everyone else was too damn scared of the man. And probably for good reason.” And he slowly began to draw a lazy circle on the table with his forefinger. “At the time your brother started sending letters trying to find him, I was actually attempting to do the same. Edward sent letters to every person he could find, I expect, who
might have come in contact with your father. I might not have been sending letters, but I was launching visits. And the people, the same people your brother wrote trying to find your father, passed the letters into my possession.”

“Isn’t that some sort of mail theft?” Alphonse smirked.

Roy chuckled a bit, “not if it was voluntarily done. I didn’t demand them.” And he didn’t think that he’d divulge the fact that that was the truth… only up to a point, for in some cases he’d actually threatened people nearer the last letters via fire to hand over a letter if he had seen they had one. He wasn’t sure why he’d become so adamant that he have every single letter Edward had written, but he’d wanted them. Even though they were all mostly the same. He’d wanted them.

“More like extortion, knowing him.” Edward offered, not knowing how close to being right he was.

“And really, it was kind of a heavy thought your brother’s letters put on those he wrote to… even unknowingly me. I don’t know if you ever read what he wrote to –”

Alphonse shook his head.

“– but they definitely made me search harder for your father. Not just because of what I wanted to find him for. But because his sons were looking for him.” Roy lowered his eyes to the table with a somewhat sad look that faltered his smile. “I know I’d have tried to find my dad, had my mom been that sick.” Had his own father still been alive. “At the time I received the last letter I would from Edward, I had been planning to come here. To see if there wasn’t anything I could do, since I was failing at my search for Hohenheim. But near the end of my plans to come and visit, I received your letter.”

It was there that Roy paused a moment, a slight frown on his face as he let himself dwell back on the memory of it. And then he was setting all the bound envelopes on the table, freeing them, and pulling out the one in Alphonse’s hand. And he held it there in front of himself before tossing it across the table to Alphonse.

“But what I never understood is how it came to be in my mailbox.”

Alphonse reached forward to pick up the letter, and unaware of the ghost of his brother hovering above his shoulder to see, he looked down at it. It was then that he remembered… he hadn’t known where to send it… he just had.

All that was on the envelope was the return address, and in the upper left hand corner, his father’s name.

Edward looked quickly back up at Roy, catching the man’s eyes as Alphonse busied himself with staring at the envelope, lost in remembrance. “You got this in your personal mailbox?”

Roy gave a slight nod.

“Seven years ago, you get this… and then you find me?” Edward looked aside as a confused frown made its way onto his face. “You’re the only person who can see me.”

Roy picked up his tea and took another sip, knowing what Edward was thinking. What the ghost wasn’t saying. So far, everything about the two of them pointed to them having been meant to find each other. But what neither of them could understand was why. Why was it he who could see Edward, and no one else?

Alphonse finally looked away from the envelope, and slid it back across the table to Roy. “Keep it. If
it came to you, keep it. It seems like you’re meant to have them anyway.” He said, waving a hand at the stack of envelopes.

“When I learned your brother was dead, I cancelled my trip.” Roy continued once he’d put the envelope back in the stack and bound them once more. “I know it seems, perhaps heartless of me right now. But at the time I didn’t feel it was right to impose on you when you’d just lost your brother. And certainly not to bring you the news that I’d not yet found your father.”

Alphonse tilted his head with a small smile as he considered the man. “You may be right about that. But you’re in good company, I’ve not found him either. As far as I’m concerned, my dad is dead by now. Else, why has he been away so long? It just doesn’t make sense. It’s of course unable to be made official… but I do believe I’m the only one left.”

Edward flopped back into his chair, causing it to squeak in protest just a bit. “Should of asked yourself why he left, not why he’s been gone so long. He doesn’t care about us, Al. He left. Plain and simple.”

Roy glanced at Edward once, quickly, before turning his attention back to Alphonse. “I guess you could say I’m here now to do what I had wanted to do seven years ago. See that you at least, are still doing okay now.”

“You said you knew my father a little?” Alphonse asked instead, not bothering to waste this man’s time with how he was doing. After seven years, no one bothered with asking him that. And he wasn’t sure what to say to such a question anyway.

“Back when I first joined the military.” Roy divulged helpfully. “He wasn’t exactly military… but we got along. I think he’d met your mother by then, but I never met her myself. And then I went to war in Ishval and never saw him again.”

“Why did you start looking for him again?” Alphonse pressed with a small frown.

Roy tapped one of his fingers atop the table, knowing that right now was a good time for a lie. He didn’t want to burden either of Hohenheim’s children with why he had been looking for the man. “I was ordered to. I don’t know anything more than that.”

Alphonse slowly nodded, and took it as it was. If it had been military ordered, it was reasonable that this Mustang guy wouldn’t know anything more about it. And then something in his head clicked, and he stared almost agape at the man across from him. “You’re the Roy Mustang?”

“What does he mean with that ‘the’ crap?” Edward bristled. “Please tell me my own brother is not about to fawn over you and make me want to hurl!”

Roy actually shared that last sentiment, but he hoped for the best possible outcome. “Yes.”

“Flame Alchemist Roy Mustang?” Alphonse quickly clarified of his guest.

Roy nodded, “the same. Why?”

Alphonse raised a hand before quickly getting up. “You’re supposed to be one of the best alchemists in the State!”

“Supposed to be?” Roy wasn’t sure how he should take that one. “I’m guessing you aren’t one of those that hates State Alchemists, but why are you so…”

“Hey, I was impressed with you too.” Edward piped up.
Roy couldn’t help but wish he could inform Edward that the ghost had also made reference to him not seeming scary, and that hardly seemed the opinion of an impressed individual.

Edward then grimaced, “not that I’d be in the fan club falling at your feet trying to get a date.”

“Our old teacher, Edward’s and mine,” Alphonse rattled off, “despised State Alchemists. But still, you’re an alchemist. And a good one! I’ve never met another highly skilled alchemist but our teacher before.” And then his expression darkened a bit. “And brother… of course.”

Roy took a chance to cock an eyebrow at Edward, teacher? The ghost had had a teacher at one point? He didn’t think Edward would have needed any assistance.

“I’ll tell you later.” Edward muttered in explanation to the brief look.

Roy decided that Edward most certainly would, and turned his full attention back to Alphonse. “Well I’m glad I could stop by then. Although I am regretful for the reason… I just wanted to see that you were doing okay.”

Alphonse sat back down with a shrug. “As okay as can be expected. I am glad though that you did. I don’t get much company here. I help out with some of the farmers crops for extra cash, but even then mostly all I get to talk to are the lettuce plants. And being seventeen… it’s a good time to hide as much as possible from my friends. Most of which are girls. They get rather…” he paled nervously a bit, “ravenous at this age.”

Roy cracked a grin as he laughed. “They don’t mellow out, I hate to tell you. Best just to brace yourself and go for it. Trust me, you’ll still walk away from it alive.”

“We are not talking about my brother’s love life.” Edward groaned, burying his face in his hands before jabbing a finger at Roy. “Especially not you, you’ll turn him into a manwhore like yourself. Tell him that commitment is a good thing! Finding someone you love is a good thing!”

Roy didn’t, it would have seemed far too suspicious given his reputation. But he didn’t fail to notice that Edward’s ideals were starting to become an endearing quality about the ghost. As archaic of ideals as they were.

But he had to rescue Edward nonetheless… and besides… this was a rare opportunity. “I was wondering, if it’s not too presumptuous of me,” Roy began, “if you would tell me a bit about your brother.”

“That depends,” Alphonse said with a growing hopeful smile as he turned his cup of tea between his hands, “are you staying for lunch?”
Chapter 24

Edward was certain there had to be some sort of ghost cruelty hotline he could call to report what was currently happening to him. The only reason he kept from going in hunt of a phonebook was the fact that he could see Alphonse was clearly quite happy to talk, and Roy, damn him, was more than happy to listen.

And besides… it was humbling to hear about himself and his exploits from his brother’s point of view.

“He actually stole something once too.” Alphonse revealed with a nostalgic smirk.

Roy barely kept himself from giving Edward a raised eyebrow and a smirk of his own. Edward? Stealing?

“On a dare.” Alphonse continued. “The other kids kept teasing him that he wouldn’t, that he was too much of a momma’s boy. So we all snuck down to the general store after hours, when everyone was asleep. Brother kind of failed at picking the lock, so being him, he kicked in the door.”

Edward groaned.

Roy chuckled, “he was strong enough to kick in a door as a kid?”

“HEY!” Edward burst out in offense.

Alphonse nodded, cracking a bit of a smile. “We fought… sparred a lot together. He was strong, but never strong enough to beat me. But yes, he kicked in the door.”

Edward scowled. “Oh I’ll beat you now.”

Unaware of the ghostly threat, Alphonse continued with his story. “So he ran in, and had to bring out something large enough for us to all share. But the owner of the general store, who lived in the apartment above it, had heard the door bust in, so we all hear the guy come running down the stairs, and Edward swore he heard a shotgun being loaded – ”

“I did.” Edward affirmed crossly.

“– so in brother’s panic to get out, presumably before he’s filled full of buckshot, he grabs this huge wheel of cheese. As if he thought that wouldn’t be conspicuous.” Alphonse sniggered. “The thing was almost bigger than he was. So there we all are, running out of the town, with brother carrying this huge wheel of cheese.”

“I sincerely hope he tripped.” Roy piped up with a low rumbling of laughter.

“It wasn’t just a trip!” Alphonse crowed gleefully, laughing as the memory came back to him of his brother crashing face-first into a wheel of cheese. “We had nearly gotten back to the old fort, the one we all built together as our secret hideout as kids, and as we’re nearly there all of a sudden brother goes flying, still clutching the cheese, and lands on top of it. The cheese had a slight imprint of his body left in it he landed so hard. It was brilliant.”

“I’ve decided I hate my brother.”
“Did you get caught?” Roy asked through his laughter. The mental image he was getting of Edward running with a wheel of cheese and tripping was just too priceless.

Alphonse colored faintly, and he gave a sly smile as he shook his head. “No. But our mother was rightfully suspicious of us when neither brother or I could stand the sight of cheese for about two months afterwards. We all ate the entire wheel of cheese that night! We thought the adults would come snooping around and find it and then we’d be in trouble!”

Roy sniggered, “I think you all having eaten the entire thing in one sitting would have been punishment enough.”

“It was!” The sentiment echoed from both Elric brothers.

“So you all had a secret hideout as kids?” Roy asked with a fond smile. He’d had something similar once, but didn’t all children have a place at one time or another that they liked to think of as their own secret hideaway?

“Yeah, there were six of us, including brother and I, and Winry.” Alphonse smiled in remembrance. “We all built it together one summer.”

“What about the alchemy?” Roy asked then, no longer able to restrain his curiosity. “When did you two start on that?”

Alphonse sank backwards in his chair, lips pursing in thought as he tried to remember. “Hard to say… I remember that before I’d learned to read that brother was already showing me how to draw a precise circle. It just developed from there. He was always better than me though. I may have won all our sparring matches… but he could best me in alchemy even on his worst day.”

Roy wouldn’t have expected anything less from the sons of Hohenheim, but he kept that assessment quiet. Besides, knowing Edward as he did, knowing how Edward had died, he wouldn’t have needed to know who the ghost’s father was to know that Edward had been a damn good alchemist. “Do you still practice alchemy?”

Alphonse’s expression darkened, and he glanced down to stare hard at the floor. “Not if I can help it.” And he pushed away from the table to stand up, going over to the oven on the pretense of checking the progress of their lunch, even as his hands rested heavily on the handle. “Understand something… my brother was killed doing alchemy. An experience like that kind of leaves its mark on you.”

“Al…” Edward breathed, silver eyes filled with sadness for his brother. “Not all alchemy is dangerous.” And he turned to Roy with a sudden desperation. “Tell him, Roy! Please! Tell him it’s not all dangerous!”

Roy looked over at Edward since Alphonse was still busy, and he tried to soothe the ghost with a look before he turned his attentions back to the younger Elric. “Not all alchemy is dangerous. I apologize if this seems out of bounds for me to say… but I do not think that your brother would have wanted to scare you away from alchemy.”

“I was never as obsessed with alchemy as he was anyway. It’s okay, really.” Alphonse replied, pulling their lunch from the oven.

Roy looked quickly at Edward for confirmation, knowing he could easily disguise his distraction as looking around at the décor.

“He’s lying.” Edward answered in response, meeting Roy’s eyes. “He may not have been as good as
I was… but I know my brother. When our teacher told us we couldn’t use alchemy for an entire month, he was as aghast as I was.”

Roy really needed to ask about this teacher, later. “You okay?” He asked though of his companion, quietly.

Edward gave him a small, grateful looking smile, and he nodded. “I am… I mean, I’m still a bit out of sorts. I still feel torn between absolute joy at seeing him, and wanting to cry in sadness. But I’m okay, I promise.”

Roy gave Edward another smile, knowing that the ghost had been going through the ups and downs of emotion ever since he’d seen his brother again. He then turned to Alphonse, who had begun walking back their way with two plates of pizza. “Thanks.” He accepted his gracefully, smiling a bit at the cheese beneath the pepperoni.

“Anyway,” Alphonse cleared his throat as he sat back down. “Brother was good too… aside from the cheese theft incident. I think I got my love of animals, cats in particular, from him. He’d always find strays, and mom would never let him keep them, but I’d watch… and before he’d actually go put the cat back where he found it, he’d spend hours brushing it, and he’d give it food. He had a really kind heart. Even towards the other kids. Sure, he’d fight if it was called for, but otherwise he’d try and reason things out with them. Try and keep things from escalating. He was always trying to do things for others… never himself.”

Edward looked down at the table, feeling the truth of the statement hit home. And he wondered now… had he ever done anything for just him? All he could remember of his life before he died was an endless stream of selfless acts… but what about his life? Was his life only meant to have been one of sacrifice?

Roy could believe it. But at the same time he knew Edward was different now. He was still kind, he was still caring, but Edward had a mischievous side to him now. There was a difference between stealing on a dare, and plain setting out to create mayhem among the masses – as Edward had done in two restaurants already. “He seems much like yourself.”

Alphonse flushed at the compliment, smiling across the table at the man. “I guess our mom did a good job.”

Edward could only hope, as Alphonse launched into another story, that his brother’s little coloration just then hadn’t been a sign he needed to dump ice water on his younger sibling. Roy was not the right sort of man for his baby brother, and while he knew that Roy was not being flirtatious, he sent the man a brief glare anyway. Just in case. But he kept holding out hope that Alphonse was just easily pleased.

He sat through the story though, without venturing to get ice water, as his brother and Roy talked over their lunch.

It was during a lull, in which Alphonse was taking the dirtied plates to the sink, that Edward heard Roy ask the one question he’d not been prepared for the man to ask. Favorite dessert? Sure. He was ready to have rained ghostly wrath down upon him for that. But this?

“What?” Alphonse asked, not having heard over the clatter of putting the plates into the sink.

“What?!” Edward echoed, slightly louder.

Roy nearly burst out laughing at Edward, but as it was, he merely smiled. “I was wondering if you
Alphonse blinked a few times, face blank, before nodding. “Yeah. Of course. I’ll show you if you’re really that curious.”

“I am.”

“He’s not!”

Roy stood up from his chair at the table, pushing it back in with his foot. “If you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.” Alphonse shrugged and began to lead the way.

Edward watched, agape, as Roy turned to give him a wink before following Alphonse. And suddenly he was no longer frozen as he pelted after the two. “Alphonse! You traitor! Don’t you show him those! I saved your life, you owe me!”

Roy, however, didn’t propose a change of destination.

Alphonse was unaware of the ghost of his brother bobbing around him, threatening retribution, as he pulled from the top of a cabinet a framed picture, passing it to Roy. “That’s all four of us, before dad left.”

Roy took the picture in hand, noticing dimly that Edward had fallen silent, and turning it so he could look, he froze.

Edward could only bear it a few more seconds, before he turned and fled.

Alphonse frowned slightly as he watched Roy stare, not really understanding why the man couldn’t seem to take his eyes away. “There are more around here, and in the album on the bookshelf.”

“Thank you.” Roy managed to say, his eyes still glued to the picture.

No, not the picture. To Edward.

For the longest time he had wondered what Edward had looked like in color. And now here it was before him, and it was everything he’d never expected. Having seen Alphonse, and having known Hohenheim briefly, he might have expected Edward to have the same dark-blond hair, the same amber eyes. But Edward surpassed that.

The silvery ghost had once been gold.

And Roy stared in amazement at the vibrant color. The child could have put the sun to shame. The blond hair was a pure blond that he’d never seen before, a golden blond. With eyes to match. He had even been tanner than the other Elrics.

Alphonse wandered over to Roy’s side to try and follow what the man’s eyes were looking at so hard, and he made an educated guess with a small “ah” of realization. “He got looks like that a lot. Brother was the only one I’d ever met who had eyes like that. You should have seen him when he was passionate about something, they were like…” he paused in reminiscent thought, “golden fire.”

Roy roughly jerked his eyes away, trying to puzzle out to himself why Edward hadn’t wanted him to see. It wasn’t as if Edward had been deformed as a child. It was the exact opposite! So why? “It is rather unique.”

Alphonse chuckled, drawing the picture out of Roy’s grasp. “I’ll get the album and you can flip
through while I go work on some chores. I have Pinako and Winry coming over in a few days and I have to clean house. If you don’t mind being left alone for a bit, that is. Otherwise you’ll never get through the album with me trying to tell you a story for each picture.”

Roy nodded, casting the framed photograph a last look as it was borne away before looking around suddenly for Edward. The ghost had been oddly silent. And it was with a start of something akin to panic that Roy realized Edward was gone. Not seeing him anywhere, Roy cast a worried look to the ground, tugging his lower lip between his teeth as he thought it out logically before he went into a panic. Edward hadn’t wanted him to see… most likely the ghost had left in silent protest.

…he just hoped that was what it was. He had fears enough about Edward being gone, now that he’d brought the ghost here.

“Here.” Alphonse said, offering out the album. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

Roy waited until the younger Elric was gone before he sat down on the couch with the album. “Sorry, Edward… but I have to.” And he began to flip through the pages, smiling and laughing at some of the pictures of his ghostly companion as a child. Page by page he turned, his eyes always for Edward in every photograph.

Eventually he did come to the end… and what he believed to be the last picture of Edward taken before he died.

Carefully, Roy pulled it free of the plastic jacket to hold it in his hand.

Edward was still the same. Blond hair, golden eyes, and a smile that made him helpless to not smile back. Even if it was just a picture. Edward was happy… and Roy found himself leaning back into the couch cushions as he contemplated the picture, trying to imagine the older Edward he knew as still having that same blond hair, those same golden eyes.

And he smiled as he got a rough mental image of it, but he shook it out of his head.

Standing, he shut the album, setting it aside. And he stood there, the picture of Edward still in his hands as he stared down at it, before quickly, he tucked it into his back pocket.

After checking to be sure Alphonse wasn’t around and was therefore still occupied, Roy slipped out of the house, knowing he needed to find Edward and ask him why. Why had Edward never told him?

He closed the door to the Elric home behind him quietly, before beginning to quickly look around. He hoped Edward would have had the sense to at least flee out here, where he wouldn’t seem like a creepy stalker wandering through the house trying to find the ghost. And his heart beat a bit faster upon the thought of what if he couldn’t find Edward… bringing those fears he’d kept quiet about back to the forefront of his mind.

But he tried to shake that off as he looked around quickly, scanning the area. This was no time for those thoughts… not yet. And then he saw it. Him. A silvery form, almost translucent, standing on a nearby hilltop. Before he could even register the will to move, he was making for the ghost at a run.

“Edward?” Roy called the ghost’s name uncertainly as he slowed his approach up the hill and came to a stop mere feet behind the apparition.

Edward didn’t look back, “now that you’re over here I can see more. I’d forgotten just how pretty it was.”
“It’s the countryside, it’s supposed to be pretty.” Roy replied but came to stand next to Edward and look around as well with a contemplative expression. “I see what you mean though, it’s nice here.”
And it was, but the scenery was not what he’d tracked Edward down for, and he looked over at his companion with confusion in his dark eyes. “Why did you never tell me?”
Edward respected both of them too much to try turning this, of all things, into one of their games. And he slowly turned to meet Roy’s eyes. “You asked, more than once.”
Roy nodded confirmation.
A flicker of remorse entered the silver eyes, “because I know how you feel about that color. About the sun. You told me once, remember? I’m not entirely sure why I wanted to hide it from you, but I think perhaps that I wanted you to appreciate me for me. Not because I’d once been blond.”
Roy studied Edward for a moment as if he’d never quite seen the ghost properly before… and not in the way that Edward probably now thought. And so he set out to absolve him of those misconceptions. “Blond? Edward, that’s like calling the sun blond.”
Edward felt a small smile hide itself in the corner of his mouth.
“You were never anything so common as ‘blond’.” Roy continued on. “But I have to let you in on a secret,” and a gentle smile began to slip onto his lips, “the moon isn’t any less entrancing or beautiful.” He said softly, willing Edward to believe him. “I appreciate you no matter your appearance, because sun or moon, you still give off light. You outshine them, you always have… because you’re you, and I wouldn’t have asked anyone less to stay with me.”
For a time, all Edward could seem to do was stare at Roy. Aware that his words had hit a chord within that he’d never felt before, leaving him with mixed feelings of which he couldn’t quite decipher beyond that at the same time he felt happiness, he also felt a confusing pain.
Roy tore his gaze to the side at the continued silence, sadness tugging at his mouth as his fears came bubbling back up to the surface. “You’re not coming back with me.”
Yet that was hardly the full answer and too easily mistaken for agreement, and he plunged forward with a frantic undertone. “I will not stay.” And as hope began to chase away the dark regret in the startled eyes that found his again, he shook his head. “I want to stay with you! Yes, this used to be my home. Yes, Alphonse is my brother. But it is no longer my home, it hasn’t been since I died. My place is beside you.” He told him passionately, willing Roy to understand why before, softly, he added, “when I’m with you… I have a home again.”
Relief flooded Roy, a grin unconsciously appearing for a flash in time as ever-present self-preservation launched a last minute shield of caution against potential pain. “You’re sure?”
Edward did not hesitate as a warm smile lit his face. “I will never willingly be parted from you in such a way. You asked me once, in true honesty, if I would come with you, and then later if I would stay with you. My answers were no less true than the questions that birthed them. I chose… I choose to stay with you, Roy Mustang, because this is what I want.”
“This is what I want.” Roy echoed softly, his dark eyes almost caressing in the fond way they gazed at the apparition at his side.
Edward’s smile faded, but into a look more tender, more knowing, with no less affection. Off and on they had both once wondered why it had been Roy who could see him. But now? He was left wondering how he ever could have deserved him. He, who had committed an unforgivable sin and paid for it with his life. How was it that he could ever deserve to have Roy? But it did not stop him from being grateful for it… eternally so.

Roy cleared his throat as he glanced to the side with a smile playing on his lips before he sent a sidelong look to the ghost watching him with that same penetrating silver gaze that unnerved him, that made him feel as if his soul was being laid bare to his companion. But this time felt somehow different than before… somehow… warmer. “I should get back, I rather left your brother high and dry there. I’m sure he’s wondering where I ran off to.”

Edward felt his head automatically nod. “It wouldn’t do for him to sneak up on us and see you presumably talking to yourself.”

That got a short chuckle out of Roy as he spared the ghost a mildly amused look. “Always with my best interest in mind?”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” Edward replied back in kind. “I just don’t relish the thought of spending most of my time with you in a padded room.”

“Yes,” Roy agreed, “how silly of me.” And he half-turned where he stood, “coming?”

Edward shook his head and sighed from his nose as he turned his gaze back to the countryside. “I want to stay out here a bit longer. You go on ahead… doubtless my brother has fished up more old pictures of me that you’ll want to view for blackmail. I’d rather not give him a heart attack by suddenly dumping the lot into the fireplace. I died to save his life, not to try and do him in later.”

A fleeting grin came and went as Roy inclined his head shortly. “For what it’s worth, despite what I said, which I wholeheartedly meant…” his dark eyes gazed thoughtfully at Edward, “the sun never had anything to compare to you.”

With that, Roy had bowed out of the conversation and swiftly made himself scarce, leaving Edward to stare after him with a masked expression before an unconscious laugh made a brief appearance.

“I wonder,” he mused thoughtfully, “what would happen to all those one-night stands if you were as honest about them as you are with me. Somehow I can’t help but feel that if you were being honest with yourself you’d be able to follow through with it all.”

Several minutes passed before Roy made it back to the house, finding Alphonse waiting there by the front door for him.

“I was wondering where you’d gone.”

Roy gave a slight smile to the younger Elric. “I’m afraid the city has done its toll on me, I can’t help but want to see a countryside of something other than buildings and homes.”

Alphonse inclined his head in acceptance and mostly turned to go back inside. “I think you’ll find a confliction of views if you ask the folk around here. Most of us growing up can’t wait to get out of this place and try our luck in one of the cities. We would grow up calling it our prison.”

Roy caught the door as he followed the young teen inside. “I grew up in the countryside too. I remember thinking like that once.”

“Do you dislike Central, Colonel?”
“Not at all, I wanted to be transferred there.” And he smiled in reflection, if only he’d known just how much his life would change once he’d gotten there. Would he have even believed it? “I’m glad I was… it was a long time in coming.” …for the both of them.

Alphonse glanced over his shoulder with a shadow of a smile as he led the way into the kitchen. “That’s a lot like how I feel about the move I’m planning on once I manage to sell this house. Trying to get it in my name is rather a lot of work, considering no one has proof one way or the other if my father is still alive. His name is on the title to the property after all, not mine.”

“Wait,” Roy interjected quickly, “you’re moving?”

“Wouldn’t you?” Alphonse arched an eyebrow as he picked up his coffee mug. “It’ll be a long time in coming, but I’ll be glad for it. Even this headache of trying to roll over the property deed into my name will be worth it to get away from this place.”

Roy stared at the young teenager with a stunned frown. “You hate it that much here?”

The look of incredulity on Alphonse’s face might have sufficed, but he didn’t stop there. “I don’t hate it, but how would you feel living in the house that your brother died in? Especially in such a violent way as that.” His hands gripped the mug dangerously tight so that his knuckles swiftly turned white, and Alphonse’s eyes had taken on a wild look. “I saw him being ripped apart! I heard his screams, and I could do nothing! There wasn’t even anything left to bury when it was over. Just blood. Everywhere. Tell me, how can I stay in this house when it is home to a memory like that?”

For several minutes, several long minutes, Roy could not find the words to answer – Alphonse didn’t seem to expect one soon as it was, for he was gulping at his coffee as if it were something stronger.

It occurred to him now that he’d never asked Edward for that much detail about his death. Certainly nothing that would have revealed what Alphonse had just told him. It left him with a strange unsettled feeling in the pit of his stomach, one that made him feel sick without feeling nauseous.

“You can’t.” Roy’s voice was quiet, almost as if he wasn’t sure he wanted to be heard. But louder he asked, trying to steer away from furtherance of the pain he could see in the younger Elric, “where do you plan to move?”

Alphonse cradled his coffee mug between two hands again as he met Roy’s gaze steadily. “I don’t know. Anywhere but here. I’ll find somewhere to start over again. Somewhere not too far… but far enough. I don’t want to ever have to travel for too long to visit brother’s grave. After all, I’m running away from this place, not from him.” He looked around at the walls darkly while adding, “but if I had it my way I’d burn this place to the ground… unfortunately I need the money I’d get from selling it.”

Roy nodded vaguely, a sad smile on his lips. “I hope you find your peace.” And then after a moment’s hesitation added softly, “I’m sure that Edward has. That he’d want the same for you.”

“I know it.” Alphonse raised his coffee mug in a half-hearted toast as a wry quirk of a smile tugged at a corner of his mouth. “He was a good brother, only ever wanted the best for me. Even when we’d fight.”

It was true… far more than Alphonse would ever know. And Roy felt a sad wrench inside him that Alphonse would never know just how deeply his brother had loved him. Still did.

…it was not just anyone that you gave your life for.

“Do you want to see his grave?”
Roy snapped out of his contrite reverie at the question he’d not at all been expecting. He’d been instead suspecting that he’d have had to sneak out later that night to go find it. For find it he had wanted to… it was Edward after all. He felt he owed the ghost that much, that he’d visit Edward’s grave. Uncertain but hopeful eyes were on him, and forcing his shock aside he gave a jerky nod of his head. “I’d like that very much… yes.”

Alphonse smiled in what could almost be taken as a relieved fashion as he looked away to set his coffee mug down. “Okay.”

The walk to the grave of Edward Elric was not a long one in matters of distance. Just around a bend in the road really, and then up a short, narrower connecting dirt road to the cemetery. It was a peaceful looking place, full of trees, and flowers. The picturesque resting grounds of the dead.

It reminded Roy of the cemetery his father was buried in.

But he pushed those thoughts away with a mental shake of his head. He was not visiting that cemetery now, and while it occurred to him that he probably should again soon, he knew he was here for Edward.

Of whom he hadn’t seen when he had joined Alphonse on their little excursion. But he knew that just because he hadn’t seen Edward yet, didn’t mean that the ghost wasn’t around. However he could hardly look around in all directions hoping to spot the spirit when Alphonse would have begun wondering what the hell was up with him.

“Just there.” Alphonse said, pointing.

Roy followed the indicated direction with his eyes to see a headstone marker that was flanked by dying flowers, clearly in need of replenishing.

“I visit once a week.” Alphonse continued on. “I would have brought new flowers, but I hadn’t planned on coming here today.”

Their steps stopped once they reached within three feet of the marker, and Roy let his eyes glance sadly over the inscription there.

Edward’s name, carved eternally into the headstone. The proof of the short life just underneath. A flamel he’d never seen before carved at the very bottom of the lines.

He knew Edward was dead… had only ever known Edward as being dead… yet seeing it carved into a headstone he felt the gravity of it, the reality of it, hit him in full. He wavered momentarily on his feet, feeling disconnected and yet more painfully aware than he’d ever felt before.

“He was so young.” Roy whispered as he continued to be unable to tear his eyes from the absolute carvings.

Alphonse’s smile was pained, but long gone were the days where he’d cry every time he’d come here. “You’d never have known it. He always seemed so much older than he really was. He was a genius, maybe that had something to do with it. But genius or not, I still would have followed him blindly as a child. Questioning, doubting, but never for long.”

Roy felt a bittersweet smile conceal itself as he found himself agreeing with Alphonse. Yes, Edward was that type. There were just times where Edward, without intending to, reminded him just how much of an adult he was. And yes, Edward was brilliant. “He was a good brother to you.”

“Yes.” Alphonse agreed softly, his eyes riveted as well on the headstone. “It’s just so messed up,” he
bit out with a gasp of breath, suddenly rubbing roughly at his eyes before wrenching his gaze heavenwards in frustration. “No one should have to bury their older brother. The only thing left of their family. It’s not fair, was never fair.”

“No.” Roy agreed, his heart going out to the younger Elric who he could see was now fighting back bitter tears, and probably near to drawing blood from the lip he was biting to stem it. “Death is never fair.”

Alphonse shook his head wordlessly, giving Roy an almost tearful apologetic look as he turned to stride away. Presumably to compose himself again.

Roy watched him go until he was far enough away before looking back to the headstone and softly calling, “Edward?” And when no answer was immediately forthcoming, “are you here, Edward?”

When still he received no answer, Roy could only believe that the ghost wasn’t there. With that in mind he took another step towards the headstone marker and eased himself down to crouch there comfortably, hands clasped in front of him limply as he gazed at the inscription. “I refuse to believe that you ever sinned…” he began slowly, passionately, “if what you did was a sin, then the world is fucked up backwards. You were young, torn with grief while trying to be there for your brother, you did what any driven, intelligent mind in your position would have done.”

Roy closed his eyes with a quiet sigh. “And you sacrificed yourself, willingly. I just can’t understand how it’s a sin… at least I have the rest of my life to convince you otherwise.”

Given time, Alphonse returned to Roy’s side, and they stood there together in silence for a time, reflecting. It was Alphonse, however, who broke their joint silence as he glanced from the corner of his eye at the man beside him.

“Either you’re a good actor at not seeming bored by trying to be polite, or you were closer friends with my father than you imply.”

Roy looked over at him, confused. “What?”

Alphonse turned his head to meet Roy’s confused look directly. “You look at that headstone as if it has special meaning to you. Either you’re a really good actor, or… you weren’t named Edward’s godfather or anything, were you?”

Could a person choke on air? Roy believed he nearly found out. Edward’s godfather?! …Gate help him, there were plenty of reasons he’d never want that dubious honor. Nothing against his companion. “I assure you it is neither.” And he looked back at the headstone marker with a wry glance. “I just can understand losing someone important to you. Someone you loved. Family.” A somewhat sad smile twisted his lips. “It’s not something you ever really forget.”

Alphonse looked back with a similar smile. “I think had he lived, he’d have liked you.” He gave a short laugh, “probably driven you mad while he was at it.”

“Overly affectionate?” Roy guessed for the somewhat twisted sake of guessing in jest to an answer he already knew.

“You’re both smart, strong alchemists, and willful.” Alphonse gave another small laugh. “Definitely a recipe for a clash… but he’d have liked you I think. Deep down.”

Roy smiled fondly, in a far off way as his gaze drifted to the wilting flowers flanking the marker. Yes, it was all so true. Alphonse had no idea. After all, Edward had started off moaning that he’d gotten stuck with an idiot. “Well, I’ve known your father. I know you… and so far I’ve been given
no reason to believe that knowing Edward would leave me wishing it were otherwise.”

No… none at all. If anything, he was forever wishing he’d never see the day Edward would leave his side.

They spent only a while longer there at the cemetery, and Roy followed Alphonse back to the house, still seeing no sign of Edward the entire way. When he’d been able to look, he didn’t even see the ghost where he’d left him on top of that hill. He tried not to let it bother him, he knew Edward was around somewhere and that the ghost was safe.

Inexplicably, it did still bother him.

“You will stay for dinner, yes?” Alphonse asked as they entered the house once more.

Roy nodded immediately, “I’d love to if it’s no problem.”

Alphonse snorted in near-amusement. “Eating my cooking may present a problem to your bowels, but honestly I’d just like the company.” He gave Roy a grateful smile, “it gets lonely eating alone as much as I do.”

“Well would you like a hand with the cooking?” Roy offered, casting aside the explanation knowingly. He knew how much emptier things had seemed at home when his father had passed away. At least he and his mother had had each other, and still did, but Alphonse didn’t have anyone left anymore.

Hohenheim was missing in action, and presumed dead by his only living descendant. And even if Edward was a ghost, he was unable to be seen by his own brother. Alphonse was truly alone. So he didn’t need an explanation for the invitation of dinner… none at all.

Alphonse brightened even more at the offer of help, “would I ever. Trust me, your stomach will thank you for it. I think the only reason I don’t get food poisoning is because I’m used to eating my cooking.”

Roy laughed and pushed up the cuffed sleeves of his shirt, “let’s get started then.”

And get started they did. Within minutes the stove burners were on, all occupied by something. One of the counters had been taken over by mixing bowls and a liberal dusting of flour. And as the tradition goes, when cooking with wine, drink the wine – there was more than one wineglass floating about, usually nearby the hand of its drinker, a layer of crystal condensation against the glass.

It was into this that Edward finally reappeared, startling Roy so much by his sudden presence that the man nearly fumbled the pastry cutter off the countertop.

“Careful.” Edward remarked blandly through eyes that twinkled with mischief. “One might think you’ve had a bit too much wine.”

Roy made sure that Alphonse was otherwise occupied before he glared at the ghost who only smirked back at him. But no matter how occupied Alphonse was, he dared not even try berating the ghost or questioning him in a whisper. So a good glare was all he could do before he got back to cutting the dough.

Edward chuckled and floated up to sit on the edge of the counter right next to Roy. But his gaze gradually drifted from his watching of Roy’s ungloved hands manipulating the pastry cutter, and over to his brother who was tossing the green salad. “As much as you did this for me,” he began thoughtfully, “I think it’s done my brother some good as well.” And he looked back at Roy with a smile. “Thank you.”
Roy paused long enough to meet Edward’s eyes, returning the smile as his lips moved in silent reply.

Edward smiled a bit more, and as Roy looked away again he too turned his gaze back, towards Alphonse. “He definitely looks happier as time goes by. It’s hard though to see him like this, as happy as I am to see him again.” The corner of his mouth tightened as his eyes grew distant. “I saved his life, but left him alone in the world. But he’s alive…”

Roy looked up again to see Edward watching Alphonse with a smile so peacefully happy, yet sad, that he felt that something in his chest constrict. He realized in that moment just how much Edward truly loved his brother. He thought he’d known, but he’d been wrong. And the knowledge that Edward had declined to stay with Alphonse left him feeling humbled, and oddly inadequate.

Edward looked back at Roy now, realizing that the pastry cutter had been silent for several more seconds than any good pause for breath would have taken. The way Roy was looking at him made a lopsided smile appear as he reached out a hand to lay it just over the one still gripping the pastry cutter, not breaking their locked gazes for a moment. “I know what I’m choosing. I love Alphonse, I do. And it doesn’t matter that he can’t see or hear me, if I truly wanted to stay with him that wouldn’t matter. But I choose to stay with you. Not because you can see me… but because it’s what I want.”

‘Why’, Roy couldn’t help but mouth, stunned confusion in his eyes even as a warmth began to grow inside him.

“You know why.” Edward replied gently, “it took two of us to get me out of that office. My reasons for wanting to stay with you can’t be so different from the reasons you want me to stay.”

Roy smiled then, a true smile as he tipped his head forward ever so slightly once in a nod. Still smiling he went back to work on the dough that had been neglected a bit too long now, in the process causing Edward to take his hand away. But the ghost himself remained sitting beside him on the countertop.

Alphonse remained again entirely unaware that he was not totally alone with Roy, and once he had finished setting the table he wandered over to assist Roy with the things the man allowed him to touch. The things Roy dubbed least likely to be at risk for food poisoning suspects.

If he could have seen his brother there, he would have appreciated the theatrics Edward was having to put on to keep dodging him whenever he’d get too close to passing through the ghost. As it was, Roy certainly was appreciating it, and he took great care in only smirking at the side of his mouth opposite Alphonse so the youngest Elric wouldn’t notice.

“Can’t you pretend you have a bigger personal space area than you do, just this once?” Edward had grumbled at one point, “as much as I love him, this is one of those times where if I still could, I’d knock him upside the head.”

Roy had somehow managed to keep from laughing… and subsequently pretended that he hadn’t heard the ghost’s request. It made the whole situation even more entertaining.

When they finally sat down to dinner, Edward only just stopped himself from yanking Roy’s chair out from under him the moment the man would have sat into it. Instead he sat himself in the air at Roy’s side still grumbling – although the fact that he could be by Roy’s side during a dinner that wasn’t with just the two of them did much to brighten his mood. So often he was shunted aside just because no one could see him.

“I know this may seem like an odd request,” Alphonse began as he picked up his fork, “but you don’t have any stories of my father, do you?” And at the questioning and somewhat uncertain look
he received added, “please? I know it must seem strange… he’s left me alone in the world, most likely dead now. And I never really knew him. Still, I guess I’m just curious.”

Roy forced himself not to look over at Edward to see the ghost’s reaction to this. The unknown of it was fairly eating at him, but he only shifted in his seat once before nodding obligingly. “Okay then.”

An almost excited smile lit Alphonse’s face. Across from him however, a wall showed more emotion than Edward’s expression as the ghost stared hard at Roy.

“This was before he married your mother I believe…” Roy began as he absently stabbed some salad onto his fork. “I first met him at one of the libraries in East Central, I had gone looking for a bit of research…”

As Roy continued to unravel the story to the rapt attention of Alphonse, in between eating, Edward continued to stare at Roy. The look in his silver eyes the only giveaway that he felt anything at all about the story Roy was telling. And as Alphonse laughed at a particularly humorous part of Roy’s story he smiled a faint, sad smile as a wistful look flashed in his eyes before he closed them.

Dinner continued, barely being tasted as Roy continued to tell Alphonse about his father, and by default, Edward as well. Until at last the plates had been cleaned, and another story wrapped to a close.

“Thank you.” Alphonse said with feeling as they began to wind down. “I don’t want to tire you out telling stories all night.”

Roy chuckled a bit, “it’s not a problem. You have a right to know all I can tell you about him.” And then he sobered somewhat as he gazed across the table at the young teenager. “Do you have ill feelings towards him at all?”

The question caused Alphonse to sigh and turn to staring at the floor. “Some. It’s hard not to, I’m not a saint. But not really knowing the man, it’s difficult to care too much. I like hearing the stories though, it makes me feel as if on some level I know him. I wanted to know him.”

“The man I knew was a good one.” Roy said honestly. “I can only hope that whatever caused him to leave was for the good of his family, not himself.”

“A lot of good it did us.” Came Edward’s soft reply.

Roy didn’t even think about it as his head snapped over in the ghost’s direction, silver eyes pierced him instantly.

“Makes you wonder what could be more horrible than what he left us to survive with on our own.” That drew a bitter-sounding laugh from him. “Survive…”

“Edward…” Roy whispered almost inaudibly.

Edward shook his head, “don’t mistake me. I’m at peace with being dead.”

“Roy?” Alphonse questioned as he looked back to see Roy raptly staring into space. “You okay?”

Roy held Edward’s gaze a moment longer before with a slow reluctance pulling his attention back to Alphonse. “Yeah, sorry.”

Alphonse gave a small shake of his head and stood up. “Since I doubt you want to help with the dishes, are you heading back to the inn? Or you could look at those pictures again, I don’t know why
they fascinate you so much,” he began to laugh, “but you’re welcome to be fascinated as much as you like.”

Roy chuckled, wryly thinking that Alphonse would never believe him if he were to say why he had a strange fascination with pictures of Edward. He realized it could be taken as almost creepy, but luckily the fact that he had once known the boy’s father was on his side. “I think – ”

“I’d like to see the workroom.” Edward interrupted, turning his eyes onto Roy despite the fact the man wasn’t looking his way, despite the surprise he could see being quickly mustered away. “My father’s workroom, where I died. I’d like to see it.”
Chapter 25

Chapter Twenty-Five

Roy took a deep breath, his mind whirling with thousands of thoughts, emotions, none of which he could voice as he tried to understand Edward’s request. Much less attempt to succeed in getting it granted! But that was the first hurdle, he could worry about Edward’s reasons later. He’d been silent too long already, and Alphonse was noticing. “Actually, I have a request... but it’s difficult to explain.” Try really difficult.

If the slightly pained look on Roy’s face was anything to go by, Alphonse could believe it. Mere curiosity alone was sufficient enough for him to want to know just what it could possibly be that Roy would actually feel uncomfortable asking about it. “Go ahead.”

Roy knew it was a damn good time to think up a damn good lie. He’d at least try, for Edward. If this was what Edward wanted… “before I lost touch with your father, I had lent him a few books of mine. Alchemy texts. I was wondering if I might check through his workroom and see if they’re there. I understand it’s an uncomfortable subject, and I understand if you’d rather not allow it.”

Alphonse quickly held up a hand to forestall any further attempts at explaining, giving Roy a small smile. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to hear an explanation, it was more that he just didn’t want to even think about that place if he could help it. As it was, Roy seemed to have some kind of strange connection to the long-gone parts of his family that he couldn’t fathom, as evidenced by the possession of those letters. He didn’t see how this would be much different… and it wasn’t like he cared if Roy were lying and robbed the workroom of all its contents. He didn’t want them. “You don’t have to explain. Just don’t expect me to stay in there with you.”

“I promise that’s the last intrusive thing I’ll ask of you.” Roy breathed silently in relief. Although his nervousness about actually letting Edward go through with this raised its head again.

Alphonse let go of a small laugh, turning his steps towards the hallway. “You’ve not asked that many. Besides, they’re your books. You’ve not struck me as insincere or some kind of stalking murderer yet, so I’ll allow it.”

Roy was shown through the house to the workroom where Alphonse left him at the door looking unsettled, informing him that he’d be either in the kitchen or living room when he was done. Roy waited until Alphonse was halfway gone in a quick retreat before turning to the door.

The lights flickered on, and Roy realized that Edward still recalled where the switch was on the wall. Shutting the door firmly behind them he ignored an active inspection of the room in favor of turning to Edward who was staring fixedly at the room around them.

“You sure you’re okay to be doing this?” He asked, his voice rough sounding, slowly walking to the
ghost’s side.

Edward met his eyes with a lost looking smile and a matching shrug. “No.” He whispered miserably. “But I want to.” And he looked away with a ragged sigh, his eyes drawn to the exact place on the floor where he could remember as if it were yesterday, that he’d knelt there to perform his last alchemy. He shivered, unable to help it. It was far too much like something out of the nightmares he’d gladly left behind come the time he had met Roy.

Roy followed the ghost’s gaze, it wasn’t too difficult to determine where or what the spirit was looking at. There, near to them on the floor, was a sickeningly large, uneven portion of the hardwood flooring that had been stained darker than the rest.

Blood.

He knew without a doubt, and a sinking pit in his stomach, that it was the place Edward had died. As Alphonse had said, there’d been nothing left but blood. Edward had been ripped apart.

Edward swallowed hard as he floated over to kneel beside the edge of the stain, his silvery hair falling forward across his face and into tortured eyes as he ran a hand against the bloodstained wood. His shoulders hunching in on him as he expelled a shaky breath before whirling away as if in sudden fright.

“Edward!” Roy breathed out soothingly as the ghost collapsed at his feet, shaking. He was on his knees before he even registered moving, he knew his legs were intersecting Edward’s but neither of them seemed to care. “We should go.” He insisted, brushing a hand back into silvery hair that didn’t even flutter at his touch.

Edward shut his eyes tightly, shaking his head frantically. “No! I’m fine. Just… don’t leave me! Please…”

Roy felt something in his chest tighten and melt at the plea, and he settled fully down onto the floor. “I could never leave you.” He promised gently, and discarded all possible worries about Alphonse wondering where he was, he just sat there quietly with Edward. Just watching. Just being there as he knew Edward needed, as Edward tried to gather himself again.

He waited until Edward seemed more at ease before broaching a most likely distressing subject. But he knew that as distressing as it was… he needed to ask. And as cruel as it might feel at the time, at this time, he knew that deep down, it was the best time to ask it. “Alphonse told me something today…” He whispered in the stillness of the room. “About the way you died.”

Edward took an unsteady breath, turning his head so that he stared with pained eyes at the stain from blood he knew had once been there. “I used to have nightmares about it… and other parts of that night.” He replied haltingly, his voice choking on raw emotion. “It was every bit as violent as I’m sure he said it was, and more. I actually felt it happening.”

Roy looked over at Edward, feeling that something in his chest constrict again. But it was not just the words… it was the pained way they were said, as if Edward were desperately trying not to cry. It was the look on the ghost’s face. “Hey…” he reached a hand out to his companion to try and get Edward’s attention away from that stain again, never looking away from him. “We really can go if you need to. Your father never did borrow any of my books.”

“No.” Edward shook his head, looking to him with an over-bright smile. “I’m fine, really. Just… stay here with me, please. Remember, you promised? Just don’t leave me in here alone.”
Roy didn’t feel any better witnessing the clearly forced smile, but he nodded. “I wouldn’t dream of leaving you.” He replied with reassuring conviction before he looked away to take in the rest of the workroom. “Do you want to talk about it? Would it help at all?”

Edward was more than ready to say no, but it never came out. “It took my limbs first, one by one. Shredding them away from my body. It felt like… millions of hot knives slicing into me, slowly peeling everything away. It went from there, ripping me apart. The pain was nothing like I’d ever felt before. I started drowning in my own blood long before my lungs were ripped from me, and the sight of it all… all the blood…”

Roy watched helplessly as Edward trembled, looking far too much like he had that day he’d fallen through the air after a bad dream. But he had not been as concerned then as he was now. Nor as helpless feeling by the knowledge that he was helpless to truly comfort his friend.

“I couldn’t help but scream.” Edward continued in strained quietness, “and scream… and scream… until I was choking on too much blood to scream any longer. And by that time, it was over. I had begged for Alphonse to be left alone, to punish me. I’d made the mistake, not him. I didn’t know I’d die for it, for him. But as painful as being ripped apart like that was, I still am honestly glad Alphonse survived, that it worked.”

“Edward…” Roy breathed out sadly, reaching a hand over to where the ghost’s shoulder was, but not touching. “I’m…”

“Don’t you dare say you’re sorry!” Edward whispered fiercely, turning silver eyes on him. Silver eyes that seemed to be over-bright in the ghost’s own soft ethereal light. “Don’t you dare say you should have come sooner! Don’t.”

Roy shook his head, his sad expression never departing. “I’m glad you’re here with me now. Like this.” And he looked over at where his hand hovered, flesh over incorporeal, one of the harshest distinctions to ever exist. And then his eyes slid back up to meet silver ones. “You are as real to me as any living thing.”

Edward was still for a time before a watery looking smile began to hesitantly slip through. “I’m glad you’re here too, Roy.”

Roy let his hand fall away as he smiled back, though it tugged inside him to do so. Not in a painful way, but one that made him all too aware that he’d grown quite close to Edward. And the ghost to him. Ducking his head in what he instantly, to his chagrin, realized could have been termed as shy, he looked back to the floor. “Where’ve you been, anyway?”

He was hoping that a light change of topic, even if his attempt was blatant, would make Edward smile easier.

“Around.” Edward replied simply, following Roy’s gaze.

Roy hummed noncommittally. “Mind me asking where?”

“Miss me?” Edward asked airily, but didn’t wait for a confirmation one way or the other. “I went around the town for a bit. Watched what went on, mindless stuff really. But it was…” he thought for a moment, “nice.”

“And no culture shock moments?”

Edward shook his head proudly. “No. I think I’m well on my way to being a further well-adjusted ghostly member of society.”
“I’d say that Grand wouldn’t share that sentiment, but his opinion doesn’t really count for much anyway.” Roy observed dryly.

“And never will at all once we’re done with him.” Edward muttered and glanced at Roy. “And what were you off doing? I saw you leave with Alphonse.”

Roy sighed and placed his hands behind him to lean back against them where he sat. “We visited your grave. He offered, I accepted. I wanted to see it.”

“My grave?” Edward asked in a voice that revealed nothing.

Roy looked at him now, eyes searching. “Yes. He visits it once a week you know.”

Edward smiled softly at the news, and gave the substantial stain on the floor what could only be termed a parting look before floating up off the floor. “Show me.”

It was not a request, but it wasn’t needed to be one.

Roy nodded and stood as well. Truthfully, he’d expected this. In Edward’s place, who was he to think he’d have wanted anything else? He could understand a potential calling a ghost had to its own grave. “We’ll just say goodnight to your brother and then we’ll go.”

Edward floated up off the floor, determinedly ignoring the impulse to turn around and take another last look. Instead he darted forward to slam his hands against the door before Roy could get to it and open it. Hovering there, between Roy and the door, he bowed his head. “I want you to do something for me in here, before we leave.”

Roy stopped where he was, pausing only a moment before he nodded unseen. “Anything.”

“On the desk you’ll find some books and my notes. They’re going to be the only things there.” Edward answered slowly. “They have the human transmutation recipe… notes… I need you to destroy them. Get them out of here and destroy them.”

Roy didn’t need a reason why. He quickly turned, making his way around the bloodstain and to the desk. Laying atop it was just as Edward had said… and he wondered not for the first time if Alphonse, or whomever, had only come in here to clean up the blood, and promptly abandoned all thoughts this room existed. Shaking his head, Roy gathered up the paper notes, stacking them quickly before shoving them into one of the books which he quietly shut.

Once he had all four books shut and gathered into his arms, he vowed he’d destroy them as soon as possible, per Edward’s wishes. He made his way back to the apparition’s side, and edged around him now to open the door. “I got them all. Don’t worry.”

Edward was subdued and silent as he followed close to Roy down the hallway, his hands fidgeting with themselves as he stared hard at the floor through saddened eyes. His mood only lifting somewhat when they located Alphonse.

“Find them then?” Alphonse rose from the couch with a tired looking smile.

“I did.” Roy’s hold tightened fractionally around the books. “Thank you.”

Alphonse shrugged, “least I could do after you spent most of the day with me. The company was really nice.” He insisted as he walked over to the man. “Are you in town long?”

“Until tomorrow afternoon.” Roy replied, before getting down to what he knew Edward would
never ask him to do. Yet he knew, just as he’d known he should bring Edward here, that he should do this. “Listen, I’m going to give you my address and phone number in Central. If you ever need anything. Anything at all.”

Edward’s head jerked quickly to look at Roy with wide eyes, a bubbling of happiness growing inside him that Roy would offer. Not so much for Alphonse’s sake, as his brother might believe…but for his sake. “Thank you.”

Roy might have smiled, but he resisted on the grounds that smiling as he wished to after spouting off those lines could come across as potentially flirting. He definitely did not want Alphonse to misunderstand.

Alphonse was more than a little surprised by the offer, but he conceded with a nod and a smile. “Okay. Thank you. Hell, my letter came to you all those years ago. This would be faster.”

So Roy wrote down the promised information, giving it to Alphonse who tucked it beside the phone for safe-keeping. He didn’t wait for Alphonse to herd him to the door, as reluctant for Edward’s sake as he was to leave. But he knew Edward wanted to see his grave, and he really should leave before he outstayed his welcome.

“It really was nice to meet you.” Alphonse said at the open door, offering out his hand. “Thank you for coming, I mean it.”

Roy smiled at the younger Elric, taking the offered hand with a firm shake. “Good luck, Alphonse. I hope to hear from you again one day, but if not, know that I really wish you the best and I hope you find peace one day.”

Alphonse’s fingers tightened around the door that he held open. “Thank you. Goodnight.”

Roy stepped outside, heading for the steps as he halfway turned with a pause. “Night.” He answered, his eyes shifting the briefest moment to linger on where Edward hovered next to his brother unseen. His heart feeling rather heavy in his chest as he waited for Edward to finish saying unheard goodbyes.

“I love you, Al.” Edward whispered, drawing away at last with the knowledge Roy wouldn’t be able to linger much longer. The man had done so much already for him. And casting his brother a parting look, he promised himself that tonight wouldn’t be the last he saw of Alphonse as he hurried to Roy.

Roy turned fully as Edward reached his side, and led them away from the house, heart heavy for the silvery apparition.

After waving to Alphonse and then making sure via Edward that the teenager had gone back inside the house, Roy then adjusted his steps towards the cemetery. The ghost close at his side.

It was a warm night for the countryside, but at the very least a slight breeze toyed with the otherwise stagnant air. The sky completely clear save the smattering of stars and a yellow new moon. And the cemetery at night was exactly how Roy envisioned one to be.

Eerie.

His only solace was that he truly had no reason to feel the least ill at ease. Not when he already had a ghost with him. But that brought a question to mind.

“There aren’t any other ghosts around here, are there?”
Edward didn’t even need to glance around, he’d been keeping an absent eye out for such an event since the moment he’d left that office. “None.”

Roy’s lips pursed, but he said nothing as he led the way among the headstone markers. Only speaking again when they neared Edward’s own headstone, and feeling as if it were all too surreal, he raised a hand to motion to it. “Do you want me to stay?”

Edward didn’t look away from the headstone he now knew to be his own. “Yes.” He replied softly before floating a bit faster as raw emotion built up inside him. Putting pressure on that dam he could never release.

As he reached his headstone, saw his name there on the inscription, Edward let out a dry sob of a gasp before tumbling from the air to his knees as his hands ghosted over the headstone. His head once more hung limply, silver hair slipping past his bowed shoulders as they shook in the tears he could never expel.

Roy felt the sting of tears in his eyes, blinking them away quickly as he felt his heart contract in pain and sorrow for the distraught ghost. Sucking in a harsh breath he quickly walked to Edward’s side, falling to his knees beside him. “I wish I knew what to say.” He whispered, mostly to himself as he watched Edward come undone.

He’d never seen Edward like he had this night. Never.

He knew that Edward accepted his existence for what it was. He knew the ghost was not mourning for that. But he knew what Edward was mourning for, and that… that was the reason he stayed quietly beside the ghost who cried, yet was unable to.

Tonight he’d found himself wishing more than ever that he could touch Edward. Just one touch of comfort. But he knew it was a wish made in vain. All he could do was what he would always do for his companion, stay by his side even in times of pain.

Especially in times of pain.

Edward’s hands had long since fallen away from the headstone to clench into the grass. And slowly, little by little, his anguish at seeing the hard evidence of his death began to subside. Not a single tear had been shed, and perhaps it was fortunate that this once he was unable to cry with tears, for he felt he would have drowned them both.

Them both… Roy had stayed with him the entire time. And that knowledge only served to soothe his suddenly overstressed emotions.

“Thank you.” Edward whispered at last in a hollowed voice as he slowly began to work on righting himself. Not even caring to feel self-conscious in front of Roy.

Roy nodded as he carefully watched his companion. “It affected me pretty hard too when I first saw it.” He said quietly in the mutual confidence they shared. “Not as hard as you, of course. But seeing it… it’s overwhelming somehow.”

Edward looked at him as he brushed his hair back behind an ear with a somewhat shaky hand. “I’m glad I didn’t stay with you… see this earlier when Alphonse was still around.”

A weak chuckle slipped from him as Roy attempted a smile at the ghost. “I think I’d have chosen him thinking I had gone insane, than ignore you when you need me. Even if you just need me to stay with you so you don’t feel alone.”
“Don’t tease me, Roy Mustang.” Edward echoed the chuckle as he tried to smile disapprovingly. “I’m very sensitive right now.”

“I would.” Roy protested good-naturedly, but truthfully all the same and sat back a bit more comfortably. “I can avoid seeing your brother if I wish. But you? You I am happily stuck with. Better to take care of your needs than his.”

Edward could only shake his head in what was becoming amused exasperation. He had the sneaking suspicion that Roy was trying to cheer him up… and damn if it wasn’t working.

Roy smiled at him before sucking in a deep breath and looking back to the headstone. “You know, when you hear horror stories about cemeteries and ghosts and such appearing to haunt you and pull you under the ground with them, as a kid you never imagine it turning out this way.”

“Oh?” An eyebrow inched its way up Edward’s forehead. “Should I try scaring you then? We both know that the theory of a ghost pulling someone under the ground is ridiculous, I couldn’t touch you if I wanted.”

“There’s the kicker,” Roy’s head flopped against his shoulder so he could gaze partially at Edward. “I’m not scared of you. Of ghosts for that matter. Hard to be anymore.”

Edward’s smile came easier this time. “I never thought I’d be the ghost.”

Roy’s head flopped back right-side-up. “Yeah… you never imagine it turning out this way.”

“I don’t think anyone ever really does.” Edward replied softly as he looked at his headstone. “I wouldn’t have wanted to have died for any lesser a reason, though. I gave everything I had until I had nothing.”

Roy smiled faintly, his eyes drifting towards Edward. “You have me now, that’s not nothing.”

Edward laughed before he could help himself, turning eyes that danced with teasing amusement on Roy. “Not much of a step up, but okay.”

Roy rolled his eyes, knowing far too well that he’d left himself open and vulnerable to that one. “Brat ghost.” He murmured fondly, and then in a burst of sudden inspiration shifted forward with an “ah!” which caused Edward to give him a funny look… though that may have also been directed towards the straining theatrics he was putting on as he shifted around searching for something on his person.

“Please tell me you forgot to take your medication.” Edward eyed him warily.

Roy paused long enough to glare at the ghost before he whipped the champagne bottle out with a victorious cry.

“Do I even want to know where you were hiding that?”

Roy took a long look at the bottle with a cocked head and pursed lips before suddenly shaking his head decisively. “Nope.”

Edward snorted and tried not to mind as Roy popped the champagne cork straight through his incorporeal head. The guilty look Roy gave him only serving to make him begin to smile again.

“Good thing you weren’t alive right then or I think I would have killed you.” Roy remarked lightly and put the bottle to his lips.
“At the very least made me lose an eye.” Edward smirked and shook his head as Roy drank deeply from the bottle. “Champagne is for celebrating, and you’re drinking a bottle of it while sitting with me on top of my grave?”

Roy drew it away with a hollow popping noise and swallowed before answering. “Yeah, about right.”

Edward rolled his eyes, knowing better than to get mad without reason. “Why?”

Roy raised the bottle slightly in a solemn toast to him. “Because,” he began gently, “though you may be dead, you’re still here in a fashion. And that’s got to be something worth celebrating.”

Edward thought about it for a moment before he smiled a bit wider. “Yeah… I think you’re right.”

“Want some?” Roy offered, shaking the bottle with a smirk.

“Oh, shut up, Mustang.” Edward growled good-naturedly. “I’m still just a bit distraught here.”

Roy gave a suddenly solemn nod and took another hearty drink before daring to try imparting any words of comfort. “Will you go with me when I die, hopefully many, many years from now to visit my grave?”

Or something like comfort.

Edward gave him a bemused look. “You think we’ll still be together like this when you die? In seventy years or however long, you think you would still want to be around me every day?”

“No.” Roy answered without pause, and the grass suddenly became quite fascinating. “To both… I can’t understand why we wouldn’t be together still. Otherwise what is the point of what we have now?”

Edward looked away, silently admitting that Roy brought up a good point. At least one worth thinking on. “I want to stay with you too.” He finally replied to the words Roy had left unsaid, but more than implied.

Roy’s mouth quirked a bit at what now occurred to him. “You think we’ll still be together like this when you die? In seventy years or however long, you think you would still want to be around me every day?”

Edward chuckled softly as he gazed at his headstone with almost unseeing eyes. “The day you start giving me greeting cards, anyone greeting cards, Roy Mustang, is the day I check you into the psychiatric ward myself.”

“Fair enough.” Roy gave in without a second thought to it. Taking another swallow of the champagne he lounged back a bit further on the grass, leaning back now on his free elbow. “Is there anything you wish you could have done before you died?”

“Besides tell Alphonse that I love him?” Edward’s eyes lowered as a wistful smile crept onto his lips. “No. I was still a kid, despite being a genius. Kids just don’t think about things like that. Or at least I didn’t, perhaps because I never had the time.”

“Odd,” Roy smirked somewhat. “Wish I’d been the age you died at I would have wanted a first kiss and sex… in no particular order.”

Edward snorted as he rolled his eyes. “Why does that not surprise me? How can you even try to deny anymore that you’re a manwhore when you say stuff like that?”
“Healthy –”

“– sexual appetite.” Edward filled in, causing Roy to grin. “I know.”

“It’s the truth though.”

“And what would you wish for now?” Edward asked, as clearly Roy had no trouble getting kisses or sex these days. The awkward initial, in Roy’s case, hour, was already over.

Roy didn’t answer right away, taking a few swigs of the champagne here and there before finally he was forced to admit the truth as best he knew it. “I don’t really know.” And he cradled the bottle in his hand at an angle. “My mother, what friends I have, they all know I care for them. I’d like to think I’d have no regrets or words unsaid when it comes to them. I’ve done everything right by them that I can, and by Hazel too for that matter.”

Edward couldn’t help but find it endearing that Roy would include his pet, despite how much he knew Roy loved that squirrel, and the squirrel him.

“As for you…” Roy trailed off briefly as his eyes found Edward’s again. “I know I can never give you everything you deserve, you deserve so much in this world –”

“I’m no longer lonely.” Edward cut him off gently, a shadowy smile on his lips. “To no longer be lonely was all I ever wanted. And you’ve given me my escape from that, and from so much more.”

Roy smiled faintly, shaking his head. “If you think that an escape from loneliness is all you deserve, all I’d ever wish to give you, you’re mistaken.”

Edward gazed at the man for a long moment they spent in silence, before finally looking away to stare at his headstone. “You’ve given me a lot, Roy. More than I ever thought I’d have again. Thank you… for everything.”

“Are you doing better now?” Roy asked as his gaze found where the books he needed to burn had tumbled off to.

“Yes.” Edward answered simply, but it was the truth all the same. “I know you didn’t want me to see where I died… but all the same, thank you for letting me.”

“I only worry that you’ll be okay.” Roy argued, looking back at the ghost who met his eyes. “I knew it’d be hard on you to see it. It hurts me to see you suffering. But I’d never leave you.”

“I’ll be okay.” Edward answered softly. “Just give me tonight. Being with you makes me feel better, feel safer.”

“I’ll give you the rest of my life.” Roy corrected, his gaze locked with Edward’s own.

Neither were too certain how long they spent just looking at each other, before Roy turned to grab the books back in hand, stuffing them under an arm while he held the champagne bottle in his opposite hand.

Edward frowned as Roy got up, “what are you doing?” He asked as Roy began to saunter off across the grass away from his headstone. Without waiting for an answer he quickly followed.

Roy didn’t answer until he was a goodly distance away from Edward’s grave. Even then he dumped the books onto the grass before he answered, the paper notes inside spilling out from where he’d stuffed them. “Doing as you asked.”
And Edward finally understood with abrupt clarity as Roy emptied the rest of the champagne bottle onto the books, liberally splashing them with the alcohol. But what he didn’t understand, was Roy suddenly producing a box of matches, shaking one out and lighting it, before holding it out.

“Take it.” Roy spoke firmly, the lit match flickering between them as Edward stared.

Edward flicked his gaze up to Roy’s unwavering gaze, before lowering it back to the match, and slowly, he did. “But I thought – ”

“You deserve to more than me.” Roy interrupted gently as he stuffed the box of matches back away.

Edward held the match up to eye level, just watching the small flame burn lower, before his mouth set into a grim line. “You’re right… I do.” And distantly cognizant of Roy backing up for safety, he dropped the match onto the champagne-soaked books.

They had been catalyst in ending his life… and Edward watched dispassionately as they erupted into high flames, spurred on by the alcohol in the champagne.

Slowly he floated backwards to Roy’s side, landing on the grass to stand beside him as they both watched the paper curl and burn, falling to the burning ground as ash. Watched the ink glow before it was fully destroyed. Neither of them said a word as they watched the flames eat away at the books and Edward’s notes, just stood there together as a sense of justice echoed between them.

When the books had been totally destroyed, nothing more than ash littering a charcoaled section of ground, and when the flames had all been doused from catching anything else on fire, they left.

It was halfway in their walk back to town and the inn, when Edward finally spoke. “Thanks for doing this with me.”

“I’m happy to.” Roy replied honestly, and the mood shifted somewhat brighter the rest of the way.

It was quite late when they got back to the inn, and Roy was more than happy to seek out his rented room and bed. He’d had quite the day. But he knew that Edward had felt it ten times over. So he quietly got changed, and took care of matters in the bathroom, before he made his way over to the bed.

Edward had already claimed the right side of the bed.

Roy cracked a grin as he saw, but said nothing as he flopped down onto the left, pulling the covers up around him as he lay his head back against the pillow. “You should know… Alphonse plans to move one day. I’ll try to arrange it so that you’ll be able to see him when he moves, if you wish it.”

Edward’s silvery gaze darkened somewhat as he blinked up at the ceiling, hands linked and folded under his head as he lay there next to Roy. “Move?” He closed his eyes briefly. “I guess I can understand why. We lived alone in that big house for a long time, now with it being just him… and after I died there like that. After mom died there… I don’t blame him. I just hope whoever buys it doesn’t do too much remodeling. I have fond memories of that house, believe it or not.”

Roy turned his head to look at his companion, before shifting onto his side, resting his head in the hollow of a bent elbow. “You like the house?”

Edward looked over to meet Roy’s curious gaze. “Yes.” And on inspiration he turned onto his side as well so he could watch Roy easier. “I grew up there. It may not be my home anymore, I like our home… but I think every kid always has at least one fond memory of their first home.”
Roy tried not to smile with too much pleasure at it being referred to as ‘our home’. “Will you tell me about this teacher Alphonse mentioned? I can’t understand why you’d need one.”

Edward’s smile was mixed with a grimace, but he laughed. “We were impatient to learn. Impatient to get good enough so that we could… well, you know what we must have done when we finished our training.”

Roy nodded, but did not speak.

“Our mom had left us some money before she died. We used it to pay for the training.” Edward continued. “Her name was Izumi Curtis… and she was as scary as she was strong.”

Roy smiled as Edward continued on with his story and explanation, settling in among the covers as he listened. He wasn’t too tired just yet… definitely not tired enough to not listen to Edward. And so as the minutes rolled into an hour and began again, Roy lay there just listening, laughing or smirking at times, and watching Edward tell his story.

After Edward finished, leaving off where he knew Roy would be able to piece the holes together, he began to quietly laugh as he watched the man.

“What?” Roy smiled, his head maneuvering around to try and find a softer spot of the pillow his arm had ended up tucked up underneath.

“I can’t believe you didn’t yawn through any of that.” Edward grinned through residual laughter.

“I never find you boring, and it was not a boring story anyway. I’m glad you told me.” Roy admonished him almost fondly.

Edward rolled his eyes, but still smiled. “So what did you think?”

Roy hummed a moment in thought, “I think you had it a lot harder than I did. Did you want to go see her as well one day? I’m sure I can find her with your help.”

“She’d try to kill you for sure.” Edward grimaced. “Don’t worry, I’m fine with not seeing her again. Not that I dislike her… but I would rather not hurt her to keep her from trying to hurt you.”

They spoke a few minutes longer on the subject before Edward finally could no longer ignore the fact that Roy was now yawning at least every twenty seconds.


Roy hesitated, about to argue that he was fine, before he gave in. If Edward was telling him to get some sleep, the ghost was probably feeling settled enough once again. So he’d take it for what it was… even though he’d been prepared to stay up the whole night with Edward. “Well there is that breakfast the innkeeper mentioned that I’d hate to miss.”

“Just remember that it’s the food, not his wife. Even if she is the cook.” Edward informed him sternly.

“Don’t worry, she’s married. But does that mean I’m not allowed to even kiss her if she’s wearing one of those ‘kiss the cook’ aprons?”

Edward promptly smacked him with a pillow.

Roy yelped in protest, laughing as Edward set the pillow back down. “Okay, sorry. You crazy
Edward could only roll his eyes and shake his head as Roy tried not to laugh. But the moment Roy reached for the lamp switch he lost control of a noise of protest.

“Ed?” Roy frowned, looking back around at the suddenly intensely uncomfortable looking ghost. “You okay?”

Edward nodded meekly, settling back down onto the bed. “Yeah. Sorry… I thought you were going to roll off the bed.” He could have flinched at the lameness of that excuse, but as it was he settled for laying there stiffly.

Roy felt like he was caught in limbo, hand still halfway outstretched, body still angled to assist the reach, and his eyes still glued to the ghost. It took him a moment before he understood, and he felt himself smile as he withdrew his hand without turning off the light. “Goodnight, Edward.” He murmured as he pulled the covers up around him and closed his eyes.

Edward looked over at him quickly, uncertainty and shock in his eyes. “The light?”

“If that innkeeper is making me pay so much for using the room just for one night, I’m going to run up his electric bill.” Roy yawned, before turning over onto his stomach to bury a smile in the pillow as he let sleep take him.

Edward stared wide-eyed and slightly open-mouthed in shock, before he began to smile. “Thank you… Roy.” He whispered as he listened to the man’s breathing even out in sleep. Just for tonight, he needed it… and was grateful, if not embarrassed, that Roy had understood. Yet he curled up on his side of the bed to watch the man sleep, forgetting all about the book he’d brought to read.
Edward was sitting cross-legged on the bed as he watched Roy make sure his suitcase wasn’t missing anything. Technically it was, but as Roy wasn’t asking for the missing item yet, he continued to hold the book in his hands. Not that he’d actually read anything. Pretended to read when Roy began to stir awake, sure. But what the journal contained, he couldn’t have said.

Last night had been one of the hardest and longest nights he’d ever experienced in life or death, and Roy had been there for him through it all. Everything he’d been through since returning here he had reflected on last night, comforted to do so by the mere fact that Roy was there beside him, even in sleep. Otherwise, the events of last night had been too closely linked to his nightmares from before to ever make him want to revisit them. What he’d told Roy last night had been the truth, he did feel safer with the man around.

Yet after he’d reflected as much as he dared, he had found himself not going in search of the journal he’d brought to read, but back in thought. This time, about Roy. Yesterday had been an awakening experience for him to realize just how much he had grown to need Roy in his life. He knew now with abrupt clarity that it wasn’t just no longer being lonely, or having a bigger world through the man.

It was far more than that, and he was still trying to make sense of it as he handed over the journal that Roy was now motioning for.

Roy murmured a thank you as he packed the journal safely away, trying to keep a frown off his face as he did so. Edward had been rather quiet ever since he’d woken up, and truthfully it was worrying him. Edward was rarely ever quiet. The only thing that kept him from prying was of the large chance that it had to do with something about last night. The workroom, the grave. If that was the case, he knew Edward would talk to him when he was ready, all he could do was do as he’d always done. Stay by the ghost’s side and wait.

“Did you sleep at all last night?” Roy asked, even though he knew there were several things inaccurate with his question. He just wanted to try and get Edward talking, even about normal, inconsequential things.

Edward floated up off the bed moving towards a corner of the ceiling. “It was just a slip that one time, it won’t happen again. Besides, I dare not disconnect like that here.”

Roy closed the lid of his suitcase with an inner flinch. That hadn’t turned out as he’d hoped. “Well, I do believe it’s time I check out of this room and check out that breakfast.” He ventured as he straightened, suitcase in hand.

Edward had tilted himself forward towards Roy as he hovered in midair. “As if that’s all you’ll be checking out.” He accused knowingly.

“You have such little faith in me.” Roy defended with exaggerated hurt in his voice, secretly glad that the attempt to lure Edward out of silence was now succeeding on a better route. “I told you before we left home that I wasn’t coming here with any thoughts of getting a date. This weekend is for you. Even once we get back home later tonight.”

Edward angled his head to one side as he began to smile slowly. “But still, I know you’re you. And I
know that just because you check someone out as a potential bed warmer doesn’t necessarily mean you actually settle on luring the poor misguided souls into bed.”

Roy didn’t care one bit that he was willingly subjecting himself to this abuse. As long as Edward was talking easily, and smiling again, he would let Edward berate him about his apparent personality flaws as long as the ghost wished. “Sometimes they’re the ones doing the actual dragging into the bed.” He felt he needed to point out, and smirked as he turned for the door. “Now come on, I’m hungry, and we still have a few hours to kill until the train back to Central.”

Edward knew without being told that Roy was leaving it up to him what they did until they had to catch their train. He was fairly certain of where he wanted to go, but as Roy was already whipping the door to the inn room open he quickly darted out the door after the man without yet voicing his desire.

The door was swung shut on the now empty room, the lamp light still glowing in outshined tandem with the sunshine streaming through the window.

Edward followed Roy down into the small dining area that was grouped off next to the closed bar counter. And he took inventory of the personages already there in the room, as well as the open tables, before he floated off to claim one and leave Roy to begin gathering food from the buffet table on his own.

Settling down into a chair that gave him both a good, clear view of Roy, and a good view of the entryway, he cast his gaze around the room again. There weren’t many people present, but he had to fight back a sigh as he noticed at least one woman shooting a clueless Roy an appreciative look. She had no idea what the man was really like.

Roy didn’t have to look long to spot Edward, and he fought back a smile as he weaved his way around the few tables in order to set his plate and a glass of chilled orange juice down before sliding into the chair next to the ghost’s. “Thought about what you want to do?” He asked in a hushed voice as he began to cut his waffles into absurdly large sections.

Edward tapped at the surface of the table, meeting Roy’s gaze silently for a moment, waiting until Roy had forked such a large heap of waffle into his mouth that he was reminded of Hazel, before speaking. “I have… but I hope you’re not out of lies just yet. The person I want to see before we leave… well, let’s just say that State Alchemists aren’t looked upon highly.”

Roy could only nod in response as their table was descended upon by the innkeeper who spoke with Roy at length – in between Roy doing a fine imitation of a feeding rodent – to enquire about the comfort of his stay and the quality of his food.

Edward had to wonder if Roy was eating like a toddler on purpose to try and drive away as much outside contact as possible.

It wasn’t until Roy had successfully stored away enough food for the winter and checked out of the room before either of them were able to really talk again. Roy was leading them down an empty-seeming backstreet while tossing an apple back and forth between his hands before he broached the question again.

“Who is it you want me to lie to?” He asked, giving his next toss an extra flourish to send the green fruit into the air and towards his opposite waiting hand.

Edward was sorely tempted to snatch the apple out of the air and see how good Roy’s catching skills really were, but he restrained himself in lieu of answering. They were running out of time as it was,
they’d only have a few hours. “Winry.”

The apple thumped to the ground.

Edward looked back quickly at the noise, and the realization that Roy was no longer beside him. “What’s wrong?” He asked, suddenly panicking as he saw Roy just standing there, staring at the apple on the ground with unseeing eyes. “Roy!”

Roy drew in a quick breath, quickly stooping down to snatch the apple back up. But he didn’t get up either, just continued to squat there, fastidiously brushing the apple off as if struck by some obsessive-compulsive impulse. It was as best a cover as he could manage right now as he tried to get a grip.

“Roy?” Edward began to frown, and he quickly floated to kneel on the dirt, angling himself to the side to try and see the man’s face. He’d never noticed before how much hair Roy had, and how well it could hide his eyes. “What is it?”

“Nothing.” Roy muttered as he finally lifted his head to meet worried silver eyes. “Just blacked out a moment, that’s all. You said Winry?”

Edward’s frown didn’t vanish. “Just blacked out? That’s not nothing, Roy. You aren’t getting sick, are you?”

Roy quickly stood. “No. Don’t worry about it, it happens to me sometimes. I think it’s some post-war thing. Never happened before then.” Which in some twisted way was absolutely true.

Edward floated back up to be at eye level with him. “Are you sure? You’ve never had a blackout before, and shouldn’t you have fainted or something?”

“Roy Mustang never faints.” Roy rolled his eyes, drawing on stored bravado.

Edward pondered him suspiciously a moment, but nodded. Even so, he decided that he’d keep an eye on the man, just in case. “Just you wait, one day you’ll faint and I’ll never let you forget it.” He assured the man before quickly redirecting the topic. “And yes, I said Winry. I mentioned her before, remember?”

“Yes…” Roy definitely remembered. “A good friend of yours from your childhood.”

Edward smiled, “yeah. So I hope you’re not out of lies yet, because the one thing you can’t announce yourself as today is a State Alchemist.”

“No, I’m not out of lies.” Roy replied quietly, sending the apparition a smile in return. “Lead on.”

Edward hesitated only a moment, still worried about Roy’s health, before he brightened with a grin. “Okay! I doubt they’ve moved. I just hope you can walk fast!”

“I daresay that I can.” Roy chuckled, and as Edward whirled to lead the way, he quickly followed. With every step preparing himself for what he was about to do, about to face. And while the man he’d been before meeting Edward would have turned away from what he was moving towards, he knew now he was no longer that man. He would do this, for Edward.

Even if he had to lie to Edward to do it. Despite the stinging guilt that pierced him to do so.

The walk to the Rockbell home did not take them very long, not with Roy being forced to move as fast as he was to keep up with the silver spirit. And Edward had left behind his active concern about
Roy as he grew more and more excited about seeing Winry again. She was after all, his one best friend from childhood. The one he’d wanted to show his alchemy to first.

Granted he had scared the shit out of her doing so, but still.

“So what’s your lie this time?” Edward asked as they finally laid eyes upon the Rockbell house, and he was caught with a flash of nostalgia. It hadn’t changed a bit. He hoped the occupants were just as unchanged.

Roy shoved his hands deeper in his pockets, being sure his gloves were safely hidden. “I’m making this up as I go along. We better just hope that she and Al never think to compare stories about a certain weekend.”

Edward hoped for many reasons that such a situation could be avoided. As they climbed the stairs up to the porch together and crossed to the door he couldn’t help but wonder just how Roy was going to pull this one off.

It wasn’t as if the man had any letters from her to get them in the door.

Roy, however, wasn’t as concerned about what lie he was going to whip up, as much as he was concerned about keeping up his front once he had his lie. This was far harder for him on a personal level than lying to Alphonse had been. He couldn’t hesitate though, and he raised his hand to knock on the door – feeling a solid sense of dread settle inside him.

“Yes?” The word was said before the door was even fully open, when it did revealing an old woman half Roy’s size who was taking drags off an antique pipe. Said elderly woman turned a shrewd look on the man clogging her porch. “And what can I do for you?” She asked, as if she couldn’t be convinced a healthy looking man like this could be here for automail, her suspicion was that he had to be a salesman.

Roy had no idea who this was, but needn’t wait long for at the very least a name as Edward breathed “granny Pinako” beside him. It was then he had the sinking feeling he knew exactly who this old woman was. “Morning,” he started off safely, and braced himself for what he was about to do. He just hoped Edward would take hints and help him out here. “I’m looking for a Winry Rockbell, I have some official business to discuss with her.”

Edward tore himself away from his mixed feelings at seeing the woman he thought of as a grandmother, but who had also teased him endlessly about his height as a child, and had been the first person to ever scold him when he let slip he knew about human transmutation. He wondered… did she know? Had Alphonse ever told anyone what they’d attempted to do that night?

Now he was blinking at Roy as if the man had lost it, and in a way, he had. Official business? That wouldn’t work very well on the old woman, and it was hardly as strong as his lie to Alphonse yesterday had been.

Even if there had been some truth to it.

“Do you now?” Pinako asked with a quirk at the corner of her wrinkled mouth as she observed this man with a predatory amusement. “And what official business would that be?”

Out of nowhere, Roy felt his stride hit him, and shoving his preoccupations away about the people who lived in this house, he fell into his undercover training as if he’d never faltered before now. “Business relating to the Elric estate. I’m conducting an evaluation for my supervisor at the bank who has been handling the requests of Alphonse Elric. These evaluations include me speaking to
close friends of the boy, to determine whether or not he is of sound mind. My sources led me to believe that Miss Rockbell is one such close friend.” And then Roy’s smile turned almost as challenging as Pinako’s. “Unless I am incorrect?”

Edward was gaping at Roy as if he’d never seen the man before. “Where the fuck did that come from?!”

Roy could barely hide his smirk as he continued to hold Pinako’s gaze in the faceoff they were having, and he was determined not to lose.

Pinako took another long drag from her pipe, eyes narrowed at the man, before addressing him again. “What did you say your name was?”

“Lie!” Edward blurted frantically. “They hate State Alchemists and you’re famous, you know!”

Roy didn’t hesitate, “Jeremy Montague.”

“That’s a terrible name.” Edward rolled his eyes. “You don’t even look like a Jeremy.”

Roy really wasn’t quite sure how someone could look like a certain name, but he’d take it under memory to berate Edward later about what kind of a name ‘Edward’ was. They were living in a modern century here after all.

Pinako took another puff from her pipe before she hummed gratingly and pulled the door open wider. “Inside.”

Roy inclined his head graciously to her, his smile shifting more natural as he walked forward. “Thank you.” He made sure to walk slowly enough for Edward to be able to get inside easily as well, at the same time making his complete look around the room he now found himself in seem casual.

“I almost can’t believe that actually worked,” Edward marveled as he hurried in directly behind Roy, “but you’re not as bad as I thought.”

Pinako meanwhile shut the door before turning to her unexpected guest. “Wait here, Montague. I’ll find where that girl has locked herself up this time.” And she sauntered away with the air of a woman who was master of her home, puffing in long drags at her pipe.

“She hasn’t changed a bit.” Edward muttered.

“Do your friends often lock themselves up?” Roy smiled as he glanced Edward’s direction teasingly. “It doesn’t bode well you know for the investigation I’m conducting.”

Edward snorted at the mention of the farce. “Just remember to mind your manners, Jeremy.” He muttered back. “Winry is closer to my age, and she’s a girl. So don’t you get any funny ideas.”

Roy dared not think of what Edward would say if he were to tell him the honest truth about why the mere idea of dating the girl made his insides churn unpleasantly. “Don’t worry, ghost. Your friend’s honor is safe with me.”

Edward rolled his eyes, but said nothing further as he focused on steadying himself. He was doing every imitation of deep breathing, despite his absolute inability to actually breathe, and he had planted himself in the air at a hover almost directly next to Roy as he looked around.

The house was so distantly familiar. Like a layer of dust being brushed off of a photograph he’d once
known well. It was a stark contrast of unchanged familiarity as compared to what he’d encountered at his old house where Alphonse now lived alone. Even Pinako seemed the same, as if he’d never died at all. Even so, it unsettled him just a bit. Not nearly as much as seeing Alphonse again had… and perhaps he was getting better, as nothing he encountered here could be as hard on him as what he’d encountered yesterday.

“At least Winry will be different.” Edward murmured to himself.

Roy looked around quickly, but was unable to question as to what Edward was talking about as a girl about eighteen with long blond hair walked out with Pinako behind her. And as he looked at her, he felt himself waver a moment before he steadied himself. He couldn’t falter now, he needed to do this, for Edward’s sake. So he latched onto the only safe thought in his head for stability, for he had realized in some distant corner in his mind that Winry’s blond hair was dull in comparison to the sun.

“I’m Winry.” Winry announced as she walked out, stuffing a ratchet wrench deep into a pocket of her denim overalls and attempting to wrestle her hair into an untidy bun. “What is it you’re here about – ” she suddenly stopped dead in voice and movement as she got a good wide-eyed look at the man.

Roy wondered if it truly was a good thing that she was not gaping at him for the reason he dreaded those around him to know, because as it stood right now, he was being gaped at for an entirely different reason… and Edward was bristling at his side.

“Don’t you dare!” Edward growled, but not at Winry. His delight at seeing his best friend again somewhat shoved to the side for the moment.

Roy wished he could have pacified the ghost somehow, but all he could do as he was being ogled at by Winry as if she’d never seen a man in a tight shirt before was to try and keep himself from feeling nauseous. There were too many reasons why Winry staring at him like that was entirely a bad thing. All he could do in way of distracting either of them was to launch into some redirecting conversation. “I’m here to ask you some questions about Alphonse Elric. I shouldn’t need to take up much of your time.”

Let the knowledge that he wasn’t staying longer than an hour be a deterrent for her.

“Right, Alphonse.” Winry blinked herself out of her stunned staring, and ignoring her grandmother’s suddenly audible sniggering, she started forward again. “We may as well sit, this way.”

“I’ll get you two something to drink.” Pinako suggested in a wicked sounding tone that caused Winry to whip her head around and glare. She beat a strategic, smug retreat to the kitchen.

Edward followed both Roy and Winry into the sitting room, and was absurdly happy when Roy chose to sit in the wooden chair at a writing desk, claiming to need a flat place if he needed to take notes. However, he noticed that Roy’s decision of placing himself at a distance didn’t deter Winry from taking the nearest next possible seat.

Winry was still trying to take her eyes off of something other than Roy’s collarbones, wondering if their perfect lines had been designed by an automail mechanic as she realized with a start that he’d spoken. “What?” She asked unintelligently, inwardly cursing herself for sounding like an idiot.

Roy merely smiled, as if educated people suddenly acting like utter morons were a common occurrence around him. And really, it was. He just wished that it didn’t have to be her. Fuck, he’d have even preferred Alphonse acting tongue-tied around him. “I asked how long you have known the individual in question, one Alphonse Elric.”
“You make him sound like a possession.” Edward muttered darkly, settling onto the writing desk. He was not truly upset about it though, and Roy most likely knew it. And as Winry began to finally answer Roy’s rather simplistic and general questions about Alphonse, he sat there, just watching her.

It had been so long since he’d seen her. Winry had truly grown up since they were kids. Gone were the freckles, and the shorter hair he’d always tugged at to make her mad. Gone were the paisley print dresses, or the plain skirts. Now she truly looked grown up. It was quite frankly, amazing, because he never imagined she’d grow up into a girl who would be wearing denim overalls over a bandeau, all visible pockets sporting some array of a tool collection, and hair that seemed far too long for a mechanic. Wouldn’t it want to get caught in the seams of the automail she worked with?

He could barely recognize this woman. Yet it was her, he had known it the moment he’d laid eyes on her again. Just as he’d known his brother.

Pinako brought drinks for the three of them, never seeing the fake hurt look that the ghost she also couldn’t see gave her. It was then she took a seat nearby Winry to listen to the questions and answers given, at times offering her own opinions.

Edward sat and listened to it, only making the remark of, “it sounds as if you’re trying to arrange a marriage for my brother, and compiling a general fact sheet about him to disburse,” when there was a pause in the conversation.

Roy only smiled into his glass as he took a sip of water.

“But I knew those boys when they were just babies.” Pinako said as she absently stared out the window, remembering some memory only she had as she spoke. “Alphonse, and the older brother, Edward, before he died. Those two… they always looked after each other, especially when their mom passed on. It was a hard year for the kids, Winry included. They all lost their parents that year.”

Roy’s hand tightened fractionally around the glass of water in his hand.

“You’re right…” Winry mused, head tilted a bit as she thought back. “I feel kind of bad though, you know.” She admitted, lowering her gaze to the floor. “When I got the news my parents had been killed Edward and Al came over not long after… and I yelled at them. Yelled at Ed that he was being stupid, or something, told him that his dad had just left, but my parents were dead. And then their own mom dies barely a month later.” A bitterly sad smile crossed her lips. “I feel bad… thinking about that now.”

Roy closed his eyes briefly, drawing in a silent, shaking breath before he went on with all the composure his best acting abilities could muster. “So you believe Alphonse to be a responsible boy?”

Edward could only look sadly back at Winry, slowly shaking his head back and forth. “I can’t blame someone for that, Win.”

“He’s a responsible boy, rarely lets anything get the better of him.” Pinako agreed. “But moving out of that house, he needs it. He’s lived there alone far longer than is good for a child to be locked away among the memories he must have of that place.”

“I certainly couldn’t have lasted as long as he has.” Winry admitted quietly, looking back up at Roy now. Now no longer so enchanted by the design of his perfect collarbones. Sad memories had a way of doing that, she supposed. “If I hadn’t had granny, I think I might have gone mad with hate after my parents were killed. You should tell your boss at the bank that it’s for Alphonse’s own good that he’s able to sell that house and leave it behind.”
Roy felt the wrench of guilt inside him, carefully hiding it behind otherwise expressionless eyes. He had hoped… he had hoped he’d be able to leave this house and these people far behind without ever having that topic brought up, even on the side. Was it always doomed to follow him forever? No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t let it go inside of him.

“Are you all right, Mister Montague?” Pinako pressed with a sudden frown.

“Yes, fine.” Roy said in a level voice before he turned to Winry with all sincerity, even though inside he trembled for what he was about to say. “I am sorry about your parents.” And with every fiber of his being, he willed her to believe him… for what it was.

Winry looked up, startled by the tone of the apology. Out of any condolences she’d ever received, none of them had ever sounded so starkly honest as the one she’d just received from a complete stranger. “Have you ever lost a parent?”

“My father.” Roy answered simply, hoping desperately that his apology had been worth something to her… even if there was no way for anyone to know that’s what it truly was.

Edward on the other hand, heard none of this. He was too busy staring at Roy with uncertainty growing in his silver eyes each passing moment, icy dread sinking inside him as he slowly pushed off the writing desk. Each step around to face Roy felt an eternity, before he was able to face the man. “Why are you that sorry… they might not notice, but I do when you’re being honest! When you’re being honest!”

Roy didn’t even care as he looked up slowly, fighting it the whole way, until he met uncertain and desperate silver eyes. And frantically he tried to communicate with his eyes that it wasn’t what Edward thought. It wasn’t!

“They were in the war… same as you.” Edward spoke, voice suddenly far colder than it had ever been before. “You killed them?”

Roy’s eyes clenched shut as pain lanced through him, centering around his heart with a torturous wrench.

“You…” Edward floated backwards, his face blank in shock before anger suddenly took its place. “Why does it have to be you!”

The sudden shout startled Roy’s eyes back open, only to go wide with panic as Edward pelted in a blur past him, vanishing beyond the wall. And only threads of his remaining control not to blow his cover kept him in his seat when everything inside him screamed to go after the ghost. Realizing that there was blood in his mouth now, from his efforts not to scream Edward’s name. And he sat there shakily until a worried voice finally broke through.

“Mister Montague!” Winry had gotten from her seat, and was about ready to try knocking the man back to his senses with one of her wrenches when the man suddenly jerked back to himself. “Are you okay?!”

Roy jumped back away from her, somehow at the same time ending up on his feet. “Sorry, I just…” he searched frantically for an excuse, another lie, before suddenly he realized it no longer mattered to him. He needed to find Edward. “Excuse me.”

And that was all he said, despite protests, as he hurriedly grabbed up his suitcase and fled the house in his own fashion.

Frantically he looked everywhere he could see for the ghost, only to feel icy panic settle deeper
inside him as he couldn’t spot Edward anywhere. He had only a few ideas of where to look… the Elric house, which he’d have a hard time searching, and the graveyard. So he set off for the latter at a run, not caring how it might look.

When he reached it at last his heart was pounding for more than the exertion, it was pounding from fear. And as he came to an ungainly stop near the headstone bearing Edward’s name he rapidly looked around in sheer desperation.

“Edward!” He screamed out, not caring who might hear him. Only that Edward might. “Edward, please! Edward!”

When no answer came, Roy fell to his knees in front of the grave, turning pleading eyes on it as if it could help. A sudden flash of anger shot through him as he slammed a fist to the ground, eyes swimming in distress. “Fine! It’s not like I need you! I don’t… I…” he trailed off, feeling the first tears fall. “Can’t you see I need you?” He whispered brokenly, choking back on a sob. He wouldn’t cry here… he wouldn’t.

But despite that, he still didn’t rise from the ground for several more long minutes, roughly scrubbing at his face as he tried to compose himself before setting out again with salty determination.

He looked until he could no longer look any longer, at the risk of missing his train home. And by that time, he had screamed himself hoarse trying to find Edward as he’d made his way like an insane person through the countryside.

When he reached the train station it was all Roy could do not to just collapse onto it, and his shoulders hung in defeat as he felt that numb, yet piercing pain wrap around his heart, crushing at it viciously as his mind replayed the anger he’d last seen on Edward’s face.

What had he done? He’d tried so hard to keep it from Edward. To let the ghost enjoy himself. He’d ruined everything… and now, Edward was gone. He supposed Edward would be all right, the ghost would probably stay with Alphonse now… and he tried to convince himself it was for the best.

Roy hung his head brokenly, wrapping himself in his misery as he tried to prepare himself to go home. Alone.

Meanwhile Edward was sitting alone on a fence nearby his old home.

He didn’t know if Alphonse was inside. He didn’t even really care, he discovered. A discovery that should have made him feel guilty. The truth was, was that he had said his goodbye to his brother for now. He had come back here for the familiarity, for the peace he could sit in and think.

So he sat there on the fence, his hands gripping the railing as if to keep him from tipping off. Something he knew to be impossible, yet he did it anyway. And his legs slowly kicked back and forth as he looked up towards the sky deep in thought.

He had always known that Roy was tormented by the fact he’d killed so many people. The man had spoke more than once about the innocent blood on his hands. And he knew inside of him that the deaths of Winry’s parents were among that innocent blood Roy regretted. It had been such a shock though… never would he have thought that he’d meet the one responsible for making his best friend cry so bitterly that day.

Never would he have thought that he’d be living with the one responsible. Or feel affection for the one responsible.

Roy had given him the world back, chased away his loneliness. Roy was the only one who could see
him. Roy was the one he was meant to be with, for whatever reason.

That didn’t change the fact that he’d been angry about it when he’d seen the truth in Roy’s eyes. He didn’t know when it had happened that he knew Roy so well as to notice the subtleties in Roy’s eyes that to anyone else must appear calm, didn’t know when it had happened that he could tell when Roy was apologizing honestly. But it had… and when he’d seen and heard what he had, he’d been angry.

Angry with Roy?

No… Edward ducked his head. It wasn’t Roy he was angry with, although a flash of guilt entered him as he realized Roy probably thought he was the one he was mad at. But it wasn’t Roy… Roy didn’t deserve his anger. Not knowing what he knew now about the man, and how Roy regretted each and every innocent life he’d been forced to take.

It hadn’t been Roy’s choice, and that was the difference.

But someone had made that choice, made Roy be the one to get his hands dirty… and that was who deserved his anger.

With new determination, Edward slipped off the fence. He knew with a pang of guilt that he needed to find Roy. The man had been distressed before he left as he had, he’d seen it in Roy’s eyes. He needed to find Roy, talk to him… but most of all, he didn’t want Roy to leave him behind here.

So Edward set off quickly for the train station, knowing that he would find Roy there eventually, no guesswork needed. And he couldn’t afford to be late, to be separated. He had never been so glad before that he could float as fast as he could.

Only when he reached the train station did he slow down, and he looked around for Roy as fast as he could. When he did catch sight of Roy, sitting on one of the farthest benches from any activity, he breathed a sigh of relief.

When he saw how Roy was sitting, however, he felt something inside him tighten and fall. Roy was sitting like a man who’d lost everything… and Edward was puzzled to stillness for a time as he tried to understand why. Did he really mean so much to Roy?

Then suddenly he was rushing forward, although when he claimed the seat next to the man who still didn’t notice his presence, it was with a more careful slowness. And he bit his lower lip a moment before speaking to the man whose eyes were being covered by a hand. “Roy?”

“Ed!” Roy startled in shock, nearly toppling off the bench, and not caring who might be around to see as his head whipped around and he stared with wide eyes at the silver figure sitting beside him now. “But… I thought…” he hesitated, drawing an unsteady breath before continuing dejectedly, “did you just come to say goodbye?”

Edward clasped his hands together over his knees as he leaned forward to look around at the man he shared the bench with. This man… he was impossible. Yet he could only look at him through serious eyes as he answered, “you’re stupid.”

Roy was entirely taken aback, and didn’t even have time to conceal it before Edward was speaking again.

“You’re so stupid!” Edward impressed passionately upon the man, determined that Roy not forget it this time. “My personal idiot. Don’t you remember?”

Roy’s mouth worked silently a moment as he tried to find words, but nothing was coming out to
voice his thoughts of ‘what the hell?!’ Instead all that returned to him were flashes of memory of Edward’s voice, of Edward calling him those exact same words once. And dumbly, he nodded. He did remember...

“Do you remember why you’re stupid? My idiot?” Edward asked gently, not lifting the fixed gaze he had on Roy, who he could clearly see was out of sorts.

Roy blinked. How could he forget? It was the morning he’d told Edward how he felt about the sun, its golden fire. Never understanding at the time that he had someone beside him who outshined that sun. It was the morning he’d told Edward about the innocent blood on his hands, how he felt as if he could only create hellfire. And Edward had called him stupid for feeling that way.

“But I’m not creating just destruction.” Roy answered slowly, in a voice that still echoed his doubt about it. Yet he couldn’t find it in him to argue it, not now as he turned a distressed look on Edward. “Why are you here?” He asked in pained confusion, “I thought – I thought you left me.”

A small, somewhat saddened smile managed to make its way onto Edward’s face. “I needed some time alone, that’s all. Time to think.” He explained quietly, before hesitantly at first, and then with conviction, he reached over to attempt taking Roy’s hand in his. And even though it could not be done, he looked down with bright eyes as he curled his fingers inward, through Roy’s hand until they hovered just over its back. Giving every appearance that in a kinder world, he’d succeeded. “I’m here because I can’t leave you, Roy.” He continued in a desperate whisper. “I can’t, and I won’t. My place is beside you, for however long you’ll have me there.”

Roy felt the several tears slipping down his face as he again lost control of… control. And with a sudden rush of need, he curled his fingers down around the back of a silver hand he couldn’t physically feel. “Don’t ever leave me.” Was all he managed to get out as they looked back up at each other, and he rubbed at his face roughly with his opposite hand.

“Idiot.” Edward whispered in affection, smiling in his own watery way as he watched Roy try and wipe away all evidence the man had shed a few tears… for him.

Roy could only shake his head a bit, a smile of relief shakily on his lips as he tried to piece himself back together. Unknowing and not caring when it was that the thought of Edward no longer being with him could make him a panicked mess, have turned him to such depression, nor make him actually lose control of his tears when that depression was chased away. He was just glad… terribly, immeasurably so, that Edward had come back.

He promised himself that he’d do everything he could to keep Edward with him.

Edward could only watch, affection glowing inside him as he promised himself that he would never leave. His place was right here. He needed Roy, as clearly as Roy needed him. It was more than the friendship, or the larger world… far more. He couldn’t understand what it was, but he needed this man.

He’d stay beside him.

They stayed that way until the train was pronounced as being ready for boarding. Only then did their hands separate in their unique fashion, and Roy offered a hopeful smile as he stood up from the bench, Edward having floated up with him.

“Ready to go home?” Roy asked, carding nervous fingers back through his hair in a manner he would have been irritated to know looked far shyer than a man of his reputation should be capable of.
Edward smiled back at him, gradually breaking into a grin. “You know you’d never survive without me.” And he quickly followed after the man, noticing that Roy didn’t seem to care whether or not anyone had seen him presumably talking to himself.

Even so, he decided to stay quiet until they boarded the train and were effectively sectioned off in a military private car.

He settled onto the bench seat across from Roy, watching as the man stowed his suitcase on the overhead rack before he spoke. “Will you tell me about it?” He asked, taking note of the subtle twitch that had run through Roy’s turned frame.

Roy pivoted to face Edward, and remained standing several more seconds saying nothing before he finally did sit. And only when the train whistle blew, signaling the impending departure, did he give an answer. “Why is it you aren’t mad at me anymore? You were so angry when you left.”

“Because I thought about it.” Edward replied carefully. “I told you I had left because I needed some time to think, although I admit I was angry. I realized something though, when I was thinking… her parents, they’re the ones whose deaths you lose sleep over. The ones that made you who you are now, have some of the goals that you have now. They’re the ones, aren’t they?”

Roy nodded, and warred heavily with himself about what was on his mind, before he plunged on regardless. Hoping Edward would not be too mad at him for what he was about to say. “And I very nearly killed myself afterwards.”

Edward’s eyes narrowed, “I hope I don’t need to tell you how stupid that is. You’re doing them far better justice still living and working towards what you are, than you would have been if you’d killed yourself in some easy way out.”

“I haven’t contemplated suicide for a very long time now.” Roy smiled half-heartedly.

“It’s like I told you that night…” Edward recalled distantly as he studied Roy. “Death isn’t so bad. Their deaths helped make you who you are now, and who you are now... I knew them as a kid, they’d be proud of what you’ve done with yourself.”

Roy was trying to accept that as the truth, it seemed as if it would be easy to do when you were being told by a ghost that it was okay. Yet much like how he still couldn’t accept that he might be creating more than hellfire, he still couldn’t quite accept that he’d been forgiven for what he’d done.

He’d never forgiven himself… and perhaps therein lay the main blockage to setting himself free.

Yet he didn’t mention any of that, instead lowering his gaze to the floor of the train as it lurched forward towards Central. “I was ordered to kill them, which you already knew. The orders came from Basque Grand during the war in Ishval. Winry’s parents had been helping any who were injured, regardless of which side the injured might have claimed as their own. When the Military asked them to desist, they refused.”

He took a slow breath before shaking his head bitterly. “I was ordered to kill them. And I did. Only later to want to turn the gun on myself. Killing them... they were my proverbial last straw, I couldn’t take anymore. I couldn’t take anymore of obeying orders that were wrong. It was as if I’d been walking around with blinders before the war, and every little thing that was inherently wrong with the way the so-called enemies were being killed was making me open my eyes for the first time.”

Edward was silent long after Roy had fallen into his own silence. He sat there, just watching as Roy stared blankly at the floor. Seeing the tenseness in the man’s shoulders. “Roy, I want you to listen to
me.” He requested, suddenly breaking their silence. And as dark eyes look up at him, he continued.
“I realize this may be difficult for you to understand at first, but at least hear me out. When I died, it
was to save my brother, and to this day I have no regrets. If Winry’s parents died, only to make you
become someone who could right the wrong paths this country has taken, then don’t you think that
they have no regrets either?”

“But I murdered them!” Roy burst out before he could have attempted to control himself, and had
nearly launched out of his seat in the process.

“Technically,” Edward replied softly, “I was murdered too.”

The words hit Roy like a splash of ice water, and he sank back against his seat heavily. It was true…
Edward had been murdered by that Gate, whatever its full purpose was, it had torn Edward apart.
Even if Edward had been pleading for his brother to be spared harm, and to be punished instead,
Edward hadn’t known he would die. “And death isn’t bad… so you’ve told me.”

“No.” Edward answered in a whisper, directing his gaze out towards the window, even though at
present he could see nothing but whiteness – for Roy was not looking with him and they must have
been on the opposite side of the train coming to Risembool. “I never felt at peace so much as I did
when I died. There were times I longed to feel that serenity again, but still exist.”

“Do you still?”

Edward smiled faintly, not shifting his attention from the window and the perpetual whiteness
beyond it. “For what reason, when I now have you?” And then he laughed quietly, not seeing Roy’s
shocked look as he added. “This is far better than being alone. Peace after pain, and peace with
happiness are two different things.”

Roy felt himself flush slightly as he too glanced to the window now. “I’m not sure that living with
me could ever be termed a life of peace.”

“But it’s still what I want.” Edward smiled, as the trees beyond the window burst into view before
his eyes, breaking out of the whiteness that was his world without Roy. “There’s peace enough.”

“I’m sorry I spoiled you being able to see Winry more.” Roy said in a quiet voice. “I had wanted to
keep you from knowing, but I guess you know me better than I had foolishly wanted to believe. You
saw right through me.”

Edward turned away from the window then, and on an impulse decision left his seat in order to flop
down next to Roy and command the man’s full attention. “Don’t be sorry, buy me something.” He
joked, then turned serious. “I’m glad you couldn’t hide it from me. It was a shock, figuring it out like
that, but I’m glad I know now. It doesn’t make me hate you, Roy. If anything, it makes me dislike
even more the one who gave you those orders. He’s the one truly responsible.”

“Basque Grand.”

“Yes.” Edward agreed bitterly. “And one day we’ll make sure he meets a fitting end for all the
crimes he is still committing.”

Roy nodded, they would. Together. He knew without a doubt that Edward wouldn’t let him have all
the pleasure of ridding the country of that monster, and he looked back out the window of the train
with a determined expression underpinned with his lingering relief. “Think Hazel destroyed the
house yet?”
Chapter Twenty-Seven

It was past the fall of darkness when Roy and Edward laid eyes on home again. The sight of it coming as a welcome relief to them both. Not that they regretted the trip they’d taken, not at all! In different ways, they’d both come away from it with closure and a strange sense of peace.

But coming back to the place they both called home, and now knowing with absolute certainty that they both wanted it to stay this way, had its own calling of relief.

As Roy busied himself with opening the fence gate, Edward shot ahead with a grin. “Time to go see the damage so I know whether or not to go out for the night!”

Roy snorted in laughter, shaking his head as he closed the gate behind him. He didn’t bother with an answer as he watched Edward dive his way through the door. He knew the ghost wouldn’t really go off anywhere, although he had the suspicion that if the house was destroyed, Edward wouldn’t easily be tempted into helping him clean it up.

Reaching the front door he fished out his keys to let himself in, and once he’d stepped inside and closed the door behind him, Roy looked around for Edward. “Ed?”

The lights were switched on in the area of the kitchen in answer, and so Roy lost no time in making his way in that direction.

What he found, made him stop dead in his tracks as he stared.

Every single chair had been toppled over. Several canisters of food that had been being stored on the countertops were either rolled onto their sides, or rolled onto the floor. The dishrag and hand towel both appeared to have ended up over the hanging light fixture, how, Roy couldn’t even fathom. The box he stored the cheddar crackers in had been raided, judging by all the crumbs littering the stove around it. And the roll of paper towels had been strewn all about the entirety of the chaotic mess, draped over the whole of it like a ribbon and bow over a coronary-inducing gift.

“You sure it’s a squirrel you have?” Edward asked weakly as he floated over to hover at Roy’s side.


Edward knew that Roy wasn’t being serious, but it didn’t stop him from letting out a noise of protest. “It surely can’t be that bad… he must have gotten tired after this.”

“The rest of the house.” Roy suddenly realized, and before Edward could even keep up, he’d whirled around to hurry into the living room, flipping on the lights there. “Holy… shit.”

Edward quickly darted over to Roy’s side in order to see, and as his eyes landed on this next scene, he began to fear what would have happened if they’d been gone any longer than they had.

It appeared as though someone had released a train into the living room and attempted to drive it in a circle. The majority of the books had been dumped from their shelves. The couch and chair cushions had been laid askew, if not removed entirely. The pictures were hanging crooked on their hooks. The table lamps were on their sides, or close to tipping over onto the floor. And the boxes that Roy still hadn’t removed to the trash after unpacking had been shredded and dispersed over everything.
The only thing miraculously not somehow involved in the disaster zone was the case that held all of Roy’s glass sculptures that he’d created.

“We need to find a pet sitter.” Edward finally noted as he looked around at the disarray of the room, and watched as Roy went over to at least rescue one of the lamps that was close to tipping.

“Maes won’t take him for a reason.” Roy replied, and considered giving Edward his gloves to hold onto. The only thing keeping him from not flipping out entirely was the fact that he had come home to this sort of thing before, if not worse at times.

“Will Hawkeye?”

“I don’t want Hazel killed!” Roy exclaimed, knowing far too well how intolerant that woman was of anything out of proper behavior.

“Just road kill?” Edward reminded him with a smile.

Roy drug a hand back through his hair in a harassed gesture. “Yeah. And he’s sort of a one-person squirrel. Well,” he looked over at Edward, “one-ghost squirrel too. He’ll behave if I don’t leave him alone. But he knows what a suitcase means, unfortunately. But he won’t behave for anyone else.”

Edward looked around at the disaster that had befallen their home, and had to agree, Hazel certainly knew what a suitcase meant. “You should invest in a cage for him.”

Roy glanced back out towards the hallway. “Come on, let’s go see what else was destroyed before I decide what sort of house of horrors cage I’ll stick the furry tyrant in.”

“I think he turned your house into a house of horrors.” Edward muttered as he watched Roy step over a couch cushion in order to move out towards the hallway, following after him shortly.

“Our house.” Roy corrected idly as he began to make his way around the stairs so he could head for the laundry room. Knowing it was the only remaining area where Hazel could have gotten into mischief. He’d been able to seal off and secure every other section of the house.

Edward smirked at the correction, despite the warm feeling that came over him. “Your house when it’s a mess.”

The laundry room by far could have been worse. If not for the squirrel-proofed bin that the furry rodent’s toys were kept in, no doubt they too would have been reassembled. Yet even with that small shred of fortune on the horizon, the rest of the laundry room had not been spared what Hazel could devise.

The clothes that had been in the hamper, needing to be washed, were now decorating the floor. Some of which were pulled almost entirely behind the washer and dryer. The box of fabric softener had been upended, with many of the fibrous sheets missing to be found only Hazel knew where. And in the direct center of the towels that Roy had neatly folded, and shockingly most of which were still folded, was Hazel.

The squirrel was utterly fast asleep. No doubt exhausted with his destructive habits to ensure that his owner knew his malcontent at being left alone, displaced by a mere suitcase. He was curled happily among the towels, fluffy tail wrapped around his head and over his body. Completely unsuspecting that his owner was bearing down upon him.

As soon as Roy was in range, he snatched his furry menace of a pet by the scruff of the neck, ignoring the startled and somewhat sleepy squeak he got in protest. “Hazel,” he growled, as the
squirrel went completely still with wide-eyes upon realizing just who had a hold of him. “So help me, I should have left you in the gutter in which I found you.”

Hazel immediately began to chatter demurely, holding up his paws towards his owner in want of forgiveness.

“Oh no,” Roy argued against the look his pet was pleading to him with, “you’re not acting near cute enough yet for me to forgive you.”

Edward, knowing Hazel was hardly in any danger, could only float nearby in observation as he tried not to let slip any laughter through his amused smile. It never got old, seeing how much Roy truly cherished his pet, even as he tried to be angry with it. And Hazel was just as bad.

Roy harrumphed over Hazel’s ‘I thought you loved me’ look and now miserable vocalizations as he plopped his pet down onto the washer lid. “Shoo!”

Hazel scrambled frantically off the lid, leaping down onto the hazardous floor in order to bound away in a slinking, guilt-ridden fashion.

“That wasn’t nice.” Edward chided, his humor beginning to slip into his tone.

Roy shot the ghost a scowl. “We’ll have made up by dinnertime. Curse it.”

Edward laughed, not wanting to miss this make up session between the two. It was bound to be priceless.

And with that, Roy began to get to work in cleaning up the mess. Grabbing the strewn clothes and tossing them back into the hamper as Edward took up sitting in the pile of folded towels atop the dryer.

“You could help, you know.” Roy leered up at the ghost as he bent over to rescue socks out from behind the washing machine. “You can get to some of this stuff easier than me.”

“I could, and I can,” Edward agreed with a wicked grin, “but I’m enjoying watching you more.”

Roy pelted the ghost with a sock he knew he’d have to go get for the second time, but he didn’t care. It had felt good. “I’m only entertainment to you now, is that it?” He grumbled as he continued refilling the hamper.

Edward merely grinned wider in answer, and Roy shook his head with muttered words.

From the laundry room to the kitchen, Edward trailed after Roy to watch as the man busied himself with putting their home back in order. It was clear as Roy fell into a rhythm that this was definitely not the first time he’d had to clean something like this up. And the man was making short, quick work of it.

By the time he was ready to move on into the living room, it was well after nightfall. His stomach was almost ready to complain loudly of hunger, believing he’d not noticed it yet. And Edward had taken to sitting up on one of the bookshelves to peer down at Roy as the man worked on sticking all his books back onto their proper shelves.

Mostly they’d been in a comfortable shared silence. Roy working, Edward watching. Although Roy had taken several opportunities to try and guilt his ghostly companion into assisting him. It hadn’t panned out.
Edward remained near Roy’s side, just observing, until he heard the man’s stomach complain noisily.

Roy noticed Edward vanish through the wall, but he didn’t think much of it as he turned to fixing all the cushions. He suspected the ghost had finally gotten bored of watching him and gone off to try and find wherever Hazel had taken to pouting.

And finally he was to the last project. Then his house would finally be clean again. And he sat down on the floor, picking up the shredded bits of cardboard and stuffing them into a trash bag. Still not having seen Edward since he’d left through the wall, nor Hazel.

It was Hazel who made the first reappearance.

The squirrel scampered slowly into the living room, meek hesitation in his every movement as he began to cautiously make his way over to where his owner was cleaning up the cardboard. And about to go around to try and plead forgiveness again, Hazel paused, sitting back on his haunches a moment as he observed with a twitching tail. After a moment he went back on all fours, and picking up a piece of the shredded cardboard in his teeth he padded up to his owner’s side.

Roy abruptly looked down at the feel of two tiny paws on his leg, and as Hazel offered the bit of cardboard up to him, he couldn’t help but smile in defeat. “Thank you.” He murmured as he reached down to take the cardboard from his pet, letting his hand stroke over the furred head in reassurance.

Hazel fairly purred at the touch, and happily he crawled up onto his owner’s lap to place his front paws on Roy’s chest and nuzzle into him.

Roy smiled, cursing himself for being too easy and soft on Hazel as he continued to pet the happy squirrel. “Death of my reputation…” he said softly as he rubbed Hazel’s head when it was shoved roughly into his hand in demand of petting.

Edward had come to lean back against the frame of the entryway, smiling at the sight the two of them made as he balanced a plate of food in his hands. “What I’d give for a camera.”

Roy didn’t cease in his petting of Hazel, who was still snuggling into him as the bushy tail twitched in happiness. Only sent Edward a faux dirty look that was soon overtaken by his curiosity as he saw what Edward was holding. “What have you been up to? I thought you were with Hazel.”

Edward flashed a quick grin before floating down to the floor to walk over to them, kneeling down at Roy’s side as he offered out the plate. “My own peace offering, for not helping you.”

Roy tilted his head slightly as he looked with some measure of puzzled awe at the dinner Edward had made. The ghost had apparently raided part of his beef tenderloin, and it was now sliced and sauced while nearby rested a small mountain of roasted and generously seasoned red potato wedges. “You made this?”

Edward was beaming as Roy took the plate off his hands, looking miffed, yet near to salivating at the same time. “Yeah.”

“You made this.” Roy raised the plate up high out of Hazel’s reach as the squirrel abandoned his snuggling in order to try and make a swipe for a potato wedge.

“What, you think I can order out at a restaurant?” Edward laughed at the man, offering him a fork and knife as well. “Of course I made it.”

Roy took the utensils as he looked at Edward in growing amazement. “What is the sauce, exactly?” He asked, ignoring Hazel scrambling up to his shoulder where the squirrel apparently thought he’d
be able to reach the food on its way to Roy’s mouth.

Edward chuckled as he reached over to pluck a potato off the plate, leaning around Roy to offer it to Hazel who immediately snatched onto it gleefully before proceeding to gnaw into it with gusto. “Red wine and chopped mushroom.” He revealed, smiling as he met Roy’s gaze.

“I’ll be damned…” Roy muttered, and never taking his eyes off the silver ones, he cut into the beef and liberally dabbed it in the sauce before lifting it to his mouth. It had barely touched his tongue before the tender meat fairly melted on his tongue, the sauce only making the experience the more enjoyable as he groaned his approval.

Edward’s smile was bright as he waited for Roy’s critique raptly. “Is it really that good? You’re not just humoring me?”

“I hope you don’t expect me to pet you, but damn,” Roy acclaimed, “you’ve earned my forgiveness too.”

Edward laughed, feeling a flash of pride burn inside him as he reveled that he’d done it right. “Just watching you eat it is reward enough.” He replied as he settled down on his side in front of Roy, propped up by his elbow, just watching him eat with a content feeling deep inside him.

Roy ate his dinner, feeling oddly at home with Edward laid out on the floor before him, Hazel stealing his food whenever he was too focused on gazing back at Edward to evade the snatching paws, and a slight remaining disarray of Hazel-created chaos around them all.

Later that night, long after the house had been put back in order and dinner had been finished, Roy was alone in his bedroom getting changed into his pajama bottoms before he called out the all-clear to Edward. And after he’d done so, he set his suitcase up on the bed. He’d unpack after he let Edward in… but for now, he carefully took the one thing he didn’t want Edward to see out from its hidden location in his dirty clothes.

The picture of Edward he’d swiped.

Holding it in his hand he looked down at it a long moment before faintly smiling. “You’d kill me if you knew I had this.” He spoke to the face smiling up at him from the old photograph.

And he walked over to his bedside table to slip it in the drawer, as far back as he could get it, underneath a box of condoms. He knew Edward sure as hell wouldn’t be going anywhere near that box, the pilfered photograph would be safe.

He eventually let Edward in the bedroom, and as the ghost flopped down onto the bed, he worked on unpacking his suitcase before shoving it away for the next time he’d need it. He crawled into bed shortly after, collapsing down with a grateful groan as he turned off the lights.

It had been a damn long day, for them both. And even if one of them was incapable of sleep, they were both grateful for the time to unwind before they dove headfirst back into another week at Headquarters.

They both left to arrive early as usual, and upon reaching the high walls of Headquarters, they were greeted with a sight that made Roy pause to curse under his breath before shaking it off.

“What is all this?” Edward asked, floating down to stand at Roy’s side.

Roy looked around at the gathering herd of civilians in the courtyard before the main building, all trying to exude airs of imperious confidence, before looking over at Edward to mutter. “The State
Alchemist certification exams.”

And abruptly, Edward remembered. “Grand invited you, didn’t he? To help proctor them, or whatever?”

“Proctoring is not what I’m there for.” Roy answered, and muttered a quick, “come on.”

Roy headed them around towards the side of the main building, and through a side entrance of a rarely used hallway. And once there he locked that door from the inside in order to lean back against the wall and meet Edward’s silver eyes. “Whenever I’m in Central during the time of the exams, I’ve been asked to be there. As nothing more than something to show off.”

“Because you’re a war hero?” Edward surmised as he leaned against the wall opposite.

“And as you so aptly put it yesterday, I’m famous.” Roy added grudgingly. Not at all convinced he deserved the honors thrust upon him. Not after what he’d done to ruin so many lives. “I’d happily forgotten that the exams started today…”

Edward frowned as Roy trailed off, “I know you don’t want to be shown off like a trophy, but this could be good for you. A chance to see me toss something else on Grand.”

Roy had to smile at that, even just a little. “I doubt you’ll find a suitable opportunity for damaging him these next three days. But if this will be good for me in any way, it’ll be in making sure that the Fuhrer sees my face again since I’ve gotten here.”

“But isn’t he like Grand in a way? Won’t you have to get rid of him to become Fuhrer yourself? It’s not like I can picture anyone just happily giving you the post to go into retirement. That’s never been the history of the country before.”

“Yes.” Roy agreed with a quiet severity, “eventually I will have to kill him as well to give myself that final promotion.”

Edward slowly nodded, knowing it was the only way. And he knew he’d stand beside Roy and support him through it all… even if no one else knew he was there doing so. “So what do we do now? I’m assuming we’re not going to the office at all today?”

“No.” Roy answered, and then he smiled. “But considering I’ll be busy with other duties these next three days, my usual paperwork will have been shunted off to other qualified officers. So as soon as I’m done we can go home early if you like.”

“Yes!” Edward exclaimed eagerly. “You can show me around more, and I can practice riding that bike, and…” he trailed off then, his joyful expression falling for a split second before he pulled himself back together to smile brightly at Roy. “And then you can go have fun tonight.”

Roy could admit to being caught off guard. Edward didn’t think that any of that qualified as fun for him? And he couldn’t curb his baffled look as he straightened up from the wall. “What do you mean? I always have fun when I’m with you.”

Edward wanted to hesitate, but he knew Roy would see the hesitation, so he plunged on without heed to how his own words made him feel. “I meant your manwhoring. You’ve spent three whole days with me, and those nights as well because of our weekend trip. I know I’m on an every-other-day sort of schedule. So you’re overdue to go have some fun.”

“Oh.” So that was it. Roy looked away a moment, making himself remember. He’d had every intention to go home with Edward tonight, and stay home. And he would have felt confused, with
Edward telling him this, if he didn’t already know that the silvery apparition didn’t truly mean his words. Edward was only reacting to what had already been established as customary, and trying not to monopolize his time.

And yet… he’d had every intention to go home with Edward tonight. “You see… the thing is?” He began with a small smile as he walked over to stand before the ghost. “I’ve got this huge cake still waiting for me at home that I don’t want to go to waste. So I do think I’d better come home for dinner tonight, and dessert,” and his smile vanished into a serene expression as he ended, “and your company.”

Edward’s eyes widened fleetingly, before his earlier joy suddenly returned in a heady rush. “Really?!”

“Yeah,” Roy smiled then, “really. So let’s go get today over with so we can have some fun.”

So they made their way down the hallways, adeptly avoiding any possibility of running into the newest batch of hopefuls, and eventually to a rather large amphitheater styled room. It was missing about half the required seats to be a proper amphitheater, and was enclosed by a dome roof, but it was large. And in a way, intimidating.

Edward supposed that the military didn’t want to make this an easy exam to pass in any manner.

Near the center of the open floor, but back nearer towards the plain wall, was a large raised grey marble platform of about five inches high. A generously sized wooden table with three chairs was placed at its center, looking out towards where the examinees would be seated. And behind the whole setup two bold Amestrian flags were hung. As if anyone could forget which countries military they were trying to join.

“Is this the same as how you took it?” Edward asked as he looked around, and up to the sections of benches and their desks, waiting to be filled with examinees.

Roy too looked around at the so-far empty room. “Yeah. Had no idea what I was getting into, either. I had all these dreams of it being some surreal fantasy I would live in. Reality turned out to be quite different.”

Edward looked over at the darkly-pensive looking man, “it always does.”

Roy glanced over at the spirit, and found himself slipping into a smile. Their weekend still fresh in his mind. “Even so… at least reality includes this for us.”

Edward smiled cheerfully back at him. “So when does this circus start? Who all are we waiting for besides the Fuhrer and Grand?”

“General Hakuro and whatever other random poor State Alchemist besides myself that gets dragged into this.” Roy answered, his eyes briefly flicking over to the table. “By the way, Grand will be sitting in the chair to the Fuhrer’s right. In case you’re interested.”

“You don’t include Grand in with the poor State Alchemists?” Edward asked, already gleefully moving to sabotage the general’s intended chair in some fashion. The sadistic man deserved it after everything he’d done, and was doing.

Roy wandered over to take a seat on one of the tables the examinees would be working on, watching the ghost as he worked. “He’s not worthy to be an alchemist. But I don’t intend to forget that he is one when it comes down to a fight between us.”
And Edward finished rigging the chair in whatever fashion he thought would most likely dump Grand to the floor… and promptly rigged the other two as well. Just to take any potential suspicion off of Roy. If all of the chairs seemed faulty at a place like this, then it would more easily be taken as coincidence.

And around the time that he had finished unseen, a man Roy greeted as General Hakuro, another State Alchemist who dared not approach Roy given the dark forbidding look that was turned on him, and then General Grand all walked in.

“Ah, Mustang, glad you could make it.” General Grand greeted with some degree of calculation as he made his way over to the platform as regally as he could manage, ignoring Hakuro and the other alchemist as he did so.

Roy was pleased to see that the General was trying to cover up a limp. Fractured patella if he remembered right… the man was probably sporting a hell of a knee brace underneath the loose uniform pants. The fractured cheekbone on the other hand seemed to have swollen nicely, and taken on the bruising the man’s purported black eye had already lost.

“Yes.” Roy merely replied, and added with silky smile, “you had a good idea. There really should be a State Alchemist of caliber here, I’m happy to represent the State.”

Edward’s jaw almost dropped at the thinly veiled insult, but as it was, he was grinning too much.

General Hakuro was hiding a smile from his chair, not about to call the Colonel out on a lack of respect. And the other State Alchemist was merely looking surly, making it hard to tell if he’d even heard or was just stewing over the black look the famed war hero had recently given him.

General Grand on the other hand had paused, and turned a calculating look on the man, not entirely sure yet if Mustang had meant it that way. But he didn’t have time to formulate a response of any sort as the doors at the top of the amphitheater swung wide, admitting the military officers who’d be serving as proctors for the exam, and the examinees.

Roy merely followed General Grand up onto the platform, taking his place near the fore and to the right-hand side of the Grand as he watched the hopefuls file in. Being sure to take a good, careful look at each one. After all, these were his new potential victims when they tried to prove themselves by attempting to outwit him in an alchemy fight.

It wasn’t a matter of ‘if’, but ‘when’.

When everyone was seated and ready to begin, the proctors took up their places at the rear of the rows of seats. There was a strictly maintained policy regarding any form of cheating or attempts at such, and they were more than ready to throw anyone suspicious out those double doors without inquiry.

Yet the exams were not passed out as of yet, the company was still short one person, and several minutes later, the Fuhrer walked in.

Edward didn’t even pay notice to Roy’s sickening show of submission, even though he was aware of it at the edge of his mind and it caused him to shudder. In his mind, Roy owed deference to no one. It was they who owed it to him. Yet still, his main attention was for the Fuhrer, taking stock of his eventual second victim once Grand was out of the picture.

Eye patched and stuffed crisply into full uniform, the Fuhrer was a darker skinned man than Roy, but still lighter than Grand. He looked about the same age as the General, leading Edward to confirm that
there was no way short of killing the Fuhrer that Roy would get his intended position as leader of the
country.

And as the Fuhrer made his way around to his chair sat imposingly at the center of the table, he took
a moment to look at General Grand in an assessing, unimpressed manner. Before saying quietly, so
no one beyond the platform would hear, “try to sit in your chair carefully, General, if much more of
you gets broken by furniture you won’t be much use anymore as anything but a field officer.”

Edward burst out into prideful laughter, catching the amused look Roy sent his way out of the corner
of the man’s eye. And he settled his laughter with a grin. “We’ll make sure that the next major career
choice he’s given is one sending him to an undertaker.”

Roy knew how very true that was… but didn’t waste time to wonder if it was fair that it was two
against one. General Grand wasn’t a man that deserved ‘fair’.

Shortly thereafter the Fuhrer’s warning to Grand, the exam began after a short speech and a
whacking of a gavel. Causing Edward to wonder how hard it would be to get that gavel to whack
onto Grand’s hand in some plausible manner.

In his theorizing he floated around over towards the table, coming in around in front of the Fuhrer,
ignoring him in favor of leaning over the table in inspect the gavel. Perhaps it could be “knocked”
from the table when all the chairs eventually collapsed? It would take only a bit of his help to make
sure the heavy wooden object landed on some fragile part of General Grand.

Brow still slightly furrowed in thought, he began to draw away from the table, as he did so looking
up at the Fuhrer who happened to be staring through him at the examinees.

The next thing Roy heard, was an inhuman scream.

Edward collapsed out of the air, connecting with the ground as pain – pain as he knew pain – shot
through his body. Pain that wasn’t going away as he continued to cry out, his body quaking, that
horrible Gate flashing before his eyes intermixed with a symbol glowing red that he didn’t
understand. He didn’t want to. All he wanted was to escape it.

So he fled, barely able to keep himself in a hover as he darted for the nearest wall, falling through it.
In doing so, causing the pain to leave him, but he fled even further. Fear of that damnable Gate and
not understanding what had happened to cause him to see it driving him back to Roy’s office where
he felt the safest.

And he collapsed into Roy’s chair, eyes wide and arms wrapped around himself as he trembled
violently.

Meanwhile Roy was standing frozen, still in the amphitheater, panic coursing through him even as he
tried to force himself to stand where he was and not move. Everything inside him screamed to go
after the ghost, but he knew he couldn’t. They’d have him locked up in the insanity ward for
suddenly having a “meltdown” and running out of here, long before he could even get to Edward.
Potential excuses he could make for leaving kept rising to his mind, but he fought them down. He
had to trust that Edward would be okay for another hour until he could get to the ghost.

The last times Edward had acted similarly in pain the ghost had been fine… he had to hope this was
similar.

And he knew Edward would have wanted him to stay. Even if he felt horrible for forcing himself to
do so.
So caught up in his internal panic, that he didn’t notice that the Fuhrer seemed to have come upon a short-lived migraine only approximately a minute ago that was now fading much to General Hakuro’s relief.

He couldn’t even find it in himself to feel amused when all at once the three chairs at the table collapsed, sending the Generals and the Fuhrer sprawling with startled yells, causing the examinees to look on with wide, if not somewhat amused eyes.

In fact, the only time he showed any sort of life or knowledge of what was going on around him was when the exam time was concluded, and they were all dismissed once the Fuhrer had left. He managed to walk steadily to the nearest door, but upon closing it behind him, he raced down the hallways to find Edward.

Having a fairly good idea of where the ghost would have gone to.

So he pelted up to his office, not bothering to greet any of his startled staff, only slamming the door shut behind him and locking it securely.

Roy couldn’t breathe in relief yet, even as he saw he’d been right. For he was still filled with fearful concern for his companion as he saw Edward shaking like a leaf there in the armchair behind the desk. “Ed?” He asked, making it to the ghost’s side in record time.

Edward looked down at Roy as the man spun the chair around to kneel before him in worry. “Roy.” His voice trembled along with his body as he continued to shake. “The exam’s over?”

“For today.” Roy replied, reaching a hand up to brush it through the silver hair he could never feel, never move. “Are you still hurting?”

Edward shook his head, before floating down through the chair to settle himself through Roy’s legs. “I don’t know what happened. I’m sorry.”

Roy frowned, eyes filled with concern as he wrapped his arms around Edward’s waist as best he could, considering he couldn’t touch the ghost anyway. But it looked right to his eyes. Edward was there, even if he couldn’t feel him. “Don’t be sorry.” He chastised fondly. “What did happen, just pain?”

“When I looked up at the Fuhrer, I was inspecting that gavel for, well, it’s not important anymore.” Edward murmured as he relaxed into having Roy close, it never failed to make him feel safer. “But when I looked at him there was just pain. Like I was being ripped apart… like before.”

Roy knew that Edward was referring to the night they’d gotten the ghost free of the office. But what about the Fuhrer could possibly cause Edward pain like before? Pain indirectly related to that Gate. It was unsettling to him, but he tried not to let on about it as he worked on comforting the still-shaking ghost. “Anything else?”

“Paper.” Edward suddenly said, “I need paper. And a pen.”

Roy nodded, ignoring the knocking on his door in order to pull down a piece of paper from his desk, jiggling out a pen from one drawer, never once taking his other arm away from around Edward as he passed down the requested items.

Edward immediately started to begin drawing. Penning out the strange, unfamiliar symbol he’d sporadically seen between flashes of the Gate. He was aware of Roy watching him, but didn’t let it distract him from his concentration. And when he’d finally finished, he held it more at an angle for Roy to see easily. “Have you ever seen this before?”
Roy took up the paper, looking at it carefully. Aware somewhere in the back of his mind that it should be familiar to him. He’d seen it once before… a very long time ago. And he tilted his head as he considered the winged serpent looking beast, curled around a star-fashioned marking. “Once… I can’t remember where though.” He admitted in a bothered tone, looking away from the paper to meet Edward’s silvery gaze. “What is it?”

Edward looked down at it in hesitation, slowly shaking his head back and forth. “I don’t know.” He answered softly, “but I kept seeing it. Mostly I saw the Gate again, but it kept being disrupted by this.” And he looked up at Roy worriedly. “How can I not know? And why did this happen when I looked at the Fuhrer? He couldn’t even see me.”

“I don’t know.” Roy echoed, looking down at the drawing again. “I really don’t… but I think that for now it’d be best to keep you away from him. Until we figure out what this symbol is.” And he studied it closely, distantly knowing somehow that it should be colored red, and not the black Edward had penned it in. “But if I ran across it once before, I’ll surely do so again.”

“I know this may seem redundant, considering my actions towards Grand,” Edward whispered, following Roy’s gaze to the penned drawing he’d created, “but that Fuhrer… be careful, Roy. I can’t help but feel after today that he’s dangerous. Maybe more dangerous than Grand.”

Roy nodded, “so am I.” He replied as he laid the drawing on the floor to bring his arm back around the ghost’s waist. “So am I.”

Edward smiled at him faintly, letting out a heavy breath that felt as if he’d been carrying it since he’d fled. And he relaxed into the thought of Roy doing his best to mime holding him with a faint smile. “To think I once told you to be careful about passing through me.”

“Technically,” Roy smiled as he tilted his head around to catch Edward’s eyes, “you passed through me. But then, we’ve come a long way since that day.”

Edward nodded, feeling the last of the trembles leave his body as he contented himself to be there with Roy as the door was repeatedly knocked on and ignored. Instead he graced Roy with a peaceful smile. “Thank you, for coming after me.”
Chapter 28

The following morning, Edward was understandably a bit nervous to go to Headquarters with Roy, but even his nerves were not enough to make him do anything but decline Roy’s suggestion that he might stay home for the few short hours Roy would be gone.

He wasn’t sure what had happened yesterday with the Fuhrer, but he wouldn’t let it stop him from staying with Roy.

“It’s really strange though,” Roy said, out of the blue as they made their way across one of the parks, empty aside from them and a slight rising of mist this early in the morning. “You’d looked at him before, hadn’t you? And you must have passed by his line of sight before you even got near that table. So why did you have a reaction so delayed?”

Edward had wondered the same thing more than once that night, as he watched Roy sleep. And looking over at the man, who was taking a very preoccupied looking drink from his coffee mug, said, “I don’t know. But I plan to avoid his front until I do know, at least even a little bit more.” Adding in a whisper directed at the grass, “that sort of pain… experiencing it once was enough, but twice nearly unbearable.”

“You were shaking pretty bad this last time.” Roy noted, giving the apparition a careful once over with his eyes. He’d been worried as covertly as he could be about the ghost ever since yesterday’s episode. Even to the point where he almost believed he wouldn’t sleep. And though he hadn’t gotten what he’d term restful sleep, at least he had slept.

Edward gave him a morose look, “I’m not much of a ghost, am I. I’ve felt pain before, but when that pain, and that Gate...” he trailed off momentarily, seeming more distraught than before. “The two in combination scare me.”

“And then whatever that symbol was.” Roy mused, even as he looked around at the drooping ghost as they walked. “Hey,” he soothed his companion, “it’ll be okay. We’ll figure out that symbol, find a way to avoid it happening again. It’s what we did the last time.” And he smiled bracingly as Edward looked over at him. “And you’re the best ghost I know.”

“I’m the only ghost you know.” Edward corrected, though he had to smile at the gesture.

Roy looked away, still smiling as he led them along. “Which still makes you the best. And it’s not like I take just anyone home with me to stay.”

“No.” Edward agreed with the beginnings of a laugh. “I know that. Your fear that anyone else might see your manly pet.”

“Steal.” Roy grumbled. “And like I’ve said, it takes a real man to own a squirrel. You know you’d be sad if Hazel got stolen, you two get along well.”

It did the trick, that not quite subtle segue both of them had taken in order to lighten the mood. So while their walk to Headquarters was still one walked in nervousness, it wasn’t so prominent in their minds.

Upon reaching their destination, Roy led them to a different area entirely.
“The paper exams are over.” Roy explained as he let them inside and found the room still empty and dark. Which would be how it remained for the most part anyway. “Now it’s more of an interview session. I never really understood why they bother.”

“People lie?” Edward guessed as he followed Roy deeper into the fairly small room – compared to the amphitheater of before.

“Undoubtedly.” Roy smirked, “although I can honestly say that the answers I gave were truthful. At that time in my life I wanted to serve the country as nothing more than a blind hound, thinking my superiors had their acts together.”

Edward tilted his head as he floated over to consider a strange golden stool, all sinewy curves of metal bars, with three legs placed so closely together he had to wonder as to the sanity of whoever had built it. Yet what puzzled him the most was that it seemed to be standing on its own, despite its clearly flawed design. “So you’d lie now, if you were asked them again?”

Roy smiled as he watched Edward poke at the stool, clearly puzzled by it. The ghost had taken to jabbing at the top of the back of the stool with increasing pressure to make it wobble on its base. “I would.” He answered, before walking closer. “It’s a special sort of stool, I never really have understood it myself, but apparently if you’re meant for alchemy, it won’t fall when you sit on it.”

“Have you ever seen anyone fall?” Edward wondered as he stopped poking at it, and instead floated around to straddle the stool facing toward its back and leaning his arms on the top as he peered at Roy.

Roy snorted, “of course not. I’m under the impression it’s under some sort of strong magnetic pressure that causes it to stabilize.” And he walked over to stand next to the silvery apparition. “You think they’d limit their potential numbers through a funky stool? That’s what they have the paper and the practical exam for. This is just to try and intimidate and drive away the less sure candidates. See if they can handle being directly addressed, alone, by superiors. You’d be surprised how many cave.”

Edward chuckled, he could understand that. “I doubt I’d cave, even being interrogated by you.”

Roy rolled his eyes, smiling despite himself. “Well of course you wouldn’t now. We do live together. I’d hope you aren’t intimidated by me.” But he could bet that it wouldn’t have mattered… Edward wasn’t the type to be easily scared off by anything.

Edward smiled back at him, before looking down to the floor with a small sigh. “Where should I wait for you?” He asked, keeping with Roy’s decision yesterday to keep him away from the Fuhrer until they had a better idea of what had happened.

“Wherever you feel the most comfortable.” Roy told him gently, “even if that means you feel most comfortable waiting outside and harassing the candidates while they wait their turn to be called in.”

An appreciative laugh escaped briefly from Edward, and he turned shining silver eyes up onto Roy. “You aren’t worried it will affect their meaningless interview?”

“Why would I be worried?” Roy asked as he looked fondly down at the spirit. “I don’t care about them, I’ve never even met them. But I care about you.”

Edward inexplicably found himself at a loss for words, and for what felt eternity he could only look up at Roy as happiness filled him. Somehow, it seemed different than how Roy usually said such things to him, something in the way he’d said them, and the way Roy was looking at him.

Roy flushed slightly, finding himself looking away from the vibrant gaze Edward was looking at him.
with. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep an eye on Grand and the Fuhrer. I won’t cause you to worry, even if I doubt they’ll try anything.”

“I’ll worry anyway, you know that.” Edward muttered, floating to his feet. He knew he would rather leave before anyone else came in, if only so that he could have a response when he said goodbye to Roy.

“Yeah, I know.” Roy smiled as he met Edward’s eyes again. “Be careful out there. These shouldn’t take too long, there are rarely more than fifteen or so candidates kept over after the written exams.”

“There might be fewer by the time I’m done with them.” Edward corrected in laughter, before smiling at Roy as he floated towards the door with an uncertain speed. “I’ll see you after?”

Roy walked after him, and as Edward halted in midair, he smiled reassuringly back at the apparition as he held out his hand. “You know I’d never leave you.” He replied in quiet tones, his dark eyes meeting silver.

Edward felt something inside him tighten at the same time it rose up within, feeling like a strange sort of hope. One he couldn’t put his finger on, and he glanced down to Roy’s hand, looking back up with a smile. “I know where you live.” He replied with a flash of humor, and held his hand out in turn.

And very much like all the times before, when they’d been able to step into the world together away from the office, Edward’s hand met Roy’s just enough, yet this time, passed through.

“Be careful.” Edward said at last, before drawing away and floating quickly towards the door.

Roy watched him go, a faint smile playing on his lips. He actually wasn’t sure if Edward would prank any of the contenders of this year’s exam. Not entirely sure if the suggestion had been meant to merely make him feel less worried at being away from the ghost. But if Edward did decide that pranks were in order, and found a suitable opening, he knew that the hopefuls would be coming in a bit more harried than normal.

Meanwhile, Edward found himself perching up in a tree outside. It was a good vantage point to be up and out of the way and still watch the door, even if he couldn’t actually touch the living tree. But it gave him a sense of secrecy that would have been hard to find there on the ground.

He knew that Roy was most likely giving out an underhanded insult to Grand when the first of the remaining candidates began to gather out front of the door where not too earlier, a man who would seemingly be serving as the single proctor had gone to stand. He knew, sensibly, that Roy was all right. Even Grand couldn’t be so foolish as to start something now. But still, much of his attention lingered on Roy as he waited for all the candidates to gather.

The proctor was checking names off on a short list as one by one, those still remaining from the pool of hopefuls began to approach to stake their right to take the second leg of the exams. And once a name was checked off, that person more commonly than not, went off a distance in order to do whatever it is they did. Pray, most likely.

Yet they never strayed far from the door. Clearly unwilling to miss their one chance of their name being called by the proctor.

And Edward floated down from the tree at last when the door opened to admit a hand which passed through a folded envelope to the proctor waiting outside.

The proctor slit the envelope and pulled out the list of names in the order they’d be summoned in for
their interviews, and with a brief clearing of the throat, announced, “Kipske, Christopher.”

Edward watched with a speculative gaze as the individual strode forward, an air of confidence wavering above the nervousness that he could clearly see. “Putting on airs?” Edward questioned softly, a smirk beginning to grow. “Roy’ll see right through you.”

As the door closed behind Christopher, Edward made his way over to where some of the contenders had huddled for what looked like a last minute pep talk for each other. And seeing as how they were so involved, it seemed fairly a crime not to take advantage of the situation.

With his smirk growing, Edward slunk through the air to flip himself sideways and facing towards their turned backs. And one by one, he circled around them in this fashion to carefully pick their pockets of the chalk that had left residue stains on the outside lapels from where they’d hurriedly inserted it. Each piece of chalk he’d chucked over his shoulder to wherever, noting absently a few times that the flung pieces must have hit someone. There were a few startled yelps, even from the proctor.

Next, he worked on untying their shoelaces, as they still stood huddled, clueless of the minor irritations their stolen chalk had caused among the other candidates. Those who did not have shoelaces, or those whose laces were so tight that they’d have felt his actions, he left alone. But for those select, fortunate few, Edward quickly bound the laces of different victims shoes together.

Leaving them to their tangled fate, he headed off to go see what he could do about finding himself some more chalk.

And several minutes later promptly perched himself cross-legged just over the proctor’s head as he watched with a manic grin as the fruits of his labor unfolded.

“ – the fuck! Who keeps throwing the fucking chalk?!” One candidate finally exploded, after having been hit in the ear with one such piece only seconds before Edward fled to his current location.

There were some murmurs of angry agreements from others standing off in their own little areas of the grass, they too had been victims of getting chalk smears on them from flying pieces.

“Where is my chalk?!” One of those over in the huddle, who had been the first victims of the pick pocketing suddenly exclaimed.

“It fucking hit me in my ear! You want it back, you ass?” Was the angry retort.

“I didn’t throw anything at you!”

Edward tipped his head down to see that the proctor really didn’t seem to care what they were doing even despite also having been a victim, and wondered if things like this exploded between the candidates most years.

“YEEEE-YAAAH!”

And suddenly five people toppled down to the grass on top of each other in an awkward and jabbing flail of limbs and crunching of bodies.

At this point Christopher, the first to enter for the interview process, walked out looking pale and a bit green around the edges. And didn’t even really stick around to see what the growing chaos was about as he headed away looking dazed.

The proctor’s throat cleared loudly, and shouting over the fray, called out: “Sampson, Leila!”
As Leila Sampson disentangled herself from the mess, she fairly fled into the interview room, if only to escape the madness outside.

The proctor sighed, crossing her name off the list. “I really need to get paid more for this.”

Edward floated down to stand beside the proctor, shooting over a sympathetic look. “Least you’re not Basque Grand.” And floated off through the air to go find where some of the chalk had landed and use it as projectiles again.

This group responded well to projectiles.

Three interviews and about an hour of off-and-on chaos later, Edward spotted a military dog.

No. Not the ones that Roy was prone to referring to in mutterings while he was doing paperwork. This was an actual military dog, and it was being walked on a leash by its unsuspecting handler.

Within minutes, the large canine had yanked free of its handler, and was tearing after the presence it couldn’t see. Barking loudly as it shot heedlessly towards the group of candidates who were now scattering even more as they tried to avoid the out of control dog.

Edward merely continued to laugh, wondering how it was that it was so easy to get an animal to chase after him, but not at all minding that ghostly presences seemed to have that effect in animals. And he continued to dart around the alchemists, the dog in hot pursuit as its handler chased and yelled ineffectively.

Candidates were led into each other with smacks as they whirled to escape the canine. Others were upended as the dog knocked their legs out from under them. The proctor nimbly stepped out of the way each time the dog came near. And as a whole, the candidates were in a state of disarrayed confusion and curses.

Finally, when Edward believed they’d had enough, he escaped up to the nearest tree once more. And as the dog barked up at him, trying to climb the tree, he waved down at it. “Thanks! Hope you don’t get in too much trouble!” He got in a few more chuckles as the dog was finally led away with profuse apologies by its handler.

As the contenders finally quieted down, though they looked greatly the worse for wear, Edward smirked at them. “Poor things.” He purred laughingly. “They look absolutely exhausted.”

But the games did not stop until the last person had gone through that door, and by then he had floated over to stand underneath the tree to anxiously wait for Roy. He felt he’d done well at harrying the State Alchemist hopefuls, and as none of them had been foolish enough to stick around for more, he was more than content to wait for Roy.

The proctor left after a while, clearly done with his duties for the day.

Edward watched him go only to the extent that he made sure the proctor had indeed gone before he resumed his wait for Roy. And when the door swung open to admit out the last candidate that had entered, his anxiousness only grew.

Not long later, the door swung open again, this time ushering out the one person Edward had been waiting for. And a brilliantly happy grin took over his face as he called out excitedly, “Roy!”

Roy flashed a grin as he quickly made a beeline for his silvery companion, unable not to be affected by Edward’s clear happiness to see him. A happiness, he admitted, he shared.
“So what happened?” Edward enquired eagerly as he floated quickly to meet the man halfway.

Roy couldn’t help but continue to smile, the ghost was infectious. “Naturally I’m okay. But come, you can tell me on our way home what you did to those poor people.”

Edward’s grin turned wicked, and he let out another brief laugh at their expense. “You know you loved watching them come in.” He teased, and happily fell in to float beside Roy as they made their way back towards the main gates so they could leave.

Roy only smiled, making a low grunting noise in his throat to show his agreement.

“Well first I started on this – ”

“Roy!” Came the faint shout at first, and then louder yet, “Roy! Hold up, Mustang!”

Roy tilted his head to the side a bit, sharing a quick smile with Edward. “Hold on, I think I know that voice.”

Edward snickered, “that’s what you get for blowing him off yesterday.”

“I was with you.” Roy replied simply, before giving the ghost a quick wink and turning about to raise an eyebrow in inquiry as his best friend came running over with a waving hand above his head. “Yes? Do you have a question, Mr. Hughes?”

“Shut up.” Maes rolled his eyes as he lowered his hand from its waving and came to a somewhat panting halt in front of his friend and superior officer. “How am I supposed to talk to you when you avoid me?”

“Hence the avoiding.” Roy smirked, but quickly added as Edward laughed, “sorry, but I’ve had a lot on my metaphorical desk. What’s urgent?”

Maes peered at his friend suspiciously over his glasses. “What were you doing going to Risembool?”

Roy’s smile thinned, and he remained silent a moment before finally giving in. “I’m sure you can guess. We both know you’re not whored out to the investigations department for no good reason.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Roy,” Maes began, his eyes worried, “it’s good if you’re trying to make amends in your own way. But you weren’t in a good place after those deaths.”

“Don’t worry.” Roy reassured him with a slight sigh as he glanced away towards the sidewalk with darkened eyes. “I’m not at risk for doing anything stupid. Not anymore. And I thought I told you I went for friend related reasons? Nothing much dangerous there.”

Maes snorted, not yet convinced. “We both know you don’t have any friends in Risembool.”

A hand quickly gripped Roy’s heart as he gaped in wounded hurt. “Maes! Don’t be so mean.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.” Maes retorted.

Roy rolled his eyes with another sigh, his hand falling back down as he gave his friend a sad smile. “You ought to know by now that there are some secrets I choose to keep to myself.”

Maes considered for a long while, silently, before giving a short inclination of his head and a smirk. “And you ought to find yourself a wife.” And he got in the beginnings of a laugh before he yelped a sudden “OW!” and ducked in on himself as he held his head.
Roy smirked, “you’re lucky I’m saving an impressive fire demonstration for someone, and I’d hate to waste it on you.” He announced loftily, before sweeping off again to leave his friend there nursing a growing lump to the head.

“Who?!” Maes called after him ineffectively.

Edward was chuckling softly as he fell back in beside Roy, and smiled over at him. “You want to impress me, do you?”

“I always want to impress you.” Roy answered, returning the smile quickly before slipping his hands into his pockets as he led them away. “So continue with your story?”

Edward did. And he related the entire thing for Roy, who was trying not to openly laugh too much on the streets of Central, as they made their way down them. Which only inspired Edward’s competitive side as he tried as hard as he could to get Roy to burst out laughing at the most inopportune moments. Unfortunately he had no idea where Roy learned to have such a mask, but it wouldn’t have been as much fun if it weren’t a challenge.

It was nearing the end of his relation of the events he’d brought about, when he noticed that they were going up the steps of a building that was most definitely not their home.

“Where are we…?”

Roy smiled as he heard Edward trail off beside him, and chanced a glance over at his companion. “I promised you, didn’t I?”

Edward could only stare numbly as he stared up at the massive grey building before him; the deep etchings of letters above the lintel of the doorway proclaiming it the ‘Central First Library’. And as he registered Roy moving again, he raced after him as sudden excitement began to spring up within him.

Roy was let in without question, although he did spare a courteous nod to the guards who made sure the library stayed strictly open to only State Alchemists. And as he entered through the grand doors, he breathed in deeply the familiar smell of old paper, ink, and leather bindings.

“I’d been having so much fun with you that I forgot.” Edward whispered at last as he too looked around, and up. There was even another floor, and from what he could tell, this library was fairly filled to bursting with bookshelves that no longer had much space.

“Between the two of us.” Roy smiled, remembering fondly the previous time such a lapse in Edward’s memory had happened, and they’d ended up having their lunch outing interrupted by geese. “Seemed like a good time to bring you here… we’ve a long time until dinner.”

Edward looked over at Roy, fairly brimming with excitement at the prospect of so many books.

“Come on then! Let’s try this way!” And he pelted headlong as far as he could down one row of bookshelves, and as the entire thing was revealed to him as Roy followed with a chuckle, he eagerly began zipping along all the shelves looking at titles of alchemy texts and research.

Roy could only grin as his arms were loaded up with books upon books that Edward wanted to look at. He had a feeling that he’d need to buy a whole library one day, just for the ghost. Although then he might never get Edward out of it.

Edward finally exhausted the first bookshelf of everything he found interesting, and promptly found himself a table off in a secluded corner where he could begin reading. And he eagerly reached for the first book that came near to him as Roy dumped the lot onto the table. “Careful!” He chastised, but
was so engrossed already in reading, that he barely remembered he’d said it at all.

Roy chuckled quietly as he slid into the seat next to Edward, pulling a book towards him and opening it. “We’re leaving in five hours. What you don’t finish I’ll check out so you can take them home.” And he began to read peacefully enough beside the silvery spirit.

This was a good way to end their day. Calm Edward down after his antics of earlier. And a good way to bring Edward back into some sense of a more secure peace after his scare yesterday. Hell, a scare for them both.

For five hours they sat there at their table, changing books as they might finish, or changing positions. Every so often they’d debate in hushed whispers – at least from Roy – about a certain alchemy theory or transmutation circle or some other item for debate. And they both enjoyed it greatly, already knowing that their debate partner was just as intelligent about alchemy as they were.

“Do you have any research manuscripts in any of the military libraries?” Edward asked, after just having gotten through another such manuscript written by another State Alchemist – long dead according to the publish date.

“I do.” Roy admitted as he turned another page in the advanced alchemy text he was browsing through and recalling old memories. “None like what I have at home though. What I have in the libraries for others to view is generic at best. Just good enough to satisfy the quota that I did one, but they contain none of my secrets.”

“Smart.” Edward agreed.

Roy glanced over at him with a smile, “I bet you’d have written a good alchemy text. Not some silly research manuscript that we only do either to fulfill a requirement, or word such that it’s near impossible to decipher without giving the reader the necessary key.”

“I haven’t needed a key yet.” Edward snorted.

“No. But then, your mind works fast that way.” Roy pointed out. “But I do think you’d have created a good text for alchemists to learn from.”

Edward smiled over at him then. “Perhaps. But I doubt I’d have met you if I had lived to grow up doing something like that.”

Roy rested the side of his head on one hand as he leaned forward over the table to look at Edward. “I’d like to think that I would have. But as long as we’re together here and now, I’m just happy knowing that.”

“Even if I harass future State Alchemists?” Edward asked with a mischievous smile.

“Even that.” Roy grinned back, “you’re such a brat of a ghost.”

Edward laughed at the accusation, a very accurate one he had to admit. “Did any cave during the interview? Did that weird stool fall down?”

“Yes and no.” Roy straightened in his seat and leaned back against the back of the chair as he covertly made sure they were still alone and that both librarians were still at their desk. “A few did cave, I’m under the impression we have your messing with their nerves to thank for that.”

Edward smirked.
“But the stool did not fall.” Roy finished with a shrug. “I’m still under the impression it’s heavily magnetized once it encounters a certain degree of weight.” And then he grinned suddenly at Edward. “Although if someone as small as you were to ever take the exam, it just might topple from lack of weight.”

Edward smacked the nearest book on top of Roy’s nearest hand, relishing in the indignant and stifled yelp. “I am not small!”

“Small.” Roy held a hand up to the middle of his chest, and quickly leaned to the side to avoid another whacking by book.

Edward rolled his eyes, setting the book down with a harrumph and opening it to the first page. He was determined to ignore the idiot he lived with. At least until he could hold out no longer, but he was unwavering in his desire that it wouldn’t happen at least until they had to leave to go home.

They went undisturbed in their reading. The library being not very busy at the time, and the librarians with plenty of work to do. And they stayed there until at last, his butt long past having gone numb, Roy pushed away from the table to stand and stretch with a groan and several popping bones.

“You should keep in better shape.” Edward admonished as he floated up as well to begin organizing the books into two piles. One he planned to have Roy check-out for him from the library.

Roy scowled, “so says he without a corporeal body.”

“Hmm…” Edward mused with a slight smile. “You have a point.”

Roy grunted and looked down to the smaller stack of books. “That should keep you busy for a few days.” And he scooped them up into his arms so that he could take care of checking them out onto his account.

The librarians were happy to see him, as always, and they spent Roy’s time at the checkout counter flirting shamelessly with him as Edward wondered if Roy would get mad if he tipped a very precarious looking pile of books onto them. Unfortunately there was no pile near enough to Roy.

As if sensing impending danger, Roy hurried along the process and fairly chased the ghost from the library. Harder done than said, as once Edward caught better sight of the top floor the chasing process got tricky.

When they finally arrived home, Roy was finally able to dump the books onto the coffee table, smiling as Hazel immediately leapt on top of the pile to investigate. Followed shortly by Edward, who helped the squirrel sort through the pile.

“Will you be okay if I go out tonight?” Roy asked at last, when Edward was nearly through with sorting.

Edward’s head jerked up at the question, his eyes confused if not a bit startled. Then it came to him what Roy meant, and he looked back down again to hide the pull of disappointment at the corner of his mouth. “Yes. Of course.” He assured the man, forcing his voice to stay level. “I’m perfectly fine and safe here.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Roy argued quietly, kneeling down next to the ghost. “You had a bit of a scare yesterday.”

“And I’m fine now!” Edward forced out a laugh, turning what he hoped was an amused look on Roy. “Really, I am. And it’s not like you won’t come back home afterwards.” And added a bit
mischievously. “You’d miss me too much.”

Roy smiled, although he still studied Edward closely. “I would.”

Edward smiled back at him, “really, Roy, I’m fine. I know you need nights to yourself like that. That I don’t get to monopolize your life, so don’t tempt me into wanting to.”

At last, Roy gave a slow nod, giving in. “Okay. I’m going to go get changed then.” He said as he rose to his feet again.

Edward watched him go from underneath his fringe of silvery hair, noting the last look Roy had given him before disappearing with a bit of a smile. And once he heard Roy’s footsteps on the stairs, he looked over at Hazel with a wry smile. “It’s hard to ask him to stay.”

Upstairs Roy finished getting changed into clothes more appropriate for his intentions tonight, knowing he needed an outlet for the pent up frustration that going days without any sexual contact at all had brought upon him. And he planned to get those frustrations out and come home for a piece of cake.

Although he had been prepared to have asked Edward to stay out of his bedroom until he said otherwise if Edward had had another trying day. But the ghost hadn’t… and had spent the better part of the day terrorizing the State Alchemist candidates, and so with that being the case, he’d leave his own personal toy box under his bed.

Shaking his head with a smile, Roy stepped into the bathroom a moment as he reflected back on what Edward’s antics had caused. It would be interesting to see how many were held over for practical exams. Yet if the Fuhrer did gain knowledge that the candidates were harassed by a runaway dog, leniency might be given for the poor performances of today.

Either way, he was looking forward to tomorrow for several reasons, and intended to keep Edward firmly beside him during the practical exam so that the ghost could watch. There would be less chance of something happening because the Fuhrer and Edward might react again. At the practical, Edward’s best vantage point to watch would be beside him, and he hoped that remained a safety spot for the ghost.

Once he felt his hair was properly behaving, Roy turned to make his way back downstairs to find Edward again.

“You want to walk with me to the bar?” He asked as he finished trotting down the stairs and swung around into the entry to the sitting room.

Edward looked up from where he’d been carrying Hazel around through the air by means of a thick alchemy tome, and smiled. “You know I do.” He said, even as he gave a careful twirl to swing Hazel about. “I get to watch your terrible, no, nonexistent attempts at flirting. Not to mention I’ll get to see more of the city.”

Roy stuck his hands on his hips indignantly. “I can’t help it if I don’t have to try hard. It’s not my fault that I’m just that good looking.”

“Smug one, aren’t you?” Edward retorted with a smirk as he guided the book back down to the coffee table so that Hazel could leap off after the flying lesson. And he turned to consider the man, mimicking Roy’s stance with his own hands on his hips. “I guess you don’t look too unfortunate.”

Snorting mildly, Roy turned to go in search of his jacket. Just in case. And they were fun to let people get him out of. “Come on, brat.” He called as he found it and made his way to the front door.
Edward smirked, and promptly dove out the outer wall to meet Roy on the doorstep as the man locked up the house. “I’ll consider it justice when you have to flirt to actually get someone into bed.”

Roy shrugged as he turned to lead them down the path to the front gate. “Won’t happen. Too synonymous with commitment in my mind. If I have to work to get them into bed, I’ll have to work to get them to leave it.”

Edward only rolled his eyes, but left the subject where it was as he followed along with the man. He was very interested to see what happened this time, and vowed that if Roy let someone almost sit on him again, he’d take drastic measures.
Chapter 29

The morning of the next day, Edward was sitting cross-legged on the foot of Roy’s bed, shaking in laughter as he watched Hazel harass the man into wakefulness. It was hard to feel sympathetic.

“Roy,” he purred laughingly, “you look like death warmed over.”

Roy groaned as the sound of cackling reached his ears, and he made a pitiful grab for the covers, intending to pull them over his eyes. “You would know.” He complained, and made a fitful noise of frustration as instead of his covers, his hand encountered Hazel.

Edward grinned wickedly as he watched Hazel rub and arch up under Roy’s hand, petting himself against the hand that kept trying to escape him and could not yet succeed. Which led Edward to believe that Roy’s movements in the morning were predictable, and Hazel knew it. “Up, Mustang!” He chastised with that same grin. “Up, up, up!”

“Why can’t it be the weekend?” Roy further complained.

“Weekend?” Edward snorted in amusement. “If you want your weekends off you should have stayed as some underling lieutenant. You want to be Fuhrer? You better get accustomed to the idea that you’ll rarely have a full weekend off. Running a country is not a Monday through Friday experience.”

“Evil spirit.” Roy groused, earning another bout of snickering amusement from Edward’s end. Finally he groaned as he sat up in bed, automatically wrapping arms around Hazel as the squirrel launched at his chest. “Fine, I’m up.” He muttered while trying not to smile as Hazel snuggled in against him inside the hug he was providing.

Edward floated in a circle to track Roy’s progression towards the bathroom. “You know,” he began in the tone of someone newly enlightened, “it’s a good thing that you never stay until morning with these poor souls you find, they’d be very unimpressed with you come morning.”

Roy looked back over his shoulder as he walked, a pouting expression on his face. “It’s not my fault it was a threesome last night.” And with that, somehow managed to not walk into the wall, and made it inside the bathroom.

Edward was laughing as the door closed, and smilingly, he floated up off the bed and into the air to hover a moment before making his way down through the floor and subsequent walls so that he could get to the kitchen.

“He’s out of shape after having taken so many nights off.” Edward chortled to himself, despite feeling happy that Roy had. It was more Roy’s condition that was amusing him, and not so much what had caused it.

He was humming cheerfully to himself as he began to work on cooking Roy some breakfast. It appeared that the man would be needing it. And so it wasn’t long before he had the bacon frying in one pan, pancakes in another, and leftover hot chocolate heating on a back burner.

Roy had only managed a single cup last night… rather, earlier that morning, before he fell dead asleep before Edward could even offer to get him more.
It wasn’t coffee, but it seemed to work wonders on making Roy feel more human; far more than coffee appeared to.

When Roy finally came downstairs to find breakfast almost finished, he smiled broadly as he walked over to join Edward at the stove. “And here I thought you’d not forgiven me for failing to direct that guy not to set his coat on top of you.”

“Oh I got my revenge on him. Don’t you worry.” Edward smirked, and motioned with his head down towards the platter of already finished pancakes and asked sweetly, “pancake?”

Roy gave him a suspicious look, “what’d you put in them?”

Edward only laughed, even more so when Roy grabbed a pancake anyway with a wary look and began eating it. “As if I’d poison you.”

“No.” Roy agreed around a mouthful of pancake, “but you might give me a laxative.”

“That’s in the hot chocolate.” Edward informed him solemnly.

“Perfect.” Roy chuckled and went in search of a mug to put some of the steaming hot chocolate into. “Although I did think you went a little extreme with your revenge.”

“In my opinion, he gave me that coat when he threw it on top of me.” Edward waved a hand nonchalantly.

Roy grunted as he chewed on more pancake, working on pouring himself some of that hot chocolate. He was just glad that Edward hadn’t done anything physically damaging to the guy who’d ended up being a third of his threesome last night.

Yet despite what Edward was prone to doing to his intended one night stands, he had no inclination at all to forbid Edward to come with him while he hunted out his nightly pleasures.

Soon enough Edward had finished cooking the breakfast with Roy’s assistance, and was hovering near the side of the table in a seated position with his legs kicking back and forth. The smile on his face feeling permanent as he watched Hazel leap up onto Roy’s shoulder and demand bits of pancake which the man gave obediently.

Only when Roy had finished eating and had stood up so that they could leave to go to Headquarters did Edward point out with a smirk, “there are crumbs on your jacket.”

Roy could believe it, and he cautiously walked over to the sink to brush himself off over it. “Thanks.” He would have checked anyway, but it was nice to know that Edward wouldn’t have let him go outside covered in crumbs. Especially considering that he would be in near proximity to the Fuhrer, he wasn’t looking for an excuse to be reprimanded about his appearance.

Only once Edward deemed that Roy’s uniform was immaculate did they leave the house.

Again, Roy took them on a different direction to Headquarters, which happened to cut through the other side of the park they’d walked through the day before. And he found he much preferred these sort of off-the-beaten-path routes to Headquarters this early in the morning, for it was pretty secluded. He’d rather seclusion these days, than a speedier walk to Headquarters. It gave him more opportunities to talk with Edward.

“Today are the practical exams, for those few who managed to survive the interviews yesterday.” And then after a momentary thoughtful pause, added, “and survived you.”
Edward laughed proudly. “I can’t help it if they’re gullible.”

“Everyone but me is gullible around you.” Roy pointed out with a roll of his eyes. “Anyway, as it’s out of doors, the place you might feel safest is beside me the entire time. On the opposite side of where the Fuhrer will be. You’ll be able to see everything going on, since it’s the practical portion.”

“I won’t be able to prank anyone, but I’d rather that, than chance more pain.” Edward spoke quietly, and looked over at Roy. “Have you had any luck yet? Remembering what that symbol is?”

Roy’s brow drew into a frown, and he slowly let out a breath as he tried to compose himself. “I think I know where I need to start looking again to find it… but I never thought I’d go back to those books again.”

“What do you mean?” Edward pressed, concern mixing with curiosity.

Roy didn’t answer right away, and when he did, his voice was carefully measured. “Do you remember when yesterday Maes said I wasn’t in a good place after the death of Winry’s parents? And how I told him I was no longer at risk for doing anything stupid anymore?”

“Yes.” Edward answered promptly, his slight frown not disappearing even so. “When you almost committed suicide.”

Roy nodded even as his lower lip was worried between his teeth a moment before he managed to summon enough courage for what he was about to say next. “It wasn’t just suicide. Maes wasn’t the one who caught me with that pistol. He caught me with something else.”

Edward was about to interrupt and ask who had caught Roy about to commit suicide, for he’d not thought anyone had, but then again, Roy didn’t ever talk about it much. And right now, that near suicide wasn’t what was important. “Yes?” He prompted, when Roy fell hesitantly silent.

Roy took a deep breath before going on. “For a while I turned to reading and studying the more forbidden aspects of alchemy.” He admitted softly, before ending far more quietly. “Human transmutation included.”

Yet Edward had still heard, and stopped abruptly midair to look at Roy with wide, confused eyes. “Why?”

Roy stopped as well, turning to face Edward with an apologetic, almost guilty look that hid most of his regret. “Temptation. I wasn’t in a good place at the time, Edward. I felt it was my only outlet because it would be so easy to sink. I wasn’t sure what I was looking for… only that it took Maes to snap me out of it. I packed up the books and vowed never to look at them again, and rid myself of everything else that had anything to do with that which is forbidden.”

Edward was silent a long time, confusion and confliction inside him. Yet there was no anger. Who was he to be angry at Roy for such a thing? No. He was happy. Happy that Roy was okay and still alive. He really had no right to be angry with Roy, to judge. They were alchemists, and sometimes alchemists walked the same path towards destruction. He could only be happy that Roy had stepped off of it. “And you think you saw that symbol in one of those books?”

Roy nodded slowly, but surely.

Edward warred with his own conflicted feelings before asking gravely, “do you still have them?”

“Yes.” Roy didn’t see what good it would do him to lie about it. “I had promised myself I’d never touch the things again… but if it will help us understand what that symbol is, and what connection it
has to you and the Fuhrer, I’ll open those boxes again. You’re more important to me than that promise, and at least I can look at them again knowing I won’t sink. Not when I have you.”

Edward met Roy’s eyes, a faint smile coming to his lips. “I’m your saving grace?”

“What reason would I have to sink,” Roy agreed softly, “when I’ve you now as well?”

At that moment, it seemed to be all that was needed to be said, and after a while longer of gazing back at each other, they continued on to Headquarters when they’d been startled out of their own private moment by a flock of pigeons taking flight out of a nearby tree.

They arrived still fairly early to Headquarters, and Roy led them towards the rear of the complex where there was a more secluded and large open courtyard that would be the location for the practical exams. Upon arriving there, they found it already stocked with materials for the practical alchemy exams. Almost anything imaginable that could be used was there for use.

“Wow.” Edward couldn’t help but marvel as he took the sight in. Their conversation from the park shoved for the moment to a different corner of his mind. “How long did setting all of this up take?”

Roy smiled as he looked around at it all. “Not too long. The supplies are brought in from the warehouses by the regular officers. And seeing as how they are in plentiful numbers, there’s a lot of manpower to go around.”

Edward couldn’t help but grin nostalgically as he looked over all the supplies. From diamonds to wood, and mountains of ice to cotton. “This brings back memories. There’s so much I could have made with all of this!”

Roy had no doubt of that. And most likely, Edward would have created something that would have stunned everyone in attendance. Even the Fuhrer. He would have expected nothing less from Edward, not even taking into account that he was a son of Hohenheim. “Shame others don’t see it as you do. They tend to play it safe, unfortunately.”

“Did you?” Edward queried with a suspiciously arched eyebrow, before suddenly latching on gleefully to the next thought to enter his mind. “What did you make?”

Roy felt himself flush, and he pointedly did not look anywhere near Edward. “It doesn’t matter. It’s been so long… I’ve forgotten.”

“Don’t lie to me, you’re a terrible liar when you try to lie to me!” Edward chastised, his enthusiasm far from curbed. “Tell me?!”

“I played it safe.”

“You damn did not!” Edward snorted, “you and I both know that you never would have played it safe. You’re too flamboyant for that.”

Roy groaned, worrying a hand through his hair. “It’s just… it was ridiculous! The farthest thing from me you could imagine.”

Edward could imagine a lot of things, yet that was not what he desired. He desired to know the truth. “Roy.” He growled in warning.

Roy merely glowered at him in defense, completely unwilling and embarrassed to even consider telling Edward. And luckily for him, the proctor for today’s exam, along with General Hakuro came into view. Which proved to him that Edward was wrong, there was a god.
Edward cursed in disappointment beside Roy, and vowed to get it out of the man one way or another later today.

“Mustang.” General Hakuro greeted happily enough with a broad smile as he approached the Colonel.

“General.” Roy greeted back after relaxing from his salute. Out of all the superior officers he had, General Hakuro was one he didn’t mind quite so much. The man wasn’t nearly as corrupt. But he still didn’t trust him. Trust was a luxury in the Military. “It’s been a while since there’s been a new State Alchemist inducted. Hopefully today they show more promise.”

Edward’s eyes widened marginally, “feeling bold, Roy?”

General Hakuro, however, seemed that he shared the sentiment. “At least no one could ever claim that the standards are lax. Unfortunately it seems though that even those who have State Alchemist sponsors might not be able to make the cut, based on the Fuhrer’s impressions yesterday.”

Roy had noticed them, and nodded. “Which is a shame, for them to have that extra advantage, extra access to learning, and they still have trouble.”

“And then there’s you who grew up in the middle of nowhere without all of that.” General Hakuro chuckled. “Perhaps the sponsor system is more a harm than a good?”

“Perhaps.” Roy conceded. “But it’s not my place to say.”

General Hakuro laughed again softly, “this is why I missed it when we were at East Central together all those years ago and you were transferred away before I was.”

“Only to get sent back.” Roy pointed out with a smirk.

“You’re a breath of fresh air, Mustang. Don’t ever lose it.” General Hakuro informed him soberly from behind twinkling eyes. “I’m glad we finally had some time to chat, I’ve been so busy since you got here.”

“On the subject of that, thank you for your insistence on my behalf that I be transferred.”

“Not at all.” General Hakuro waved it off with a shrug. “You’re only an asset here. Now tell me, do you still use that chess set I gave to you?”

Roy thought morosely on just how much he’d been using it, and losing, but nodded. “Yes, sir. I daresay I’ve lost my touch though. Since our last match I’ve been declining in how many times I can win. My current chess partner has only recently relearned the game, and delights in trouncing me.”

Edward was shaking in laughter at this point, a wicked grin on his lips. “Someone has to.”

“I’d ask their name,” General Hakuro mused, “but if you’re getting trounced, than I’ve not a chance. I’d best not let curiosity get the better of me. I’m too old for that.”

Along this point in time, the other State Alchemist, whose name Edward still didn’t know, walked over to the group. This time not attempting to even get near Roy, clearly obeying whatever dark, territorial look the man had given him the first portion of the exam. It was clear to Edward that there seemed to be some sort of hierarchy among the State Alchemists, one that undercut the ranks of the Military.

He wondered briefly where Roy stood in relation to Basque Grand; for all that Roy had made that
thinly veiled insult to the man on Monday.

When next Basque Grand arrived, Edward didn’t have any time to spend wondering any further about it. He was instead keeping a narrow-eyed and careful look on the General who spent several moments grooming his pretentious moustache and trying not to seem as if he’d been the subject of a variety of debilitating injuries lately.

Before long, the Fuhrer arrived as well, and conversation between Roy and General Hakuro halted. And as the Fuhrer did come to stand with all of them, in their center, Edward dropped to the ground to walk over and move in close to Roy’s far side so he could no longer see the subject of his latest painful experience.

Roy didn’t, couldn’t say anything, but he shifted himself even closer to Edward, noting that the only reaction he received was a soft exhale of comforted breath. He’d keep Edward as safe as he could, and he didn’t need an overwhelming feeling of protection to flare up within him to know that.

Edward felt himself melt into Roy’s nearness, taking comfort in it. With Roy he always felt safe. And he listened with half an ear as the Fuhrer informed them of the candidates that had been held over for this final installment of this year’s State Alchemist exams. Not long later, the candidates were marched in by the proctor who had at one point left in order to fetch them.

Once they were all assembled, the Fuhrer addressed them, as he’d done for the entirety of the exam.

“We now offer you all of the matter that exists within these premises.” The Fuhrer announced with an ever-present happy expression. One that had always made the back of Roy’s neck prickle. “Please make use of it to transmute whatever you like.”

Roy muttered under his breath, “he always says that, and do they?”

From beside him, General Hakuro indulged in a quirk of a smile before sobering.

One by one the candidates mustered together some confidence and made their way forward. And as they began to gather ingredients for whatever they’d transmute, Edward saw that Roy was right. Most of them went for only one or two ingredients, very few went for more. And even fewer seemed to go for ingredients that were not basic rudimentary things that they’d been working with since they must have started learning alchemy.

“They aren’t comfortable using the others.” Edward murmured to himself. “Wood, water, graphite? I was using that stuff when I was five. What will they do when they don’t have access to them and need to create something amazing enough to save their lives?”

Roy could only agree, but could say nothing as he continued to watch.

“Most of these recipes I recognize from basic alchemy texts. They’ve just added to them to make them seem more impressive.” Edward continued to remark, his gaze lifting towards Roy. “A State Alchemist should be able to think on their feet and use anything at their disposal. If they’re still bound by book learning, they won’t survive.”

Roy looked away from the scene, his eyes briefly meeting Edward’s, and he gave an almost imperceptible shrug before looking back.

“Now I know you didn’t play it safe.” Edward affirmed with pride. “Is that water flow controlled by pipes?”

Roy knew better than to think that he didn’t hear that flicker of mischievous interest in Edward’s
voice. And he fought against giving the ghost a wide-eyed look.

Edward smirked, “it is.” And with that, he forgot all about the Fuhrer for the moment as he whirled around to dart off towards the Headquarters building. If that water was being piped in, there were sure to be controls along the wall to regulate the water flow.

When several minutes later, water from the miniature river set into the concrete suddenly came gushing towards the candidates, Roy could only observe it with a deadpan expression to cloak his helpless amusement.

“Pipes burst?” General Hakuro wagered a guess as he scratched at his chin, not jumping to assist the candidates who were now scrambling over each other trying to avoid the torrent of water lest it crash into them, even as water began to flood out over all of the concrete.

“Imagine so.” Roy agreed with similar dispassion in his voice, barely managing to conceal a smirk as he heard familiar wicked laughter come up behind him.

“Think we should help them?” The other State Alchemist spoke up as water began to flood around his boots.

“If they’re any good they’ll be able to contain it.” Roy pointed out in a drawl. “Besides, who the hell are you? The Dam Alchemist?”

“Colonel Mustang.” The Fuhrer spoke warningly, even if a hint of amusement colored his tone.

“Apologies, Fuhrer Bradley.” Roy replied, and stood there trying not to smirk as water continued to flood around them all.

Edward and General Hakuro seemed to sense just how unapologetic Roy was, although the latter only settled for shooting Roy a quick cautioning smile, while the former cackled deviously.

The Fuhrer only sighed as he watched the candidates scramble for cover, or in some of their cases, actually attempt to block and contain the flow. Yet they weren’t being very successful at it, as all of them wanted to do it their way, and that did not at all help with consistency.

Yet none of them there lifted a finger to assist. In fact, Edward had even taken to dancing and splashing in the water around General Grand, kicking it up at the man to sufficiently start soaking his uniform pants. Always being sure to keep the Fuhrer at the edge of his peripheral vision, so he’d know if the man ever started to look his way.

He’d go back to Roy if that became the case, but for right now he was having fun getting General Grand wet. And watching as the General became increasingly agitated and unable to figure out why the water kept splashing up around him. Perhaps the sidewalk was ridged around him? But discipline kept him standing still and silent, lest he be reprimanded for letting water get the better of him.

The flow of the water was finally halted, by one of the candidates who’d finally happened upon the common sense to turn it all into ice. Of course that meant that everyone, including herself, had been caught in the ice when it had all frozen, but at least the water had been halted.

General Hakuro, the Fuhrer, and the other State Alchemist lifted their boots bodily from the ice. Roy gave an absent, but carefully controlled snap of his fingers which caused the portion around him to melt in the split second before it was vaporized by the heat of his alchemic attack.

General Grand on the other hand was being observed by a grinning and softly laughing Edward. When the water had frozen, the General had been so wet that the ice had frozen even up into the
waistline of his pants. Now immobile and trying not to shiver, the General felt silent rage bubbling up inside of him.

“Do you require Colonel Mustang to assist you?” The Fuhrer asked the trapped General. Finding it curious how the man had gotten so wet. He must have been standing in a bad spot when the miniature river let loose.

Edward had already whipped back around to Roy’s far side, laughter shaking him at random. “Steam burn?”

“Hush, brat.” Roy murmured, as everyone’s attention was mostly centered on General Grand.

“I will not require assistance, Fuhrer.” Grand managed to get out from behind gritted teeth that were trying not to clack in his chilled state. Reaching down he scraped the hard edge of one of his gauntlets against the ice to create a transmutation circle, before activating it to steam away the ice.

Roy turned away with a smirk, and as he looked out over the sheets of ice, he couldn’t help but think that until the Fuhrer ordered him to vaporize it, Headquarters had a skating rink.

The Fuhrer, however, had turned his attention elsewhere. To the candidates who had huddled together looking very much like nervous deer. “I have yet to see an example of your finest alchemy. Water does not stop a State Alchemist.”

With that said, suddenly they sprung into action again, passions renewed.

“He does remember that some of them had finished, and the water just ruined them?” Edward asked as he observed the candidates move about carefully on the ice. In some cases slipping and falling anyway.

Roy chuckled softly, but said nothing as he too watched.

And at long last, there were no more mishaps, and all of the candidates had completed an example to be judged. Although little did they know, it wasn’t just their results that were being observed. It was them as well.

When they were finally released with instructions from the Fuhrer that they would receive notification if they’d passed, the candidates shuffled away looking exhausted. By all accounts, it had felt that this exam had been more than the sum of its appearance.

“Gentlemen, thank you for attending.” The Fuhrer then addressed them all, and made to leave, but not before addressing one individual in particular. “Colonel Mustang, the ice, if you would.”

“Need we move?” The other State Alchemist asked nervously.

Roy snorted, already raising his right hand. “I’d warn against it.” And he began to snap his fingers, his eyes firmly locked on the subject of his attack.

All around them lines of fire began to lace the surface of the ice with blinding speed forming a complex design that Edward recognized with wide eyes was an alchemy circle of fire; the ice superheating back to a liquid and nearly instantly, a gas.

Edward heard Roy getting thanked by the Fuhrer, and General Hakuro, but as the others all moved off to leave them there alone, his wide-eyed stare of amazement was soon met by Roy’s own dark gaze that glittered in happiness.
“That was beautiful.” Edward whispered at last.

Roy smiled at him, the action almost seeming shy. “Thought I’d show off a bit. It unnerved Grand. I didn’t have to make it look nice.”

“With that kind of control, I can only imagine the rumors about you must be true.” Edward spoke softly as he looked at Roy as if seeing him properly for the first time today. “You’re dangerous.”

Roy gave the apparition a lopsided smile, “yes.” And he tilted his head as he considered Edward. “You really thought it was beautiful?”

Edward nodded avidly, beaming up at him. “It was! How did you ever manage to make that happen?”

Roy lifted a finger to his lips with a wink. “Secret.” And moving away he gave a languid stretch. “Come on, let’s go have some fun today.”

“Fun?” Edward queried, momentarily distracted, but as Roy got a bit ahead of him due to his pause, he dashed to catch up. “Come on, Roy! Tell me how?”

Roy only laughed, and ignored the odd looks underneath the salutes he received from the officers who had been dispatched to clean up the courtyard of the materials.

The whole way home he had to field off the question of how he had managed it, Edward finally pacified when he learned that Roy’s intentions were to take him out on the bicycle again.

But not just anywhere.

Roy had led them back to the secluded park. With the trees shading private dirt paths, wildflowers, and the lake that the ducks and geese still circled across. It was relaxing here, for them both, and it provided them a perfect opportunity to spend their afternoon together outside and talking away from prying eyes.

Even if Roy always passed the bike off as a magic trick to curious looking people and children.

Edward was waiting astride the bicycle at the head of one of the dirt paths, waiting for Roy who was still at the sidewalk bordering the park. The man was ordering his latest adventure in suspicious street vendor food.

“What’d you get this time?” Edward asked, even as he raised up against the bicycle in order to peer up and over the carton Roy held as the man approached.

“Meatball sub.” Roy tilted the container for Edward to see.

Edward took one look and felt his face screw up in disgust. “It looks horrid.” He determined as he tried not to think about Roy actually eating the now soggy roll that was drenched in an oily looking orange-red sauce dotted with roughly shaped meatballs.

Roy raised it to his nose to take a precursory sniff. “Doesn’t smell too horrid.” And he started forward again. “Come on then.”

Edward pushed off from the dirt, struggling against the uneven ground valiantly as he tried his best to ignore Roy beginning to somehow eat the mess of a meatball sub. “So you still have to tell me.”

“I’m not going to tell you my precious secret.” Roy grinned. “Besides, if you really want to know,
you’ll read through the rest of my journals. I’m not about to rob you of reading discoveries or motivation."

Edward straightened in success, an action slightly hindered by the fact that it was such a struggle for him to bicycle on the dirt. Even if it was fairly even with few rocks. “Thanks.” He huffed out as he continued to peddle in determination, having to catch himself every yard or so before he tipped over. “But that’s actually not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?” Roy asked absently as he calculated the best place to take his next bite and not have a good portion of the meatball filling escape.

“What you made for the practical portion of the exam. You must have made something, and I know it wouldn’t have been some common achievement.”

“Your faith in me is nice.” Roy smiled faintly, and took his bite at last. “But it’s far too embarrassing. I have some dignity still around you.”

Edward rolled his eyes, “I’ll get it out of you one day, just you wait and see. Your dignity won’t last that long with me.”

He pried no more though as he struggled with the bicycle. He was determined to learn how to expertly ride it, so that Roy would no longer have an excuse to keep him from learning how to use the motorcycle. And besides, Roy had a vile looking meatball sub to eat.

Their walk through the park along the dirt paths was unhurried, and fairly unbothered. They only passed one other person who Roy smiled disarmingly at when the rider-less bicycle was looked at strangely. Otherwise, there were only the animals of the park. Including rabbits, which made Edward smile at the memory of his first rabbit experience.

Eventually they decided that a break was in order. And Roy led them to a secluded spot near the manmade lake once more. It was a different one than they’d been at before, and if anything, a bit more secluded with an ancient willow dropping its boughs out over the water and mostly cloaking them from view.

“Will you tell me about Hazel?” Edward asked during a brief lapse in their current conversation where they’d been distracted by a brief goose fight on the water. He had quite some time ago flopped down onto the grass to lay on his stomach, and he looked up at Roy now from where his head lay sideways in the cradle of his folded arms. “He was a wild squirrel, wasn’t he? However did you tame him?”

A soft, reminiscent smile made its way onto Roy’s face, “yes. He was wild.” He agreed as he stretched his legs out in front of him, leaning back down onto one elbow so they were on a closer level. “I plucked him out of a storm drain, gutter, whatever, while I was in East Central. He was a matted mess, and it was raining, and he was barely hanging on to the metal guards so he didn’t fall all the way in. So I took off my jacket so I could grab him safely and brought him home with me. I cleaned him up and nursed him back to health, and ever since then he’s never tried to really escape.”

“He loves you.” Edward smiled in an almost teasing manner. “Doesn’t that make you panic, that someone besides your mother loves you?”

Roy snorted, eyes crinkling in mirth. “He’s a squirrel. Not much to fear there.”

Edward laughed, and had to admit Roy was right. The man didn’t seem to have commitment issues with pets. Just other humans that weren’t his mother. And as his laughter subsided, he closed his eyes
with a relaxed breath as he enjoyed just being here like this. It was a relaxing way to end the whole ordeal that the State Alchemist exam had oftentimes been.

Roy studied Edward silently for a time, his mouth seemingly caught in a permanent fond smile. Reaching out silently, so as not to disturb Edward, he let his fingers drift through the silvery hair on the ghost’s back. It didn’t bother him so much that the silvery locks still refused to move at his touch. “You really want to know what I made?” He asked only upon withdrawing his hand.

Edward opened his eyes at the question, a bit of confusion causing his head to tilt quizzically into his arm. “I thought you still had dignity.”

“I thought so too.” Roy admitted wryly, and without waiting for any further permission got up from the grass.

Edward shifted to a sitting position as he watched Roy move around their secluded little clearing by the water. Curiosity and a warm glow inside of him as he watched the man begin gathering things from around them. Bringing together a far wider array of ingredients than any of the candidates from the exam had attempted.

Roy carefully piled all but one of his ingredients on the flattest portion of grassy dirt he could find, only to move to the edge of the lake. Scooping up a sufficient amount of damp earth from the bank, he brought it over as well. A snap of his fingers later, the dampness had dried out the earth until it more resembled sand.

About to reach into his pocket for his chalk, Roy suddenly thought better of it as he glanced up to meet curious silver eyes with a smile.

Edward could only lean forward in curiosity, feeling some sort of excitement pulsing inside him that he attributed to his rabid fascination with alchemy, and his approval of how good an alchemist Roy was.

Roy swept his eyes quickly over his ingredients, being sure that they were all accounted for, before snapping his fingers.

Instead of the small pile catching fire, lines of flame began to crisscross the ground around the ingredients and circle around them to burn the transmutation circle into the earth as the pile glowed and flickered in the soft red light. And then without pause, Roy’s hands made contact with the outer circle the moment the fire vanished, and bluish-white light now flared up.

As the light faded, Roy sat back with a peaceful smile, though his eyes were not for what now rested on the grass.

Edward’s eyes had widened in sheer amazement, “Roy…” he whispered, awestruck as he stared transfixed. “You made this for the exam?”

Reaching forward, as if sudden movement from an incorporeal being could shatter it, Edward picked up the sculpture. Every single ingredient Roy had gathered clearly represented. The base was made from the rocks, now fused, that Roy had gathered, with leaved vines somehow hardened erupting from the top of rock base. But what had sprung from the cradle of the vines was what had caught Edward’s full amazement.

It was a glass flower, yet somehow inside the glass there appeared to be flames coursing through it. Ever moving, even now; a swift rivulet of traveling fire. And along the petals of the glass flower, the petals of the wildflowers that Roy had gathered had fused. And now their own exotic colors were
brought to a different light as the fire raced underneath them behind the surface of the glass.

“No one ever told me it couldn’t be beautiful.” Roy spoke at last, his eyes moving from the flower, to Edward, and back again.

Edward lifted his gaze from it, his stunned silver eyes meeting dark ones. “How did you capture fire inside the glass, keep it moving?”

Roy tilted his head with a secretive smile. “Because I’m a damn good alchemist, and it’s not glass. That’s how. I may have used something close to sand… but that was put to use in fusing the rock base.”

“Then what is it?” Edward blinked in shock, giving it a closer inspection, but not coming up with anything.

“It’s yours.” Roy answered simply as he gazed, lost, into silver.
Chapter 30

Long after Roy had fallen asleep, Edward lay beside him still awake. His head was laid on a folded arm, silver eyes resting on Roy’s sleeping face as echoes of earlier whispered to him.

“Then what is it?”

“It’s yours."

It was a gift he’d never expected to receive, something so unique in its beauty. Something recreated this once, just for him. He knew that the fiery flower was special to Roy, so he knew that it was not a gift lightly given.

When in that moment, when Roy had pronounced it as his… Edward let out an unsteady breath. It wasn’t even so much the words, as the way Roy had looked at him; how under those dark eyes, everything had seemed to narrow down to just Roy, to the exclusion of all else. And he refocused his gaze that still rested unwaveringly on Roy, bringing the man back into clarity.

“You’re already my world.” Edward whispered into the stillness of the night. “How is it you can let me see everything… then make me see only you?” He wondered just as softly, reaching a hand up to brush against Roy’s face.

Roy didn’t move, and Edward couldn’t feel, yet his hand lingered.

Eventually Edward did move his hand away, but through the rest of the night he didn’t move from Roy’s side. He wasn’t sure what had happened between them, but he knew that whatever it was, he didn’t want to forget it.

Only just before sunrise, when Hazel was soon to be expected, did Edward float upwards and leave Roy’s side.

He couldn’t explain the compulsion he felt to be here. On the rooftop. There were things he’d never take for granted again, seeing a sunrise being one of them. Yet all the same, he’d not indulged in daily sunrises and sunsets.

But for whatever reason that had compelled him here, it felt right. Soothing to his mind in a warm, caressing way that his body could no longer feel. Wrapping his arms around his knees, Edward leaned his chin forward onto them as he stared into the gathering light, realizing as he let the light soothe him that he had far more cares now than he ever had before Roy had entered his life.

Still, he couldn’t find it in himself to mind. He cared far more about Roy than going back to having no questions in his death.

That was how Roy found him an untold time later. And he didn’t even register that the man was there with him until a profile he’d not noticed before spoke.

“I give, every clever opening I’m coming up with sounds like a bad one-liner in my head, so I’m just going to ask: what’s on your mind?”

Edward looked over at him, tilting his head marginally as he processed what Roy had said, now that his initial moment of being startled was over and he could gather his thoughts along with his wits.
And after he had, turned back away to rest his eyes on the sun once more. “Yesterday.”

Roy studied the spirit in silence, his mind methodically and swiftly reviewing everything that had happened. From their slightly revealing morning on his end to… shit. Had he done all the revealing between them yesterday? A scowl pulled at his face temporarily. It was like he’d been to a damn confessional. So he felt obliged to ask at the risk of sounding an ass either way, “any particular part?”

“All of it.”

Well, that didn’t help much. Where the hell was he supposed to begin? And Roy bit down on his lower lip as he tried to push his brain into higher functions before he’d had a second cup of coffee.

“My existence feels far more real to me since I met you, than all the times before.” Edward murmured as he stared ahead. “If not for the memories… it’d be like everything before I died was just a dream. I can’t remember a time I had so much on my mind about one person.”

Roy didn’t look away from the ghost, yet his eyes traced down and back up Edward’s form several times before he pulled his own knees up to wrap his arms around them and mimic the ghost’s posture as he continued to watch him. It didn’t seem as if Edward was expecting an immediate answer, or even one at all, so he took his time to think. Things like, ‘change has a way of doing that,’ or ‘don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere’ all seemed inadequate, and Edward already knew those things.

“When we first met I thought I’d grown up and knew anything about everything… now I’m not so sure.” Edward admitted quietly, as much to Roy as to himself.

“We never can.” Roy replied in kind, hesitating a moment to gather his thoughts before pressing forward to admit, “you’re not the only one who’s changing because we met.”

Edward’s smile was barely there, a quirk at the corner of his mouth, but there all the same judging by the answering smile he received. “As long as we do it together.”

Roy tipped his head forward against his knees, still smiling. “So you ready to go to work with me? It’ll be back to military life as normal.”

“Nothing about us is normal anymore, Roy.” Edward let slip with a little humor coloring his words. “Especially not in the Military.”

Roy’s lips twitched as he slowly unfolded his limbs with a muffled groan of satisfaction, enterprising to get himself to work before he ran late, even if he’d rather sit up here with Ed all day. “True. You seem to have a rare talent for livening it up.”

While Edward still had more that he didn’t quite understand than that which he did, he felt far better for having come up to the rooftop for a while. So he followed Roy down back to the grass without complaint.

The walk to Headquarters took them through a shadier looking section of town, but neither of them were too worried. Roy could certainly handle himself and char anything suspicious within an elapse of only seconds, which was why Edward wasn’t too concerned either about the area of Central they were walking through. Although true to impulse, he did stay alert even so.

To say Roy was glad to be going back to his normal routine was something of a double-edged sword. On one hand, he liked the opportunity it gave him to interact with Edward much more while he was at Headquarters. But on the other hand, he had enjoyed being able to leave early those three days and spend that extra time with Edward elsewhere. It was sort of an amusing revelation, really, to realize that somewhere along the way he’d begun to base the quality of his day on Edward.
When they reached the imposing building that was Headquarters, there was a noticeable lack of the atmosphere that had hung over the facility while the State Alchemist Exams had been in progress. And a noticeable lack of fresh targets for Edward.

But despite this overwhelming lack of much, neither party was given too much time to dwell on it as the moment they made it to the hallway connecting to Roy’s office complex, a loud, effervescent voice echoed down its length.

“Colonel!”

Edward jumped at Roy’s side as out of nowhere, seemingly, they were ambushed by a hulking, balding man at least three times the general mass of Roy.

Roy, for his part, remained quite calm with a pleased smile as he walked forward to greet the saluting officer. “Major.” He replied in kind, raising a hand in welcome. “I thought we’d be seeing you around shortly. Glad to see you didn’t keep me waiting.”

Edward, having since gathered his wits, also quickly ran through everything he knew about Roy’s military happenings… and suddenly, he had it. “His sister looks almost exactly like him, but with hair.”

A statement which decidedly left Roy with the bad mental imagery of Alex Armstrong in a dress and with hair. If he was looking a bit green, it wasn’t mentioned.

“I arrived yesterday, but you were engaged elsewhere.” Armstrong informed him dutifully, then a broad smile lit across his face. “So I spent the day catching up on the adventures of the others. Strange, though, for so little adventuring on their parts they sure acted miserable. I’d have thought they’d be bursting with energy! So this morning I thought I’d prescribe the old family secret exercise routine, passed down through the Armstrong line for generations –”

“Yes, yes. Good.” Roy cut in hurriedly in a manner that suggested he couldn’t interrupt fast enough, and stepping a step closer into the man’s personal space he rested a hand up atop one broad shoulder in a turning motion. “You can fill me in on what caused you to finally give in and get yourself here while we walk to my office.”

Already obeying the guiding motion on his shoulder, Armstrong had turned and begun to walk next to the colonel and the hand fell away. “Archer was no longer proving any use, just as you insinuated. Whatever interest the Fuhrer had in him, it’s now my belief that it has waned. I’m of more use to you here, as I realized only days after you’d boarded the train.”

Roy led the way into his personal office, and shut the door behind them himself before turning to regard the larger man seriously. “I do have use for you. Maes is doing the best he can, but a second body to the task will only help.” And he met Edward’s eyes for a lingering second before training his gaze back on Armstrong. “And I’m not the only one who’d feel as if everyone were safer if an alchemist were assigned to this as well.”

Edward felt himself breathe out a small sigh of relief, uncaring to the fact that he really didn’t need to breathe. Some mannerisms were just hard to get rid of after all, no matter how long you’d been among the dead.

Armstrong was entirely serious now, a soldier being addressed as such by his commanding officer. “Of course.” He was already agreed to whatever was asked of him, but nevertheless he waited attentively to be briefed on the matter – not in the least surprised that Colonel Roy Mustang had already gotten himself involved in something.
As Roy crossed around to his desk to begin giving Armstrong the details, Edward found himself perched in the air next to an unsuspecting Alex Armstrong, watching him carefully as Roy spoke. He trusted Roy’s choices in confidants, but that didn’t stop him from analyzing this new alchemist. Especially an alchemist that was to be trusted with something so critical to Roy as the ongoing search to find General Grand’s philosopher’s stone experiment.

He found all uncertainties assuaged when Roy got to exactly that part – the philosopher’s stone. For the words had only just left Roy’s mouth when Armstrong’s expression darkened.

“He would bring that accursed thing back?” And a fist clenched so hard at Armstrong’s side that the joints creaked in protest. “Those who it didn’t destroy in some fashion it drove mad with power lust. And you’re certain of this? Of him?”

Roy had long been past the time of ever possibly doubting Ed’s word about this. “Yes. Which is why I need your help to find where he’s holed himself up. Hughes is doing what he can trailing Grand, but he can’t be on him every minute of the day, and I can’t risk him seeing me where I would have no reason to be. He won’t see you or Maes as any kind of a threat, and I can’t have him feeling threatened by me right now.”

“I’ll handle threatening him.” Edward pitched in darkly, casting his gaze towards Roy now.

Roy let himself meet silver eyes for a moment, knowing that even if he wanted to, he’d not be able to stop Edward from doing just that. He smiled faintly as he looked back at Armstrong who had remained silent in thought. “Well?”

Armstrong wasted no time in giving a concisely short nod. “I’ll speak to Major Hughes about combining our efforts in the most effective manner.”

“Anything that might help keep Maes safer.” Edward murmured. He didn’t want anything to happen to Maes, he liked the man. Perhaps not to the extent he liked Roy, but even so.

“He should be wandering around within the hour.” Roy told him as he pulled a stack of documents towards him that he knew Riza had delighted in piling there the night before.

Armstrong knew a dismissal when he heard it, and gave a gruff salute. “Sir.”

Edward looked after the massive man as Armstrong made his way out of the office, waiting until the door had closed behind him before turning to Roy who was currently looking up at him, patiently waiting. “He’s… strange. He seemed so carefree, hollering down the hallway at you, and then he’s all serious.”

“Not that Maes can’t be serious when the occasion calls for it, but Armstrong is so deeply ingrained in his family’s military heritage that it seems to be a quicker switch for him to flip.”

Edward smiled as he turned more towards Roy, his legs completely merged with the desk at this point. “And why were you in such a rush to shut him up? It sounded like he was going to give you some good material to harass the others about.”

“I don’t need anything to harass them about.” was the answering smirk, “I harass them about nothing at all just fine.” Roy remarked and he frowned down at the first document on the day’s stack. “He’ll go on and on if you let him, regaling you with tales of his family heritage and impeccable bloodlines, and soon you’ll find yourself wishing to end that bloodline yourself.”

Edward’s eyes were widened somewhat in disbelief. “Then I suppose you wouldn’t ask him back in
to tell me stories when I run out of books to read?”

Roy looked up through his lashes at Edward, one eyebrow cocked upwards. “Edward, if you ever get that bored, I’ll find you an exorcist. It’d be far kinder to you.”

Edward couldn’t help but laugh, shaking his head at the man. “Depends on how skilled the exorcist is.” And with a smirk he ducked himself down into the depths of the desk to find the last book he’d been reading.

And so they returned to their schedules as normal. Riza drifted in at several points during the morning, clearly not so certain that Roy would go back to his previous good behavior after having three afternoons in a row off. Yet Roy remained hard at work, even when Maes came crowing in to display the latest photography shoot results.

At one point Maes did calm down enough to be questioned by Roy about whether or not he’d had a conversation with Armstrong about what the plan was. Finding out that Armstrong had opted to take over most of the trailing and tracking duties from Maes, thus freeing the once-investigations member to what he did best. Investigating.

It was an arrangement that sat well with Roy, and one that made Edward’s relieved expression appear once again. He wasn’t sure how capable of an alchemist Alex Armstrong was, but it just didn’t seem logical that Roy would let any incapable alchemists anywhere near his private goals.

Lunch was a quiet affair, with food being delivered in. It was just passing the mid-afternoon mark when Roy stretched gracelessly in his chair with a grunting whine of a noise that distracted Edward from his reading.

“Are you quite all right?” Edward asked mildly.

Roy sent him a withering look as he relaxed back into a more natural position. “Just because you can’t enjoy the pleasures of a nice stretch anymore…” he trailed off with a wicked grin.

Edward harrumphed, sitting up primly on the couch and peering haughtily over his book at Roy. “I also enjoy the pleasures of never having a headache, something I should be most happy to arrange for you.”

Roy chuckled as he pushed back from his desk, taking the stack of finished paperwork in hand. “Give me one over a game of chess? I’m done for today and by protocol I’m required to still be here another two hours and thirty-seven minutes.”

The book was shut decisively. “My pleasure.” Edward promised with growing mischievousness.

As Roy dealt with the paperwork and Riza, Edward dealt with setting their game up. Doing so with a smile playing across his lips. It had been almost a week now since he’d been able to play chess with Roy, and now that they were back to it, he was beginning to realize how much he’d missed it.

There was something exceptionally soothing about going one-on-one with Roy at a board game and thoroughly trouncing him.

A delight that Edward proceeded to indulge in the moment Roy had sat down and made the first move.

“I gather that Armstrong was with you in Ishval?” Edward asked, having successfully made his venture to box in one of Roy’s knights.
Roy frowned at Edward’s move, trying to analyze a way to make the loss act to his benefit. “He was. He, Kimblee, Grand, Marcoh… Armstrong was one of the few of us who realized the wrongs we were committing by using that degree of power following orders blindly. He never went off the deep end like I did, I respect him a great deal for that.”

Edward’s lips had pulled together in a thin line as he contemplated both Roy’s words and the surprisingly good move that Roy had pulled out of his ass, “be fair. You can’t really know that. Not everyone shows or deals with shit like you went through the same way.”

Roy gave an absent shrug. “There’s dealing with shit, and then there’s what I did. Are you going to move that pawn?”

“No.” Edward was certainly not about to move that pawn and give Roy’s bishop a clear shot to his queen. “So who is this Marcoh guy?”

“A defector.” Roy answered with an absent shrug. “Chose a life as a hider rather than a fighter. I’m pretty sure everyone believes him dead, I was the only one he spoke to before he skipped out of Ishval with the philosopher’s stone samples.”

“I’m guessing you lied about that last part?”

Roy grunted affirmatively.

“So there’s no way Grand could have gotten his hands on those samples this Marcoh took?” Edward pressed, feeling the need to have some sort of outside reassurance, even though he knew that if Grand had located this Marcoh character, he’d have heard about it in the years before he’d met Roy.

“None. And I’m not about to tell him, or anyone else, where Marcoh is.” Roy said firmly as he knocked one of Edward’s rooks off the board with a little smirk.

That was good enough for Edward, and didn’t press further about the matter or Marcoh. He got the feeling that Roy had given him enough clues to figure out a few things for himself, but something inside him balked at knowing right now. He had enough on his mind already as of late without adding on questions about a man that Roy assured him was of no immediate threat.

And for several moves Edward remained silent, drug back into his thoughts of earlier this morning. Trying to figure out just what had happened between them last night. Roy had given him gifts before, so why was this latest one so different?

It wasn’t that Roy had never given him anything of a more personal nature either. In some manner, everything that Roy had ever given to him had been personal. From that photograph that still hung here in the office, to his bicycle at home, to even that photograph of his father. And those were just the material things that Roy had given him up to this point. That was nothing on the gestures Roy acted out.

And yet here he was now, entirely confused.

Roy waited it out as long as he could, unable not to notice that Edward was distracted. Again. And by the looks of it, whatever it was wasn’t just some general preoccupation. He’d even pulled off some bordering-on-illegal chess moves just to see if Edward would notice, and the spirit hadn’t. “Ed?”

Edward shook himself out of his internal musings to blink up at Roy. “Yeah?”

“What’s on your mind?” Roy asked for the second time today, this time his tone holding far more
Edward glared, the bastard had cheated? Leave Roy alone for a minute… “move them back properly.” He demanded with scowl still in place.

Roy linked his fingers together to rest his chin down onto them. “No.” He denied quite simply. “Not until you tell me what’s going on in that head of yours. You’re never like this, all closed up for an entire day.”

“It’s not been an entire day yet…” Edward muttered petulantly, even as his body posture signaled that he’d given in. If not reluctantly. “I don’t know what it is exactly, that’s the problem. Ever since last night I’ve – you’ve given me gifts before… it doesn’t seem right that some should make me feel any different than the others. I should be happy about all of them.”

Roy didn’t make any outward reaction at first, before at last he tipped his head down and his hands fell away back to the desk. “Have any of them made you unhappy?”

“No!” Edward answered quickly, eyes wide.

Roy studied the ghost for a moment longer, toying with one of his captured pawns in a covert effort to sneak it back onto the chessboard. “It’s okay, you know, to feel different amounts of happiness about gifts. Different kinds.”

“I know that.” Edward frowned at him, “but last night it felt,” he tipped his head as he searched for a decent enough word, only coming up with “special. Different from the others.”

Roy tapped the pawn slowly back across the chessboard, maneuvering it back to the nearest square as quickly as he dared, his eyes never leaving the silver ones watching him so attentively. “It was.” He agreed, head tilting as well to mimic Edward. “Edward, what I gave you last night was something I wouldn’t give to anyone else. Not even my mother. I’m glad it’s special to you. Like I said, I thought I had dignity around you, I clearly don’t. You get to witness the undignified side of me.”

Edward’s lips drew into a tight line as he considered the explanation, looking away at one point when Roy’s unwavering gaze seemed to strangely be too much for him. And he was trying to decide how to ask Roy the question he’d only before asked him in the depth of the night, without it sounding completely ridiculous, when something distracted him. “Hey!”

Roy yanked his hand back with a laugh, the pawn clattering from his grip as Edward swiped across the desk at him. Grinning unrepentant in the face of the apparition’s scowling, he winked at the ghost. “I wasn’t doing anything, I swear!”

Edward sniffed as he grabbed all of Roy’s beaten pieces and pulled them closer to himself. “Your guilty reaction says otherwise, Mustang.”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Roy retorted with the same wicked grin.

They were still arguing about it when there was a firm rapping on the office door. An interruption that caused Edward to silently vow that he’d finish with Roy later, and proceeded to stare as unnervingly as he could manage at his cheating chess partner.

Roy merely smirked at the stewing ghost and called for whoever it was to enter.

“What are you doing?” Maes’s expression pulled sourly across his face as he made his way into the
office.

Roy glanced down at the chessboard. “Arguing with myself over strategy. What’s up?” He asked, looking back up at his befuddled friend with a purely innocent expression.

Maes passed one hand over his face, giving a shake of his head. “Since Armstrong is providing some assistance I was going to ask if you wanted to catch a drink later, but forget asking. You need a drink if you’re fighting with yourself about a chess game.”

“On the contrary,” Roy smirked, “it is a good method of debate. It doesn’t sound half as convincing if I carry the entire thing on in my head.”

“Uh-huh.” Maes deadpanned.

Roy waved one gloved hand dismissively. “I’m fine, Maes. Trust me.”

“You’re still coming out with me for a drink.”

Roy’s grin was positively wolfish, but he shook his head. “Sorry, Maes. You make a tempting offer, but you’re married to a very lovely woman and I wouldn’t want to come between that.”

“Don’t forget Elysia!” Maes exclaimed swiftly. “She’s my…” he trailed off, his eyes narrowing suspiciously beneath his glasses as he considered his smiling best friend. “Nice try, but I’m serious.”

“As am I.” Roy countered promptly.

Edward could only look between the two, trying not to smile too much at their banter. He still had an argument to win with Roy after all, he couldn’t be getting too softened up.

“Look, you can still pick up other women, or men, you won’t hurt my feelings.” Maes bargained with a roll of his eyes.

Roy tipped his chair back, sinking into it as he regarded his friend. Only for a moment, however, as his eyes slipped aside to rest on Edward. And for a time he just looked at Edward, long after the ghost had returned his attention. “Tempting offer, really, but I’m still declining.” He said at last, looking back up at a shocked Maes. “I’ve got other plans. Maybe another night?”

Maes’s expression turned suspicious, “other plans? What other plans? I know you, and you never have other plans for an evening out.”

“Tonight I do.” Roy maintained, “we’ll do it another night. You have my word on that, but not tonight.”

Edward was frowning at him, “tonight’s your night to yourself, but it doesn’t mean you don’t need to blow him off. I’ll let you have a night for just you and him, I mean, he is your best friend.”

Maes, meanwhile, had sighed in temporary defeat before he pointed a finger at Roy. “All right. But I’ll figure this out, just you wait.”

Roy merely shook his head with a smile, and traded several friendly insults with the man before Maes bowed out intending to instead go home early to his wife. Gracia would be surprised, mostly because Maes had phoned ahead to tell her he’d be out with Roy, but Roy had no doubt that she would be equally as amiable to having her husband home early.

Which left Edward alone with Roy once more.
“You should have gone for a drink with him.” Edward rebuked, “he’s a lot better company than those loose women and men you surround yourself with. I’m still not convinced they’ve all been virgins.”

Roy shook his head as he reached forward across his desk to pick up the telephone receiver. “Another night.” He insisted, quickly dialing the number he needed. Whereupon he proceeded to ignore Edward as he waited for it to be picked up.

Edward could only wait, one foot tapping forward against the desk. Maybe Maes was right, Roy just might need a drink. He wouldn’t have ever thought that Roy would turn down a night out with his best friend, or that he’d subsequently continue putting off their chess game in order to randomly make a phone call.

“This is Colonel Mustang,” Roy said the very moment the other line was picked up, “I need a car waiting for me at the front in half an hour. No driver needed.” And once he had his confirmation, hung up.

“What do you need a car for?” Edward questioned in confusion, his curiosity definitely piqued now. Just what was Roy up to?

Roy met Edward’s gaze now with a growing smile. “For us.”

Which ended up being all that Edward could get out of him. So eventually he had to resign himself to waiting it out, and took his confused impatience out on Roy’s chess pieces.

Roy seemed disappointingly unaffected by losing the match.

A half an hour later they were packing up the chessboard so that they could go home. Or to whatever it was that Roy had up his sleeve. Edward wondered idly if there was such a thing as a ghostly kidnapping, because Roy still wouldn’t tell him what he had planned. Yet shortly they were making their way down to the courtyard where a car was, in fact, waiting.

The officer who had driven it up passed off the keys to Roy with a respectful salute before expertly making himself scarce so as not to hold the Colonel up.

Edward hesitated next to the car, looking over at Roy as the man opened the driver’s side door just in time to see him direct a challenging look his way. The message in Roy’s eyes was clear. ‘Coming?’ It wasn’t a challenge he meant to let get away from him, and without a second thought to it, floated his way into the car and up to the passenger seat where he let himself rest down.

“Have you ever been in a car before?” Roy asked as he started the engine.

Edward looked over at the steering wheel as he shook his head, a small, nervous smile beginning to make its way onto his lips. “My teacher, Izumi, took Al and I out on her boat a few times.”

“This is a bit different than a boat.” Roy grinned as he shifted the car into gear and pulled out along the courtyard driveway, aiming for the gates. “You’ll enjoy this.”

“You borrowed a car just to take me out in it?” Edward asked him in surprise, puzzled.

“Not exactly.” Roy disagreed, braking the car just enough to check for traffic before pulling out onto the roadway and giving the car the acceleration it craved. “I’m taking you somewhere, not just anywhere. It’s a bit of a drive, but we should be there before it gets too dark.”

“But what about your night to yourself?”
“This is my night to myself, with you.” Roy corrected, flicking a quick smile Edward’s way. “You’ve clearly had a lot on your mind, and I want to spend tonight with you. You started to worry me, you know.”

Edward looked around the car a bit guiltily, even though he knew it was really nothing to feel guilty about. But as quickly as that guilt had come, it began to vanish as he smiled. Inordinately happy by the other piece of what Roy had said. “Just because of that?”

Roy found himself smiling at the road ahead. “I missed you today.”

Edward blinked owlishly at him. “But I was right there, all day.”

“Still missed you.” Roy replied quietly, his smile more muted now. “Realized that we don’t get to talk as much when I have paperwork.”

Edward chose not to point out that they hadn’t exactly spent every moment together these past three afternoons talking. There had been plenty of companionable silence between them as well. Yet he kept that to himself, as he had a feeling Roy already knew it. Besides, he was far too pleased.

So without any further postponement, he began to ask every question he could think of about automobiles – and was very firmly told at one point that the only way he was ever getting behind the wheel was never. Roy didn’t seem to care when he pointed out that that had made no sense.

Before they left the city entirely, Roy had stopped at a small diner to acquire dinner take-out, further impressing upon Edward that he had Roy fully and completely to himself tonight. Back out on the road Edward knew that the drive was taking a long time, but he barely even noticed it. He was far too engrossed in watching the scenery zip by past the car windows.

The world outside Central was green and home to many orchards in their neat little rows. And several times Edward had been delighted to see cows again, causing Roy to shake his head with amusement, only to be berated that he’d not seen such big cows in Risembool.

Eventually the orchards and farms were left far behind, yet Roy kept on driving westward after the path the sun had already taken, casting the sky back into darkness. The bob of light from the headlights on the road ahead showed Edward that they were gradually leaving behind the verdant area they’d first been in, yet Roy kept driving.

After almost an hour more of straight driving, in which the world around them became quite barren and dry looking, Edward was getting ready to ask Roy if he’d thought to bring a map when the car began to slow and Roy’s head began to swivel around as he looked for a good place to pull off.

“Here? There’s nothing out here.” Edward frowned as the car tires crunched into looser-feeling dirt. “If you’ve brought me out here to murder me, something beat you to it.”

Roy rolled his eyes, working on braking the car to a stop slowly. He didn’t feel like choking on dust when he got out. “You’d be too much trouble to murder. I’d have you haunting me instead of Grand.”

As the car gently swayed forward into the stop, Edward looked around at the landscape that was only dimly lit by the moon and stars now that Roy had turned the headlights off. “Where are we?”

“Middle of nowhere.” Roy observed as he looked around with satisfaction, and then brimmed with energy. “Come on, get out. You’ll see why I brought you here.”

Edward eyed Roy suspiciously, but as the man got out of the car, so did he. Floating out to stand in
front of the car he looked around as best he could as his eyes continued to adjust to the darkness. They really were in the middle of nowhere. In the far distance he could spot what looked like mountains, but all around them seemed to be nothing but flat... Edward shifted his left foot a bit deeper into the ground as he judged the give of it. Sand?

“This way.” Roy waved for Edward to follow him, not taking any time to look around, and cheerfully jogged across the sand several yards away from the car.

Edward darted after him, still miffed, but now beyond curious. “What are you doing?” He asked as he reached Roy’s side where the man was now digging about in the sand as happily as could be.

Roy smiled over at the ghost as Edward settled down beside him where he already knelt in the sand. And he let his eyes trace the ghost’s figure a moment, admiring the way Edward seemed to shine even brighter out here away from artificial light that was so impossible to escape in the city. When had he started getting used to the way Edward glowed with that silvery, ethereal light that it took dragging the ghost out into the middle of nowhere to notice it again?

Clearing his throat though, not wanting to be caught staring, he looked away. “My display case could use some additions, you like cows, right?”

Edward couldn’t help but laugh despite his confusion. “Yes, I suppose so.”

“Good enough for me.” Roy smiled and gathered together a pile of sand in front of him, at least arm’s length away. Taking a moment to put himself in the proper mindset for doing this – as it had been years – he stretched forward to trace out a basic imprint of a specialized alchemic circle before snapping as he quickly leaned back.

Edward’s eyes widened as the flames burst explosively into life, and suddenly understood why Roy had placed himself so far away from it. The intensity of it was easily illuminating all the way back to where they’d left the car. The snaps and crackles of the flames as they roared with restrained fury inside the circle was like nothing Edward had ever witnessed before.

And he’d accidentally set fire to a field once with Alphonse’s assistance.

Roy allowed himself a few seconds to look over at Edward, smiling as he saw the stunned attention the spirit was giving to his little hobby. He felt gratified, really, because he knew there was no way that Edward was able to feel the tremendous amount of heat that was being left off. Most people couldn’t stand it, but he had been a lot closer to fire than most people.

By instinct, he knew it was almost complete, so he turned away to watch the flames once more as they fought angrily for space within the alchemic circle. Carefully judging the right moment before he snapped once more.

Edward toppled back onto his rear with a muted noise of surprise as the flames exploded upward into a shower of firework-looking sparks before vanishing in a wispy cloud of smoke dimly apparent in the night air. Another bright flash jerked his attention back to where the caged fire had been, and his eyes widened as they lit upon the glass cow figurine that stood proudly in the midst of charred sand.

Roy sat back and watched with a pleased smile as Edward reached forward carefully, as if some part of him that still remembered being alive feared to be burned, and took the glass figurine in hand. The mystified look on Edward’s face as he turned it over and over, continuously running a finger along the pointed horns was well worth the bit of sweat this activity caused.

And then he had a sudden remembrance which wrung an “oh!” out of him.
Edward was distracted from the cow as he looked over to where Roy was suddenly scooping together a much larger pile of sand. Yet he didn’t have a chance to even ask before Roy had completed whatever circle it was he was using – in the dark no less – and snapped.

In concern for the glass cow, he cupped it closer to himself in an attempt to keep it away from the heat he knew existed. But he didn’t drag his eyes away from the fire.

When it was over, and a brilliant flash of icy light that Edward suspected came from another circle Roy was employing in order to cool and set the glass, he tilted his head with a small smile. “I don’t think that will fit in the display case.”

Roy looked over at Edward with a mischievous grin. “Whoever said it was going in the case? You said you wanted a pony, there’s your pony.”

Edward laughed as he stared straight into the glass eyes of the miniature-sized pony. It would barely come up to Roy’s waist at the highest point. “You chose my pony well. A fine specimen.” He agreed sagely with a nod to the noble pony. “But it’s a bit small, isn’t it?”

Roy looked over at Edward wryly. “So are you, but you don’t find me complaining.” And was forced to duck Edward’s attempt to smack him, even if it would only pass right through. “I was kidding!” He defended, rolling away as Edward made a lunge for him – having set the glass cow safely aside by its equine counterpart.

How Roy eventually escaped ghostly indignation he wasn’t sure, but set out to appease said indignant ghost by creating more little trinkets. He’d been meaning to expand his collection, and now that he was here, he couldn’t honestly imagine a better way to do it than with Edward eagerly giving him suggestions.

When at last Edward did help Roy pack the glass figurines back to the car, piling them carefully onto the backseat, a miniature zoo had joined the cow and the pony; among them a squirrel, a deer with an expansive rack, a rabbit, Maes, something Roy called an elephant, a turtle, and a puppy.

And as Roy began the long drive back to Central, Edward dutifully obeyed Roy’s request to keep him talking so he wouldn’t fall asleep at the wheel by insisting Roy tell him about elephants which apparently the man had met on one of his undercover missions back around the time he’d first joined the military before the war in Ishval. And after that story was over, insisted Roy tell him why Maes was to be part of the animal menagerie.

As Roy talked Edward had settled into the car seat, curled up and facing Roy with contentment pleasantly pulsing inside him. His cares of the day long gone from his mind in this moment as he listened to the warm amusement coloring Roy’s voice as the man rambled on incriminating Maes.
“Were you being entirely truthful when you said death wasn’t so bad?”

Edward couldn’t help his smug smirking as he watched Roy flop miserably onto his opposite side. Whether to get away from him, or Hazel, he wasn’t sure, but either way it wouldn’t help, the sun was in that direction. “Initially for me it was quite painful. But you will not die from only getting three hours of sleep, which I might remind you, is fairly normal for you.”

“Yes, but I was driving most of the night.” Roy felt obliged to point out, stifling a groan as Hazel scampered around to his face.

Edward let his head fall back as from the very corner of his eye he watched Hazel begin mussing Roy’s hair. The high-maintenance man would surely be appreciative. “So are you telling me you regret what we did last night?”

The reaction was instantaneous.

“No!” Roy whirled up into a seated position to stare, shocked, at the ghost.

Edward tipped his head back down, shooting Roy a teasing smile. “Then there’s no reason for you to want to die. So get your lazy, complaining ass in that shower before you run late. The country was never run by a ghost fuhrer.”

“It might unknowingly be co-run as such.” Roy pointed out as he gathered Hazel up into his arms for a morning man-cuddle, smiling as Hazel butted up against the underside of his chin to demand petting. “Okay, fine.” He gave in, and as he affectionately began rubbing a hand up and down Hazel’s body he swung himself out of bed.

Edward watched silently as Roy vanished into the bathroom with the squirrel and shook his head. “There he goes, thinking I’m a tool again.” He grumbled with a constant smile.

When he heard the shower turn on, and shortly thereafter the sound of a body interfering with the spray, he slipped out of the bed himself. Leaving Roy in the trusted and capable paws of Hazel, he made his way downstairs. Actually making a point to take the stairs this time. And once he’d reached the landing he turned into the living room where the wooden cabinet with its glass door showcased the glass figurines – both old and new.

After they’d gotten home last night, or rather, it was more like much earlier this morning, they’d hauled in the new figurines with much care. The resulting minutes were spent rearranging what was currently in the case and manipulating the shelves in order to fit everything without the risk of cramming one at the top.

The only figurine they’d not managed to fit due to its size was the glass pony.

That had been set strategically next to the sofa, a prancing and noble creature. Tall enough not to look silly where it was, and not tall enough so as to get in the way.

Edward had been assured that if Hazel did knock it sideways onto what he was told was a very plush carpet, that even if it did break, it could easily be repaired. Personally, he was of the opinion that at the point in time he and Roy went off on their own for another weekend or longer, that the pony was
being moved behind a securely closed door.

After a moment spent happily examining the fruits of Roy’s alchemical show last night, he went in search of one of the man’s research journals and flopped himself onto the sofa to begin reading. It seemed the more he learned about what Roy was capable of with alchemy, and the more that he saw, the more he was convinced further away from the idea that Roy was a one-trick pony.

Smirking a bit at his own thoughts, Edward found a promising looking section of the journal and began to read.

That was how Roy found him, wandering out from the kitchen where he had grabbed himself an apple to eat. A task that was more difficult than it should be, what with Hazel trying to snatch it away whenever the rodent thought he wasn’t paying enough attention to the fruit.

“Budge over.” Roy murmured as he came around to sit.

Edward pulled his legs up automatically to make room for him to sit, feeling the sofa dip beneath him and then level out as Roy did. “Feeling awake enough to drive?”

Roy thought fondly back to that singular cup of coffee he’d managed and proceeded to drink down in one fail swoop just minutes ago. “I will be. But we are getting more coffee on our way home tonight.”

“What are we doing tonight?” Edward asked then as he turned the page.

“Besides getting coffee?” Roy mused aloud and took another bite out of his apple – much to Hazel’s dismay – to think about it. “Well you could practice riding that bike of yours. Or we could take a little tour of some more of Central. Were there any other places you really wanted to see besides the library?”

Edward had lowered the book at this point in order to look through his knees at Roy. Slowly he began to sit up until he was directly facing Roy, the book forgotten for the moment. “There weren’t. Everywhere I’ve lived before now has been too small to expose me to much at all. What do people do in big cities? I mean, people besides yourself.”

Roy tried not to read between the lines on that one. “Well if we take Maes’s opinion on the matter, it’s a nice happy place of toy stores, playgrounds, the zoo, the theatre – of which I also go to on occasion I’ll have you know,” he told Edward with a stern expression.

“Alone?” Edward smirked back in retort.

“Clearly not anymore, as I’d have you with me.” Roy rejoined smugly.

Edward rolled his eyes, “doesn’t quite give me the full answer.” And then he peered closely at the man. “Are you inviting me?”

“Tonight?”

Edward nodded.

Roy considered his companion thoughtfully, lips slightly pulled together in his consideration. “If there are any plays happening, yes. Would you like to go to the theatre with me?”

Edward grinned at him then, “what do I look like, a girl?”
Roy scoffed in annoyance and swatted Edward’s way. “Fine. See if I ask you again.”

“Please do.” Edward’s teasing grin had slipped into a smile clearly reflected in his silver eyes. His demeanor quite changed from the playfulness of before to something Roy couldn’t quite put his finger on.

He did the only thing he could do when faced with such a request. He smiled back. “Will you come to the theatre with me? If not tonight, then one day when there is a play?”

Edward tilted his head as if giving it some thought, but his smile never faded. “I think you just might be able to convince me.”

“Good.” Roy passed the apple core up to Hazel’s eagerly grasping paws and looked over his shoulder as the squirrel began to hurry away to munch on his new treat. “Don’t you go leaving mushy bits of that where I’ll step when all the lights are off.”

Edward smirked at the thought, and wondered if Hazel didn’t, if he would somehow be able to get away with doing that and not get the squirrel in trouble. “I take it you speak from experience?”

“You’ve no idea the presents that animal has left for me.” Roy informed the spirit frankly as he rose up. “You ready to get going? We do need to return the car, so you could read a bit longer if you wanted.”

Edward quickly closed the book he’d forgotten about, passing it over to the coffee table for later. “No. I’m ready. You’ll be able to show me more of Central this way. At least for this morning.”

More than amiable to the decision, Roy wandered off to get the car keys while leaving Ed to do whatever it was Ed did. Not too long later they were getting in the car and driving off in what Roy claimed to be a good direction for a scenic tour that would take them past the worst of the morning rush of people, bicycles, and the few cars and horse-drawn carts heading in from the surrounding countryside to visit the morning market.

During the drive, when Edward wasn’t looking around with avid fascination, he was still attempting to convince Roy to one day teach him how to drive a car. There was a reason he spent more time staring out at the surroundings, they were far more agreeable.

Eventually they did end up at Headquarters, whereupon Roy left the car sitting at the curb and tossed the keys to one of the officers standing around on security detail at the main entrance. No direction was needed, and the officer hurried off to take care of the car after a prompt salute to the Colonel.

When they got up to Roy’s office, secure in their privacy, Roy looked over to the ghost as he walked around to his desk. “Today is Friday, you know.”

Edward hesitated with a bit of shock, somewhere near the ceiling and the wall. For a moment he just blinked before he dropped down to the floor to consider the man in confusion. “Wait… really?” And he tilted his head as he quickly thought about it. Three days for the exam started on Monday, then yesterday… “Why are you staying home tonight?”

“Well technically I’ll be going out with you, so it’s not quite staying home.” Roy pointed out with a smirk as he settled into his chair with a purposeful air. “Besides, tonight is your night. Seven days in the week means every now and then my every-other-day schedule lands with you on typical date night. Last night hardly counts, you were worrying me. That matters more.”

Edward continued to look dumbfounded as he slowly crossed over to sit on the edge of a couch. “Friday… I didn’t even realize.”
“We’ve been having a lot of fun.” Roy grinned momentarily before clearing his throat. “Which means tomorrow is the weekend. I know it’s short notice, but do you want to get out of the city and go anywhere?”

“Go where?” Edward blinked again, confused. “I don’t want to go back to Risembool if that’s what you mean. I can get there on my own now, thanks to you. I could go anytime I wanted. And I’m not sure your lies would hold up if anyone saw you again so soon.”

Roy shook his head with a smile, “no, not Risembool. Actually, if you don’t have any preferences, there is someplace I’d like to take you. I think you’d like it there.” He considered Edward quite closely then, “I think it would be good for you to see it.”

“Where?” Edward demanded in rising curiosity, almost anxious for another trip. Then suddenly added with a forbidding look, “and don’t tell me it’s another secret.”

Roy laughed, fighting off the temptation to do just that. He’d already done that to Edward once, and for good reason, but there was no good reason to do it again now. “From most people, yes. But I’d like you to see where I grew up.”

“Really?” Edward was stunned. It had always been a suspicion in the back of his mind that one day he would see Roy’s first home, as Roy had seen his, but he’d thought that he would have had to ask to see. Or that Roy would just one day take him there for family-related reasons. Never as an offered vacation.

Roy nodded, a mischievous smile slipping onto his face as he tried to picture his mother’s face when he just showed up on the front lawn. “Only Maes has been there before, and Riza only knows where it is.” And he leaned forward over his desk with the enthusiasm of a cunning child. “It’s not just anyone I’ll take there, so you want to go?”

Edward grinned back, entirely taken in. “The chance to see where the Flame Alchemist grew up? Roy, don’t you know anything about me? Former alchemic genius sitting here!”

“Oh, right, how could I forget,” Roy rolled his eyes as he flopped backwards into his chair with a grin he was failing at concealing, “you’re only with me because I’m the “Flame Alchemist”,” he air-quoted petulantly.

Edward smirked at him. “That’s right. It has nothing at all to do with your narcissism, your ability to see me, your personality, or the fact that you spoil me when I’m just a ghost.”

Roy winked at him, but let his head fall to one side as he considered his silvery companion. And quite honestly, he said, “I’d spoil you even if you weren’t. You’re not just a ghost, not to me.”

Edward felt his smirk fade to a smile, peaceful warmth filling him at Roy’s words. Words he’d heard before, and yet, they never failed to make him feel content. And for a time he just sat there, warmly gazing at Roy with that same soft smile. “What would you have done with me had I not done what I did and lived?”

“I still would have spoiled you.” Roy answered quietly, almost reverently. “Taken you, both of you, away with me. And I’d not have let you go. I still won’t let you go.”

Edward’s head tilted to one side as his smile grew a bit, his hands gripping the edge of the couch as he began to swing his legs back and forth slowly. As if he were timing it to the time it was taking him to think. Not rushed, a steady calm as he relaxed into this peace he felt at this very moment. “I waited here seven years for you. You don’t need to worry about me trying to leave you.”
Roy didn’t answer, he wasn’t sure he could have if he’d wanted to. He knew nothing he said would be the truth, and he just couldn’t bring himself to lie to Edward about it. He still worried, even after Risembool, that Edward might one day leave him, and the ghost knew it. Edward hadn’t said that as some simple, sweet remark. It had been said as yet another attempt to try and gently convince him that he had nothing to fear.

But he still feared it. He knew he did.

The matter was left to the side, however, when Hawkeye entered the office with a cheerful greeting and a stack of paperwork that was significantly smaller than all the stacks before it.

“Where’s the rest of it?” Roy asked, verging on sounding offended as the paperwork was set before him with a less-than-impressive thump.

Hawkeye looked at the stack she’d just been able to carry in with one hand, for once, and then looked back up at her Colonel with amusement. “I can try to find you more if you like. But it seems that yesterday might not have been quite as eventful for the country.”

“Have Breda and Falman go raid explosives storage of C4 then and do some demolition somewhere. Everyone enjoys a good explosion! It makes for eventful paperwork.” Roy suggested quite eagerly, sounding more than serious.

Edward rolled his eyes in sync with Hawkeye, and wondered if he might need to make a week’s end visit to Grand in effort to make Roy feel better about the chaotic state of the country.

“Just enjoy the break, finish it, and get your ass out of here early.” Hawkeye told him in a mildly exasperated tone before shaking her head at him with a weary smile. “I may never know what’s gotten into you, sir, but I’m glad of it.”

Both Edward and Roy watched her leave, and the ghost gave a mournful sigh. “I’ll never get the accolades I deserve for lighting the fire under your ass.”

“As if it was entirely you.” Roy scoffed, but when he turned to his paperwork it was with a smile unable to be entirely hidden by his resting his chin down into his hand.

Edward only shook his head at the man before grabbing a book and floating up to his favored corner of the ceiling and opening the book, began to read. And he stayed as long as he could manage it, but when a ghost ran out of books, he ran out of books. And mentally he made a note to have Roy switch out the selection next week. So turning his attention instead to Roy, who was a goodly way through the much slimmer stack of paperwork, he cleared his throat to catch the man’s attention before saying: “do you think I have time to go visit Grand?”

Roy underlined something on one of the files before looking up at the ghost, the end of the pen tapping against his lips. “Of course. This file alone will take me almost up until the lunch hour. It’s a bit detailed. Just be careful.”

“You always say that.” Edward smiled in humored resignation, “and you know I always am. Besides, you know nothing can happen to me.”

“When the Gate stops tormenting you with the fact that it can cause you pain, I’ll stop telling you to be careful.” Roy rebuked him, pointing the nub of his pen in Edward’s direction. “So be careful, and bring me details if you do anything to him.”

Edward snorted, waving a hand flippantly. “I always do something to him.” And catching Roy’s look gave an amused, exasperated sigh. “And I’ll be careful, mother.”
Roy could only shake his head, trying not to smile in his own exasperation as Edward vanished out of the office. He had a growing suspicion every day that Edward’s mother must have truly had her hands full raising him. Much like his own mother. “Perhaps if we’d grown up together in the same town our mother’s would have formed a support group.” And he was halfway through another page of the file when he burst into stifled laughter. “No wonder mom drinks so much.”

As it was, by favor of good fortune or really bad luck, depending on how Grand took stock of his current situation, he was not in his office.

“You are trying my patience.” The words not done justice with the unendingly friendly tone Fuhrer Bradley employed ninety-eight percent of the time.

But General Grand was not misunderstanding in the least, and fought to keep his shoulders squared under the weight of disapproval in the unwavering gaze he was being pinned to the ostentatious rug with. “I’ve run into setbacks. They happen from time to time, they always have. But they’re only temporary, Fuhrer Bradley; they always are.”

Bradley’s eyes narrowed marginally, taking stock of the lumbering tool he was currently stuck with. For all the firm reassurances he’d been being handed over the years, it had been just that, years. “What Marcoh was able to create in the space of a month took you a year, three months, and six days.”

“Tim Marcoh had his specialty.” Grand defended through gritted teeth and a tense jaw. “But you gave me the information I need, it won’t be much longer now.”

“I gave you that information years ago when you proved yourself capable of at least muddling your way through to the step Marcoh left off at. And even with my very concise directions, you are encountering setbacks.” Everything but the Fuhrer’s voice indicated displeasure, and for Grand, it was downright disconcerting. “I’ve been lenient, but so are you being. Do not make the mistake of thinking my leniency is interminable.”

General Grand did his best not to flinch at the implications of how such leniency might terminate, and he stubbornly glared at his superior. “With all due respect, sir, you’re asking me to acquire numbers near to this city’s population! Spacing out the acquiring of the main ingredients is necessary to avoid suspicion. Suspicion which carries implications neither of us would want to face!”

“You make the mistake of thinking that this will in any way be able to be tied back to me.” Bradley’s tone had suddenly gone to an almost deathly quiet, devoid of any pleasantry of before. “If you screw this up, it’s being hung around your neck entirely. So don’t screw up, Brigadier General. And work faster, draw from other cities if you need to. The source does not matter, just get me what I need. That’s all you should be worrying about.”

Grand managed not to waver under the threat only by virtue of dignity.

“And do stop injuring yourself.” Fuhrer Bradley added, the friendliness back in his voice. “You’re of little use to me incapacitated, remember that.”

“Yes, Fuhrer.” Grand answered, fighting to keep the churlish undercurrent out of his voice.

Bradley studied him piercingly a moment longer before giving a slight nod meant as dismissal. “I expect you to have better news for me next week when you report.”

General Grand was halfway to a salute when he paused, lowering his hand as he fixed the Fuhrer with a wooden look. “What of Colonel Mustang?”
“What of him? He won’t help you with this.” Bradley found himself laughing at the mere thought. “The man is a decorated war hero. He’d never step a toe out of line and risk sullying his name for something we both know he would find inherently wrong. Which is a shame for you, he’s brilliant.”

Grand tried not to read too much into a potential implication. “I don’t trust him.”

The Fuhrer actually found himself resisting the entirely too human urge to roll his eyes. “If you did you’d be even more a fool than I currently find you. You wanted him here to keep a closer eye on him, so don’t tell me that all of a sudden you’ve remembered he should scare the shit out of you. Now do your job, General. Or I’ll find someone who doesn’t always come to me with setbacks to do your job for you.”

Grand looked at him seriously a moment longer, before quickly executing a salute followed by a short bow. Only then did he beat an as unrushed seeming retreat as possible. He was a Brigadier General, he had standards to maintain, and besides, rushing pulled uncomfortably on several of his healing injuries.

He had work to do, he knew it; and a lackey to put on Mustang’s tail, just in case. He had too much at stake and couldn’t afford any interference from a glorified pyromaniac.

General Grand entered his office that day not knowing he’d escaped a more imminent disaster by only minutes.

Meanwhile a certain ghost had already made his way back up to Roy’s office.

“Not quite the result you were hoping for?” Roy asked as he caught sight of the silver figure entering the room, looking up to see that Edward seemed less than pleased. And he found himself completely forgetting about his paperwork in the process.

Edward was frowning as he hovered up near the center of the ceiling, before suddenly flipping upside down to look at Roy that way. “He wasn’t there. I just wonder where he was.”

Roy’s mouth tightened towards a straight line a moment before it eased. “It is normal work hours for both Maes and Armstrong. Wherever Grand was, I guarantee you he had one of those two keeping tabs on him.”

“I know, but still.” Edward looked off to the side, “I guess I’m a little disappointed. Messing with him makes me feel like I can do something to help.”

Roy considered a moment, before laying down his pen and getting up from his chair. Walking around the desk he stretched up a hand to Edward who was still upside down on the ceiling. “Come on down from there. All the ectoplasm is rushing to your head and muddling your thoughts.” And he waited with hand outstretched until Edward gave in and floated down well within arm’s reach and standing properly. “I’m going to tell you something that even Grand would understand: never rush to pull a trigger.”

Edward’s head tilted somewhat with a small frown. “Grand would understand that?”

“Well,” Roy gave a humorless laugh as he lowered his hand from where it had rested near Edward’s arm, “maybe not now. But any man with his aim would have once learned that. Sometimes you have to track a target, even if you can’t always see it, before you can take a final shot.”

“But you’re tracking completely blind! How can you be so composed?” Edward demanded.

“Because I’m not a marksman.” Roy smiled then. “I’m something far better. So be patient. Wherever
he was, he was being followed there. And who knows, maybe when we get back on Monday he’ll be in a far more vulnerable state after spending so many consecutive days in the clear of random acts of violence against him.”

At last, Edward finally nodded, and after several seconds spent in seemingly deep thought, gave Roy a sudden bright smile. “I’ll have an entire weekend with you to plan what to do to him next! You will help me, won’t you?”

Roy’s laugh was real this time, “my talents are always at your disposal.”

Edward rolled his eyes. “Just be sure to use discretion. There are some talents you’ve alluded to that I don’t want to know anything about. In fact, I will stick your motorcycle in a tree if I ever see more of your supposed talents than I want to see.”

“Hey now,” Roy complained, turning to follow after Edward who had headed past him towards the desk with a wicked smirk. “That’s just below the belt, messing with my motorcycle.”

“Funny how the punishment would fit.” Edward shot Roy a grin over his shoulder.

“Get your mind out of the gutter.” Roy rebuked moodily, and then made a mad dash for his office chair as he caught wind of Edward’s intentions. He barely beat the ghost there, falling into it with a cry of success.

He didn’t understand why Edward was laughing so hard until he looked up.

Hawkeye was standing at the door, both eyebrows raised towards her hairline, looking as if she didn’t know whether to write this off as just her superior being strange again, or if she should call down to the medical ward. “Sir, what are you doing?”

Roy snuck a glare towards the gaily laughing ghost, who only laughed harder as a result, and primly sat himself up straight in the chair. Holding his head high, he picked up his pen again as if nothing had happened. “My paperwork, of course.”

“And that little… maneuver was?” She asked, head weaving slowly side to side with each word as if it would help her understand.

“I was judging an acceptable leaping distance for matters regarding the State.” Roy held up the topmost file, brandishing it to her disbelieving eyes.

“Right.” Hawkeye said, in a tone that implied the exact opposite. “You know, sir, if you are missing your old glory days of being active in the field, I am sure the regular officers would not mind you joining them on the obstacle course. You can jump around as much as you like.”

Roy barked out a laugh and threw his pen down in exaggerated disgust. “I’d wound their egos. Now what do you want?”

“Lunch?” She posed the question as if it should have been obvious. “I tried paging you but you didn’t pick up the phone. I assume now that it was because you were trying out for the Military long jump team.”

Roy shot her a fond scowl, “shut up.” And he looked over to the clock, mouth pulling together in thought before looking back to her. “I’m going to skip it today. You all go on ahead without me. I want to finish these up — ” he tapped the thin pile of files, “ — and then get out of here. I have things I need to get done today, I’ll catch lunch on my way out.”
“Just make sure you won’t be reprimanded for cutting out early.” Hawkeye sighed, giving her Colonel up as a lost cause as far as today was concerned.

“You’re the one who suggested it!” Roy couldn’t help but point out with a grin.

Her eyebrows twitched upward again in a slight mockery, “I’m not your superior though, am I.”

Roy shuddered and gagged childishly. “The Fuhrer won’t mind. All I have to do is claim State Alchemist business and show him my library log of how many books I’ve checked out recently. We are meant to be self-sufficient and motivated, something more than what you regular officers are.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that last bit.” Hawkeye deadpanned, but she was smiling. “Just leave the files on my desk when you’re done, sir.” And with a resigned shake of her head exited the office with a perfunctory salute.

Roy waited until he was certain the door was firmly closed and Hawkeye wouldn’t be coming back through before he quickly rounded on Edward and flung his pen at said ghost who ‘eeped’ and dove to the floor for cover. “Brat.”

Edward surfaced with Roy’s pen and fresh laughter, and his silver eyes glittered with his mirth as he threw the pen right back at the man. “Idiot.”

Roy stuck his tongue out petulantly before rescuing his pen and getting back to work, ignoring Edward when the ghost came over to rummage through his desk – quite literally through. All he knew, on the edge of his consciousness, was that Edward pilfering pieces of blank paper and a pen couldn’t lead to too much chaos. At least, that was the general working theory when dealing with a bratty apparition.

And together they worked on their various projects in silence until Roy closed the last file with a groaning stretch and a pleased expression.

It didn’t take any effort at all to convince Edward that it was time to leave, and walking over with the small stack of paperwork, he looked down to see what the spirit had been working on. His eyes widened almost immediately, and a grin began to tug at his lips.

“Think they would work? I haven’t done one of these since I died.” Edward admitted, staring down at the pieces of paper that were littered with drawings of alchemy circles. There was only enough space between each circle to distinguish them as separate.

Roy let slip an amazed laugh. “Well I’ll be damned. Edward, if anyone could pull some of those more complicated ones off, it’d have been you.”

“You won’t try?” Edward teased then, brightly folding up the papers to take with him.

“On Hazel.” Roy determined as seriously as he could manage, strolling towards the office door. “When we get back Sunday evening and he has destroyed the house again.” And promptly ignored Edward’s protests with a wide grin as he ducked out of his office and hastily shut the door between them. As if it would stop the ghost.

It took Edward several blocks after they’d left Headquarters to convince the man to admit he wasn’t serious. Only to realize a short time later that they were heading the opposite direction of home, or anywhere else Edward had ever been for that matter.

There was certainly enough of that old, white world fading away to signal he was entering new territory. Although by the way Roy confidently walked along, it was familiar to him.
“Where are we going?”

Roy didn’t answer at first, only shot him a quick wink before moving forward just a bit more purposefully. They were almost there, and then Edward would have all the answers he needed.

“I’m being ghost-napped again.” Edward muttered, hopping up into the air and floating after him at the quicker pace. There was not much he could do about the fact that his legs were short and Roy’s legs were unfairly long, he refused to run to keep up with the man. He just knew Roy would tease him endlessly for it.

And then he began to notice the state of the current surroundings and groaned. “Roy, I know I get tonight with you and all, but you could have warned me you were wanting to pick up a specific sort of lunch.”

The look Roy gave him was entirely offended, and he huffed in indignant pride as he marched on. Doing quite admirably, he thought, in not smirking. And he led them past the upscale bars and restaurants, and several flower shops until he reached his destination; stopping to look up at the sign affixed to the façade with a certain smug contemplation.

Edward stopped as well, and not ever having seen a building like this before, with a curious frown he followed Roy’s gaze to the sign reading: ‘Central Theatre Group’. It took a moment to sink in, and then in his shock he could clearly feel Roy’s eyes on him, waiting.

Roy’s question was clear in the arch of an eyebrow, and the challenging twinkle in those dark eyes which exactly matched his smile.

Edward grinned, and nodded. “See when there’s a play next. I’ll go with you.”

Roy winked at him then, smile broadening in a pleased way as he sauntered over to the ticket office where a bored, pockmarked teenager who should have still been in school was manning the desk behind the plexiglas window. At least there was someone there, that was a good sign.

“Can I help you, sir?” The teen asked, seeming to come a bit more to life when faced with someone from the militia who might find cause to interrogate him if he didn’t extend gratuitous customer service.

“Not just yet.” Roy said dismissively, but was pleased to note that the teenager’s attention didn’t stray. Quickly he glanced at the schedule of upcoming events, and finding that there would be another show starting next week, turned his attention back onto the teenager. “Show me the chart of open seats for the Tuesday night performance.”

The chart was quickly tendered through the slot at the bottom of the window, a teenager’s hand along with it as the boy gripped onto a pen with which to point. “Anything that is not colored in by the green, sir.” He said, tapping at a green square in indication. You could never really know, after all, if someone was colorblind.

Roy only had to look for less than a minute before he motioned at the teenager, who quickly turned over to him a green pen. “Here. I want it reserved entirely.” He said, placing a rather blatant green ‘X’ over a square that he knew from experience denoted a private box seat almost right against the stage. It was the best view he could manage when he wanted to take Edward. He wanted to be able to talk to the ghost after all, and he couldn’t do that if they weren’t in private.

“Yes, sir!” The teenager perked up even more, and drew the chart back to him along with the pen. Quickly writing up the bill he tore off the customer copy which bore the monetary damage about to
happen to Roy’s bank account.

Roy couldn’t find it in himself to care. It would be entirely worth it to do this for Edward. So pulling out his wallet, he paid up. When he had the tickets in hand – four of them – he made his way back to Edward who had waited for him near the curb while he’d dealt with the transaction.

“Well?” Edward asked eagerly as Roy walked back over.

“You could have come over with me.” Roy teased, despite being quite obviously in public, and began to make his way back how they’d come.

“I was nervous.” Edward defended in a muttering way, as if ashamed to be heard.

Roy cut through an alley so they could talk, directing a frown over at his companion. “Why were you nervous? You do want to do this, right?”

Edward flipped around in front of Roy to get the man to stop, nodding eagerly. But he quickly looked away with an almost shy smile, which Roy couldn’t help but smile back at, and he waited patiently for Edward to explain.

“I’ve never been able to do anything like this before, and with you?” Edward gave him an amazed, searching look. “It feels kind of too nice to be real. I think it’s all still a bit much for me sometimes.”

Roy felt his smile slip, but his eyes were fond as they rested on Edward. “Well, you’re perfectly welcome to bring a support group of two other ghosts.” And he held up the four tickets, fanning them out so that Edward could see. “I wanted us to have privacy, but I’m not opposed to you bringing a few friends.”

Before Edward knew it, and although he didn’t understand why, he was laughing. And he was still laughing even as he followed after Roy who had flashed him a grin and resumed walking for home. Finally when he was able to get control over himself, he reclined in the air to float backwards and reach his hands out to where Roy held forward the tickets for him to see. “I’m not sure you could handle two more of me, Roy.”

Roy looked down at the four tickets in contemplation, and then shrugged as he looked down smilingly into Edward’s eyes. “I’m happy with just you.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Thirty-Two

The next morning was a rush of familiar activity.

Roy packed his suitcase for their overnight trip while Hazel watched with nefarious plots in his beady eyes and Edward darted around the rest of the house trying to secure what he could against a certain fluffy rodent.

It was a losing battle, but both human and ghost waged it.

And then they were firmly locking Hazel inside, whilst knowing what would happen as a result while they were gone, and set off for the train station despite that. Roy wasn’t sure what time the train would be leaving for the town he needed to get to, but it was better to get there early anyway than miss the only one.

Which was how they ended up sitting together on one of the many benches lining the platforms. One of which they would be needing in the coming two hours. Roy had predicted that meant they’d be able to finally get to his mother’s place just in time for him to get a late lunch. It seemed that their end destination was only about an hour or so walk away from the train station they’d end up at.

So while they waited, Edward was indulging in a game of yes-or-no questions that had long since caused him to dissolve into helpless chronic laughter.

“Will you survive if your mother ever finds out you have a motorcycle?” Edward asked with a wicked smirk.

Roy groaned, rolling his eyes and shaking his head empathetically in the hopes it would dissuade Edward from ever devising a prank to let his mother in on that little secret.

“Did you ever bring someone home for her to meet when you were younger?” He knew the details of Roy’s sexual escapades now, but he was admittedly a bit hazy on those before.

Roy cracked a small smirk as he shook his head again.

“Roy! Just how depraved are you?” Edward exclaimed with a fresh bout of laughter. “She does know then about your conduct with all your supposed virgins, right?”

Roy only grinned, shooting him a wink before nodding and settling back into his seat to stare down a small child who’d been watching him too long. Only grinning more when the child turned and ran back to its mother.

Edward watched the exchange with an almost exasperated look. “Do you like any kids besides Elysia?”

Roy shrugged in answer, he wasn’t exactly in a position to elaborate, and even if he could, what other children did he know? Not any. Maes was the only one who’d settled down like that, and personally, he took every precaution to be sure he didn’t end up with any children himself.

Edward shook his head wryly before plunging back into his questioning; mostly in the attempt to see if he could get Roy to break his silence and actually let slip a few words. So far, he wasn’t having much luck, but Roy’s expressions sometimes more than made up for it.
By the time their train had pulled in and unloaded its prior cargo and was made ready for boarding to the next destination, Roy hadn’t slipped once. Which made the already cocky man preen with pride as he led the way onto the train and into one of the private military cabins.

“You’re not allowed to ask any more questions for the entire train ride.” Roy pointedly informed the ghost as he sunk into one of the bench seats with a relaxed sigh.

Edward smirked at him, curling onto the seat beside the man and blinking at him innocently. “But you’re allowed to talk now.”

“Bad ghost.” Roy pointed a finger at him, trying his best not to smile but fearing he was failing utterly.

“Bad Roy.” Edward rejoined, taking care to sound as pet-scolding as possible. “You realize Maes will have a crazed fit when he realizes you’ve run off somewhere again. I get the feeling he’ll notice you’re gone.”

Roy chuckled briefly, smiling at his partial reflection in the window. “We will be assured of entertainment on Monday then.”

“You knowing we must be putting the poor man through hell.” Edward smiled as he closed his eyes and settled into the seat as best he could, wrapping his arms around his legs to pull them in close to his chest and lay the side of his head down on his knees. “One day you’ll take pity on him and tell him about me so he stops tearing his hair out.”

Roy looked back over at him, face expressionless. Would he? That really was a question, wasn’t it. When the subject had first come up he’d been adamant that he would never. Never take the chance that his best friend wouldn’t believe him about Edward. But that was before he had formed such a close connection with the ghost. Before he and Edward did almost everything together.

It wasn’t exactly anything he could easily answer.

They sat there together in comfortable silence as the train began to pull out from the station, at which time Edward straightened up a bit so that he could look out the window with unwavering curiosity about the world beyond Central that he’d not yet seen.

“I think you’re going to make her very happy, showing up.” Edward murmured almost an hour into the journey. “I think mothers would like being surprised like that by their kids. What’s her name, anyway?”

Roy glanced over at him only so that he wouldn’t lose full sight of the scenery beyond the window, and he faintly smiled at the words. “Besides ‘mom’? Daphne. And she will be. I don’t see her often enough for her liking. She was an absolute mess when I first left home. For months I had to call her every day until she got more accustomed to me being gone.”

“I wonder what I would have done, if it would have made my mother worry about me.” Edward mused as he stared out the window.

“As long as you still ended up with me in the end, she wouldn’t lose full sight of the scenery beyond the window, and he faintly smiled at the words. “Besides ‘mom’? Daphne. And she will be. I don’t see her often enough for her liking. She was an absolute mess when I first left home. For months I had to call her every day until she got more accustomed to me being gone.”

“I wonder what I would have done, if it would have made my mother worry about me.” Edward mused as he stared out the window.

“I’m not sure anyone would have taken care of me.” Roy replied as he rested his head against the headrest nearest Edward, still keeping his attention on the scenery.

“I don’t need anyone to take care of me.” Edward replied, sounding almost sleepy.

“I don’t think it’s possible for me not to want to.” Roy told him, staring out the window more in
pensive reflection than as any want to open up the ghost’s world. “Although…” he trailed off, lost in his own thoughts, “I’ve done a lot of things since I met you that I never thought I would.”

Edward blinked his eyes open again, resting them on the man he was sitting nearly up against. “I think whatever it is, it’s good for you. You mostly seem so happy.”

Roy’s lips twitched faintly at the observation. “I am.”

Edward smiled at Roy’s profile and settled back again to watch the scenery roll by. “I am too.” He said softly, and silence fell over them save for the rattling of the train.

Roy found himself smiling briefly before it faded as he continued staring out the window, still wrapped up in his own thoughts. He had done a lot of things since meeting Edward that he’d never thought he’d do. He’d promised a lot of things, and broken just as many promises. How many times did it make it now that he’d blown off the possibility of getting laid just to be with Edward? To take him somewhere, anywhere. Or just to simply be with him. Times he knew he could have gone bar hopping and still be able to function for these weekend trips.

Granted, this was only the second one, but it hadn’t even crossed his mind that they might stay home. That he might go out tonight, that Edward might stay at home with Hazel. No, instead he’d arranged a spontaneous trip for them to see his mother of all people.

Which was almost as promise breaking to him as the promise he’d once made about anyone ever living with him. That had crumbled at his feet when Edward had gotten free of that office with his help. It had crumbled at his feet and he hadn’t cared. Their trip to Risembool had shown him just how much he couldn’t stand the thought of Edward not being there with him.

To the extent he’d as good as admitted to Edward during that same trip to Risembool that he wanted to stay with the ghost even after his own death. He wanted to stay with Edward, indefinitely.

And he was content to be so.

At one point someone did come to check Roy’s ticket, but then they were alone again, speeding off towards a destination only Roy knew. Yet despite the quiet in their cabin, the journey didn’t seem to drag on indefinitely. If anything, the hours-long train trip seemed to fly by as fast as the passing scenery of progressively more forest that was covering substantial hills.

So when the train began to pull into the station with the squealing of brakes and the rumbling lurch of the machine coming to a stop, Roy shook himself out of his thoughts and began to stretch the kinks out of his muscles.

“So about an hour walk?” Edward asked as he floated up to fetch Roy’s suitcase for him from the overhead rack.

“About that.” Roy agreed with a smile over the groan he was fighting back as he stood up and felt the stiffness in his legs. “This train was bumpier than the last.”

“I couldn’t tell.” Edward grinned cheerfully enough, especially when he earned himself a scowl. To which he answered by smugly thrusting the suitcase into Roy’s chest. “Time to go! I want to see this childhood home of Roy Mustang.”

“Groupie.” Roy muttered behind a smirk as he followed the ghost off of the train. Once on the platform he caught Edward’s eye and led them around behind the train heading towards the outskirts of the small town they had ended up in.
His haste was equal parts wanting to get there and wanting to get out of here before the townspeople who he’d grown up with as a kid recognized that he was there and decided to pull him aside for a chat related to “the old days”. Normally he wouldn’t mind, but he had Edward with him, and he was on a sort of tight schedule considering he wanted to get some lunch.

So before long they found themselves walking along a barely-paved road that eventually melted into hard-packed dirt that had gouges and ruts along the sides and in the middle from the passage of vehicles and horse-drawn carts during a muddier season.

“You grew up rural?” Edward questioned at last as he saw just how far away from civilization it looked like they were getting.

“Yeah.” Roy smiled, hefting his suitcase over one shoulder. “The town isn’t too far unless you’re walking, like us. But it’s still rural out here even with the town. Why?” He looked over at Edward with that same smile. “Did you think I was always a city boy?”

Edward nodded.

Roy nodded in kind, turning his attention back to the road in order to stay on a straight path of avoiding the gouges in the road. “It’s a misconception I do my best not to absolve people of. My mother moved out here with my dad when they got married, years before I was born. I only moved out to the city when I joined the military.”

“I’d never have guessed that of you.” Edward smiled at the mental image. “So did you grow up rural like me or rural in the sense that you were on a farm?”

“Neither.” Roy grinned here, his step becoming a bit quicker. “You’ll soon see.”

Curiosity was certainly incentive, and Edward hopped a bit faster from rut to rut as he followed Roy along. This he definitely needed to see, and that was nothing on how curious he was to finally have a face to put to Roy’s mother.

It must have been at least an hour later that they finally came upon a clearing in the mostly wooded area, whereupon Roy stopped and nodded towards the house that had appeared to the side of the dirt road. A single story structure of dark wood and shimmering glass with a large veranda wrapping seemingly around the entire thing and contained on all visible sides by hedges and flower pots. And it was surrounded entirely by green grass completely clear of the normal forest and instead shaded by fruit-bearing trees.

“That’s home away from home.” Roy murmured softly as he just stood there looking at it.

Edward could only stare at first in a slight amount of awe, “it’s beautiful here.”

“That’s not even the half of it.” Roy said with a bit of pride at the knowledge that Edward felt it was beautiful. He’d hoped to do well and show Edward another place the ghost might feel at home. A place similar to where the ghost had grown up. “But come on. I’ll show you the rest soon enough.”

Edward followed after him as Roy led the way up the driveway, looking around avidly. Quite aware of just how few people managed to ever see this place in this manner.

They hadn’t quite gotten to the steps leading up to the veranda when the door was flung open with a cry of delight as a dark-haired woman bolted down the steps to – what Edward thought, would be to hug Roy – instead she took aim and smacked him around the back of the head.

“Ow! Mom!” Roy protested, having dropped his suitcase in order to clutch at his head. “What the
“For not calling me and letting me know you were coming!” Daphne scolded him with one hand on her hip and the other looking ready to smack him again.

“I wanted to surprise you.” Roy explained, eyeing her warily as if ready to duck and run. And truth be told, he was.

Daphne tried as long as she could to seem scolding before her face broke into a grin and she stepped forward to pull her son into a tight hug. “I am.” She muttered from where her head was buried in his shoulder.

Roy felt himself being slowly crushed in the vice of her arms, but he was smiling as he wrapped his own around her to hold her just as closely. “Are you crying, mom?”

That got him released quickly, and Daphne regarded him haughtily for even suggesting it. “Of course not. I just have very bright eyes. Unlike you. You have your father’s eyes.”

Roy grinned at her, “you are so going to start crying.” He taunted her mercilessly before stepping forward to grab her into another hug as his grin softened into a relaxed smile. “I missed you, mom.”

Daphne chuckled as she hugged him back, “missed you too, Roy.” She suddenly pushed him away with a groan and a quick swipe of a manicured hand against her eyes as she leveled an accusatory stare at him, “you’re trying to get me to cry!”

Roy laughed, “I am not. You know if you start crying I’d wonder who I need to kill.”

“You.” She rolled her eyes but beamed at him happily. “It’s good to see you. You just came for a visit? Nothing’s wrong?”

Roy shook his head and found himself glancing over to Edward for a moment before meeting his mother’s questioning green eyes with a smile. “Everything’s going right.”

Daphne opened her mouth, then paused as she searched her son’s face with an expression Roy couldn’t quite decipher before her eyes began to twinkle and she smiled. “Why don’t you tell me about it over lunch. You are hungry, aren’t you?”

“Starving, actually.” Roy admitted as he stooped to pick up his suitcase.

Daphne nodded approvingly before turning on her heel, fairly brimming with happiness and making her way up the steps, calling for Roy to hurry up.

Roy did, Edward close beside him. An Edward who was positively beside himself grinning after witnessing that little family reunion. Both Roy and his mother clearly loved each other, which only made their taunting better. And he vowed to have a better look around the home he was following Roy through once he had some free time tonight in which to do so.

For now he was busy getting to know Daphne in the one-sided way he’d grown so accustomed to.

She was a petite thing, really. But from Roy’s expression whilst being hug-crushed, she wasn’t weak. Her wavy hair was the same inky black that Roy’s was, and her complexion the same paleness. But her eyes were definitely different. She had mentioned Roy had his father’s eyes.

And she was pretty. Even Edward could see that, even though she must be nearing her fifties. He knew now where Roy had gotten his good looks from. Although he wasn’t too sure that Roy could
pull off the dress that Daphne was wearing.

“So,” Daphne began as she led the way into the kitchen and began rummaging about in the refrigerator for food for Roy, “last I heard from you, you were packing up and heading to Central. How is that going?”

Roy walked over to rest back up against one of the counters nearest the stove as he watched her begin pulling containers out for reheating, and he smiled as Edward hopped up onto the counter next to him to watch as well. “All moved in everywhere. Hazel will be glad though that I don’t intend to move again anytime soon, if at all. I like the place I have now.”

“And the military?” Daphne asked, staring at him pointedly as she withdrew from her looting of the refrigerator. “What’s going on with that?”

Here Roy bowed his head with a heavy breath before looking over at her from underneath the fringe of hair that had fallen forward. “I’ve got my sights set on taking down Basque Grand, first and foremost.”

Daphne didn’t need to ask for specifics on who that was, she’d heard about Ishval from her son. So she merely nodded as she began readying a plate to heat in the oven.

“When I got to Central I received some information that he was up to something bad, very bad. I can’t tell you what it is… but I can’t allow him to succeed.” Roy whispered, his eyes falling to the hardwood floor. “I’m dancing a thin line here, mom. I’d like to out him to be able to slip into his position, which puts me that much closer to having the privileges to angle in for a military coup against the Fuhrer and take over control for myself. But at the same time I’m working against time, because if he succeeds with what he’s trying to do…”

Edward slipped off the counter, concern in his face and eyes as he put himself in front of Roy. Even with the man standing slightly slouched against the counter and head bowed, he could look directly up into his eyes and he did, raising a hand towards Roy’s face. “It’s now four against one, and I have faith in you, Roy. You’re a brilliant alchemist and Grand is intimidated by you. You’re the stronger, no matter what. Because I know you’ll do everything in your power to stay with me. You have me. What does he have to fight for?”

Daphne watched her son a long moment, taking in the change in him even as he stood there. The way his expression seemed to soften and some of the worry leave his shoulders in exchange for a steely set. Something was different about him, she was certain of that now. And while she had her suspicions… it was too early yet to tell. But there was something there inside Roy that hadn’t been there before, something that made him stronger.

“The point is,” Roy started again, his eyes not leaving Edward’s as the ghost moved unconsciously closer to him, “stay safe for me.”

Edward smiled up at him faintly, his hand still drifting at Roy’s hair as if he might be able to touch it if he just kept hoping. “It works both ways, Roy.”

Daphne stuck the plate into the oven to reheat, now more than convinced. Something… no, she looked him over carefully, someone had left their mark on Roy. Just ‘stay safe’ without her needing to break open the wine as Roy spilled all his concerns to one of the few people he could trust? Somewhere, somehow, someone had made her son into a much more confident man. And that was saying something, considering the size of his ego. “You know I will. Now why don’t you go sit and I’ll get the wine out.”
Roy finally broke eye contact with Edward, looking over at her and nodding even as Edward’s hand fell away. Trying as he did so to shake away the feeling that staring too long into those silver eyes gave him, that complete baring-of-his-soul feeling. Trying not to wonder if Edward ever liked what he saw. “Give me what’s left of whatever bottle you’re on. I know you’ll go through a whole one on your own now that I’m here.” He suggested smugly, hoping his voice came across sounding normal.

“Don’t credit yourself that much, you evil child.” Daphne rejoined, tearing her focus away from him to hunt through the wine cooler for two appropriate bottles. “Do you want a glass or are you just going to treat it like that beer swill that I know you drink sometimes.” She asked from where she was stooped in front of the cooler.

Roy was smirking as he moved past her to the dining room and its large, welcoming table surrounded on three sides by glass windows that overlooked the meadow beyond and out to the forest. “I would never. Of course I need a glass.”

She rolled her eyes and pulled free two chilled bottles, one of which was half gone already. Grabbing two goblets as well from a cabinet she made her way over to the table just as Roy was settling down into his customary chair. “Roy, you trying to tell me that you don’t drink sub-par beer is like trying to tell me you’ve never had sex.”

Edward actually had to laugh as he took a seat next to Roy, one facing the windows so he could have a view of the scenery too if he wished it. “She has a point.”

“I wasn’t asking for your invasive opinion on it.” Roy muttered, crossing his arms over his chest dramatically.

Edward merely smirked at him; Daphne, on the other hand, set one of the goblets down and with a flourish thrust the half-filled bottle into Roy’s chest causing his arms to uncross in order to catch it. “I’m your mother, I give you my opinion whether you want it or not.”

Roy gave her a plaintive look as she sat down next to him with her own goblet and bottle – and luckily not in the same seat that Edward had chosen. “Painfully so sometimes.”

“I have to pay you back for all the pain you caused me trying to give birth to you. You weren’t an easy baby, you know.” Daphne re-informed him as she worked the cork free with practiced movements of her slender fingers. “Your father –”

“Got bit three times as I cursed him out for being the one to do this to me.” Roy finished for her smugly in the face of her mocking look. “Oh, and you threatened to castrate and then divorce him until you saw what an absolutely stunning baby I was.”

“I don’t remember that last part.” Daphne muttered doubtfully as she poured herself a goblet of a rose-colored wine.

“Dad was a brave man.” Roy nodded sagely, before yelping as a sandaled foot connected with his ankle. “I rest my case!”

Edward was trying not to laugh too hard, worried it would move his chair. But he was not opposed to looking over at Roy with a blinding smile. “I think you need to prove that ‘stunning baby’ point. You got to see all of my childhood pictures, fair is fair, Mustang!”

Roy groaned and took a hearty swig of wine from his goblet. “I need more wine for dealing with this. And food.” And then he turned a very eager look on his mother who looked just a bit worried at being fixed with it. “Do you need any help around the place? Repairs, pruning, anything?”
Daphne rested her chin in her hand as she considered her son with growing, worried amusement. “Just what the hell has happened to you, honey?”

“Nothing yet.”

As far as Roy was concerned, it took far long enough for his lunch to be heated through. It was hard enough dealing with either/or when it came to his mother and Edward. Both of them harassing him at once was just some sort of injustice. So when his lunch was finally ready he fairly flew to the oven to retrieve it and spent the next ten minutes being laughed at by his mother and having Edward roll his eyes at him as he bolted down the scalding hot food despite the temperature.

So once he was done eating he begged his way off into just walking around the property, citing some need to just wander around. It was one he’d used more eloquently on past visits, and he knew his mom understood that it helped him unwind and regain perspective and focus on some level, so it was easy enough to slip away from her, knowing that she’d keep herself busy now making a dinner and dessert that would make him feel akin to a sacrifice receiving its last fattening-up meal.

Which was how he managed to slip out a side door onto the veranda with Edward beside him, and he smiled over at the ghost as the door closed. “I’ll show you around the house after she’s gone to bed. But I want you to see this,” he motioned with his hand and that same easy smile, “in the daylight.”

Edward followed Roy’s gesture, pausing a moment with his heat tilted to one side as he took in the rows upon rows of grapevines stretching farther than he could really see an end to. And off in the distance was a large structure easily as tall as Headquarters if not quite as large around. “A vineyard? You… that wine… is it hers?”

Roy walked over to the veranda railing to lean against it with a fond expression for the rows of grapes. “Ours. Although I rarely dip into the profits. When she retires or passes away the entire thing moves over into my name. But… this is how I grew up.”

Edward looked from him back out onto the expansive vineyard and found himself smiling. “It’s actually really… surprising.” And then he leered over at Roy, “although that explains your love of alcohol.”

Roy winked at him before pushing off from the railing to head to one of the series of steps so they could go down into the vineyard. “I actually didn’t start drinking until my mom allowed it. I was good only stealing the champagne grapes and somehow surviving her chasing me around with the pruning shears. I think she offered to let me try wine in an effort to save herself from committing limb removal of her only son.”

Edward felt he might have blanched, were he still of flesh and blood. As it was he followed after Roy with a shudder. “So wine, just how much money do you make from it anyway?”

“One that can spoil you rotten and still feel as if I’ve done an inadequate job.” Roy admitted as they crossed the grassy lawn heading over towards where the vines were growing up their trellises.

Edward shook his head, miffed at the thought of having so much money. But he shook it off, it didn’t change Roy as he knew the man. Apparently Roy had always come attached side by side with money. And as they stepped among the rows of grapevines he found himself smiling as he examined them with his eyes, unable to touch the living plants.”This must take a lot of work. How does she ever manage it all?”

“Three times during the week the local ruffians come over and she teaches them about caring for the
grapes, to keep them out of trouble. And then she does have some hired workers that come when she needs them, during harvest. Other than that, that woman is a pistol.” Roy knew how true it was, too.

“She seems it.” Edward smiled and then pointed towards where the large structure at the end of the fields was. “What is that?”

Roy looked over before turning back to one of the grapevines he’d been inspecting with a reminiscent tenderness. “The winery. Where the alcoholic magic happens. There’s also a storage basement below it all where all the kegs that aren’t ready for bottling or consumption yet are kept to age. It’s all heavily secured. I don’t have the keys with me, they’re in my old bedroom here, otherwise I’d show you right now.”

Edward smiled unconcerned and floated down the rows, weaving in and out of them as he marveled at all the growing grapes and green vines. He was beginning to understand why Roy thought it would be good for him to come here, it was simple, peaceful. Probably one of the reasons Roy visited when he could besides of a want to see his mother. “I don’t mind.”

Roy watched after him for a while, a smile shadowing his lips before he turned to make his way out of the rows of grapevines. “There’s nothing else but grapevines for several acres, and the winery, but come this way.”

Edward soon fell in with him, hovering at Roy’s shoulder as they moved along, and in between looking around with interest found his attention drifting back to before. “Are you really not going to show me where your picture album is?”

Roy flicked his gaze up to meet the silver eyes beside him now and smiled faintly. “It’s only fair, but since we’re out here you deserve to see in person some of the sites of my greatest moments.”

“Do I deserve that?” Edward asked back teasingly as he twisted midair so he was floating backwards, his legs pulled up against his chest so he could rest his chin on his knees and watch Roy with shining silver eyes.

“Probably not.” Roy deadpanned, although his following smirk might not have helped him to be entirely convincing. As it was, he was only laughed at, and he finished leading them over to the nearly-ancient oak tree that shaded a startlingly large section of the grass. Looking up at the branches with an almost relieved breath he turned to flop against the bark, head included.

“Old girlfriend of yours?” Edward asked with a smile, looking up at the branches above that were so thick with leaves that no light managed to pass through.

Roy chuckled and reached a hand back to pat the bark fondly. “You could say that.” And his eyes slipped closed with a smile. “I used to practice my alchemy over here every day. I was hosed down just over there,” he pointed blindly with one finger, “the time I caught myself on fire.”

Edward dropped to the grass, cross-legged and gaping up at Roy in disbelief. “You practiced fire alchemy underneath a tree?”

Roy laughed and slid down the trunk to sit as well, opening his eyes to look over at his companion. “It was the nearest place in reach of the garden hose, which came in handy. Mom didn’t want me near the house or the vineyard, so we sacrificed the tree to a potential torching at my hands.”

Edward dropped to the grass, cross-legged and gaping up at Roy in disbelief. “You practiced fire alchemy underneath a tree?”

Roy laughed and slid down the trunk to sit as well, opening his eyes to look over at his companion. “It was the nearest place in reach of the garden hose, which came in handy. Mom didn’t want me near the house or the vineyard, so we sacrificed the tree to a potential torching at my hands.”

“Just what age did she allow you to start drinking?” Edward asked suspiciously.

“You would have been two or three, I think, you do the math.” Roy grinned before his face relaxed as he settled back against the tree, enjoying the heat of the day despite being in the familiar shade.
Edward shook his head, bewildered, before settling down onto the grass. Curling himself up on it as he watched Roy from barely-open eyes. “How did you ever decide to try and do alchemy growing up in a place like this? I mean, if it wasn’t for my dad, I doubt I’d have ever learned… it just wasn’t the sort of life other kids in Risembool had. Was your dad an alchemist too?”

“Nothing quite like that.” Roy answered, voice hinting on amusement. “As a kid I started having an obsession about fire. I’d find matches and play with them. When they’d get out the barbeque lighter for the grill I’d always find a way to steal it and run off to play with the flame, make my own little bonfire. Mom started researching options for me to put my obsession to a safer use than either trying to repress it in me or letting me become an arsonist.”

“She did a good job with that.” Edward couldn’t help but think. And he was glad she had… now that he had a life with Roy he couldn’t imagine being contained in that office for the rest of, well, forever. “About Grand…” he began softly, feeling Roy’s gaze find him, “I’ll be there with you when you finally face him. If you need my help, don’t let your ego get in the way, because he can’t hurt me.”

“Don’t ask me to use you like that!” Roy snapped, unexpectedly fierce as Edward’s eyes shot open wide and startled. “How many times have I…” he trailed off, trying to compose himself as he refocused a hard gaze on Edward. “Just because he can’t, doesn’t make it right for me to treat you as if you aren’t alive. So don’t ask me to put my ego on the backburner. Not in this. For once in my life I’m going to go about this the honorable way, and that does not include using someone I care about.”

“Don’t I get a say in this?” Edward asked as he sat up, eyes flashing.

“No!” Roy adamantly put his foot down on the matter. “You don’t.”

Edward glared at him, “you can’t stop me, Roy. I am quite capable of making my own decisions, and weeks ago when we met I made the decision to stay with you. I’m staying with you. Unless you plan to walk into this with your eyes closed, which I don’t recommend, you can’t leave me behind. I’m not saying you’ll need my help, I’m saying I’m there for you if you need me. You’re not the only one who cares about someone here, so do me a favor and treat me like your equal in this.”

Roy looked away with a scowl and ran a ragged hand through his hair as he tried to come to terms with the fact that Edward was as stubborn as he himself was. He’d already known this, but it’d never been slammed against him before. “Damn incorporeal brats.”

Edward raised his eyebrows reproachfully before smiling and settling back down onto the grass. “Roy… we’ve been through too much together to tell me now to stay away and not offer help if you need it. Be honorable, but at the end of the day remember that I don’t care so much about your honor as I do about you.”

Roy found his gaze resting on the ghost again, this time a searching expression in place of the scowl as he watched Edward give every impression of being asleep. Several times he found his mouth opening, and each time he closed it, turning his head away with frustration in his eyes.

He was so occupied in his thoughts that he didn’t realize his mother’s approach until she was nudging his leg lightly with her foot.

Edward startled up at Roy’s yelp, up into a seated position hovering just above the grass, and Roy attempted not to jump in such a manner himself — mostly because he knew the reunion with the ground would leave him with a bruise in a very inconvenient area.

Daphne chuckled at his fright, ignoring the glare that was sent her way. “Nice day for a nap.” She
remarked as she settled down next to him against the broad tree trunk and looked up at the branches overhead. “The soil has been loving the weather we’ve been having here. How’s it been in Central?”

“You came out here to bother me out of a perfectly lovely nap to talk about the weather?” Roy asked, wanting to make sure he was understanding this right.

Daphne smiled and spread her hands in a passive gesture. “You weren’t exactly napping.”

Roy looked over at Edward who was paying attention to his mother right now. “The weather has been fine.” He gave in, sounding like a child robbed of its toy. “I’ve not really noticed considering I’m usually busy at work.”

Edward looked over at Roy now to say teasingly, “yeah, says the man who left early four out of the five days.”

Roy didn’t even have time to wonder if he might be able to get away with embracing his immature side and sticking his tongue out at the ghost. Not with his mother only a beat behind.

“And enterprising to give me more grandchildren than I can count.” She muttered with a half smile.

“There has not yet been a single case, not that it’s any of your business how careful I am.” Roy countered protectively.

“Not yet been.” Daphne grinned through her laughter. “Marry whoever it is before you bring kids into the picture, okay? Now come on, I made your favorite kind of ice cream sundae and I want to hear all about what you’ve gotten up to in Central.” She said, clapping a hand to his knee as she got to her feet. “I don’t want any details left out!” She called over her shoulder as she strolled back to the house.

Edward looked after her with almost-silent laughter. “You’re about to develop a very boring life in Central to tell her about, aren’t you.”

Roy groaned, although the idea of ice cream was definitely making up for the discomfort of the inquisition he was about to go through from a mother who hadn’t talked to her son in weeks and hadn’t seen him in longer. “Don’t have much choice.” He agreed as he got to his feet, brushing himself off.

Edward had flashed him a wry smile and begun floating after where Daphne had gone when Roy’s voice called him back, and he turned in midair to tilt his head questioningly at the man. “Yeah?” He asked, dropping to stand on the ground as Roy walked up to him.

Roy hesitated a minute to gather his thoughts before meeting Edward’s eyes seriously. “You know me well enough to know if I’m in trouble, I think out of anyone… you would know. Don’t act unless I am, can you at least promise me that?”

Edward didn’t answer right away, processing Roy’s words carefully before he slowly began to nod. “Yeah… yeah, I promise.” And he offered a lopsided smile before he looked down at the small bit of ground separating them. “I remember, you know, you telling me you don’t always think of me as being dead. I understand where you were coming from back there… and thank you.” He said, meeting Roy’s gaze again. “When I’m with you I sometimes forget I’m dead.”

Roy’s expression was soft as he nodded before giving himself an abrupt mental shake and grabbing for a more light-hearted tone, “come on then, before she eats my ice cream herself.”

Edward gave a short laugh as he turned to walk with Roy back up to the house. “One of these days I
know I’ll witness you doing all the pushups you must need to eat like this.”
“Where is my sundae?” Roy looked around in confusion upon finding himself in the kitchen with his mother and there being no ice cream in sight anywhere.

Daphne glanced at him over her shoulder and opened the freezer door to pull out several different tubs of the stuff. “I haven’t made it yet.” She said and opened a cabinet to fetch a bowl. “Sit down, I need to talk to you about something. And in here you have less chance of running off.”

Edward raised an amused eyebrow at Roy, “do you have a tendency to run away from her?”

Roy gave Edward a withering look while his mother’s back was turned before turning his attention back to her. “Running off?” He echoed, and didn’t move to sit at the table, instead moving over to stand next to her at the counter and fix her with a stubbornly insistent look. “What is it, mom? You’re not on some crazy ‘I want grandchildren’ binge, are you? I can bring Hazel to visit next time if it would mean that much to you.”

“Hazel is not a suitable child, he is practice.” Daphne told him helpfully, as any seasoned parent would.

Edward darted through the air to set himself on top of the table in the dining room, tilting his head with a grimace. “Hazel is practice? Please never marry someone like she suggested and have kids. Marry them, but no kids.”

Roy was hard pressed not to laugh. But he turned a fond look on Edward all the same, while knowing that like his mother, he could probably never tell Edward that he didn’t plan on marrying anyone. Or letting anyone else live with them, for that matter. It would interfere with their time together.

Daphne flicked a quick look at her son from the corner of her eye before smiling and continuing to dish the ice cream into the sundae bowl. “I want you to be happy more than I want grandchildren.” She said as she began to put away the ice cream and went in search of the chocolate and caramel sauces.

“So you want to see Hazel then.” Roy determined with a teasing smile.

“I am never opposed to seeing your idea of a pet.” She reassured him as she began to drizzle the sauces over the ice cream. “Now go sit, Roy, honestly. Unless you plan to help me.”

“Am I in your way?” Roy smirked at her as she had to lean across him to get to the fruit on the countertop.

“Since you were still an unborn child.” Daphne informed him quite seriously despite the twinkle in her eyes.

Roy made an affronted noise in response and stomped his way over to the cutlery drawer with a huff. Daphne merely grinned at his actions and went for the whipped cream. Edward meanwhile was watching them both with amusement, and the distant thought of whether or not he and his mother might have had this sort of relationship, had they both lived.

When Roy finally snatched away his sundae with a childish grin of delight, he retreated to a sunny
sitting room filled with cozy armchairs and a brown leather couch heaped in throw pillows and
afghans. The walls were almost filled with framed photographs, what space on the wall wasn’t taken
up by the few bookcases and trinkets.

“How is it?” Daphne asked, unable to really complain as her son settled into one of the armchairs.
Despite his size, Roy was almost dwarfed in the thing it enwrapped him so completely. He would
have a difficult time getting out of it quickly if he decided to make a run for it.

Roy shifted back and forth several times in the chair, burrowing deeper with a content smile on his
face as he held the spoon loosely in one hand. “As good as I remember.” He acclaimed, turning a
smiling look briefly down onto Edward who had settled at his feet, looking up at him.

“That’s not my favorite either, in case you were wondering.” Edward told him a bit smugly,
watching all the same as Roy continued to happily dig his spoon into the sundae and slip obscenely
large globs of the stuff into his mouth.

Roy barely resisted the urge to grumble at the ghost, knowing it would be taken the wrong way from
his mother, so he settled for mocking Edward later tonight about what dessert could possibly be
better than an ice cream sundae! What kind of picky child had Edward been? So he attempted to
drag his attention away from it, turning his attention back to his mother who was watching him over
her cup of coffee. “So what is this thing that you wanted to talk to me about that requires bribing me
with ice cream sundaes? You’re not getting married again, are you? Trying to buy me off to be nice
to the guy?” And then raising an eyebrow added for good measure, “girl?”

Daphne laughed into her coffee and drew the cup down to hold it on her lap as she considered him
with fond amusement. “I’m happy being a widow. Any fun I need I can get without strings
attached.”

Roy grimaced and worked on getting a much bigger spoonful of ice cream therapy. “I don’t need
details.”

Edward could sympathize with that, he wouldn’t have wanted more detail than that on his own
mother either. Unfortunately he felt that Daphne got more information on Roy than she probably
wanted just due to the fact that Roy was Roy, and the man wasn’t exactly a discreet figure among the
public, still being a celebrated war hero and all.

Daphne grinned around the rim of her cup before she took another sip of coffee and then shifted
more towards the edge of her seat, just in case, as she leaned forward to engage him. “What
happened to you when you got to Central?”

“That’s the question you were going to ask that you thought would make me bolt?” Roy worked on
scooping up another spoonful of sundaes. “Do I need to get you in to see a mental health
professional?”

“You’d never risk a shrink getting claws into one of the few people you trust.” Daphne pointed out,
unconcerned, before leaning casually against one of the chair arms as she considered her son. “I
don’t mean the little things, I can guess as to those. You’ve only been in the military almost half as
long as you’ve been alive. I mean what happened to you. You’re different, you know.”

“Different?” Roy echoed, sitting up a bit straighter as he frowned at her. “Different how, exactly?”

Daphne smiled at him gently. “Roy, you’ve been stable for a long time after Ishval. Sure, you still
have some issues relating to it, and anyone would –”
“Are you seriously going to bring up Ishval with me when I’m enjoying ice cream?” Roy asked, turning away from both her and his ice cream sundae with a sigh to frown out the windows overlooking the front yard. “I need something a bit stronger for that conversation.”

“Hear me out.” Daphne appeased him in that motherly tone that hinted under the warmth that he had no choice in the matter. “I’ve never seen you this confident before in yourself. Usually when you have issues with something happening in the military, take this recent development with Grand for example, usually you unload it all over a bottle. Not standing calmly in the kitchen. I’m not saying that unloading like you used to wasn’t a stable thing to be doing, it was better than the choices you made right after the war, but today… something’s happened to you.”

Edward looked up at Roy from where he was reclined at the man’s feet, said man having long since looked back at his mother with a closed-off expression. But he found himself unable to say anything. He didn’t even know what to say. He’d heard from Roy that he’d been suicidal at one point, but he knew nothing about Roy coming here in the past to unload his troubles. So he stayed silent, leaning his head against the very edge of the chair to look up at him.

Roy finally tore his gaze away from her to stare unseeingly at the sundae he was now unconsciously mashing into a thick puddle with the spoon. “I can’t afford to be that man anymore. If I’m going to make it to Fuhrer, a goal I now can actually see close in sight, I can’t do it by facing it after climbing from the bottom of a bottle like I used to.”

“Which I’m glad of, don’t get me wrong.” Daphne smiled, “I always have considered you sound in the head after you got the initial freak out over Ishval out of your system. You’ve never exactly been a raving lunatic or a drunk.”

Edward snorted.

Roy kicked at him, despite knowing it’d do no good, and smugly rested his foot inside Edward’s thigh.

“Get out of me!” Edward hissed, but Roy’s attention was smugly back on his mother and clearly, the man was actively pretending not to hear him.

“I’m just wondering,” Daphne continued with quiet intrigue, “who it is that you met. I know you met someone, and you’re different for it.”

Roy suddenly didn’t feel quite like ice cream sundaes anymore, and he rested the spoon back in the bowl as he turned away from her, closing his eyes with a silent, slow exhale of breath.

“Roy?”

It was not his mother’s voice, but Edward’s, and he looked down to where he knew Edward was, meeting the concerned silver eyes. He knew Edward was waiting to see what he’d do, what lie he’d give this time. Finally, he looked back up at her and shook his head. “Mom, not again. I know you want something like that for me, enough to have little delusions considering how much wine you drink. But there’s no one. If I’m different, it’s because I’ve finally got an opening in my goals and I’m taking it.”

Daphne smiled gently at him, more aware that her son was effected by her question than anything else. Effected in a way he’d never expressed before, and it only spurred her on. “So when you were out in the yard ranting about not using someone you care about,” she tried to keep her smile in check at his sharp look, “who were you referring to that wasn’t there?”
“You need to learn to keep your voice down when you’re yelling at me.” Edward muttered as he looked between them both with a worried frown, shifting closer to Roy.

Roy wasn’t sure how helpful that was right now, and he pinned his mother down with the same sharp gaze he’d had since she’d mentioned that incident. “How much did you hear, exactly?”

“Does it matter?” Daphne asked as she tried to gauge whether or not Roy was liable to try fleeing, more uncertain of whether or not he actually would with her son now seeming more defensive than flighty. “So there is someone?”

“Does it matter?” Edward echoed up at him, silver eyes still filled with worry. “How are you going to explain this one away?”

Roy fought the impulse to look back down at the ghost, as if afraid to let his mother know where Edward was. “Are you going to try and pull some psychotic episode card on me? After all this talk that I was stable? Is this where you’re leading to? Trying to corner me, mom?”

“Nothing I’ve not done to you before, Roy.” Daphne agreed, her green eyes suddenly serious. “I don’t believe any such thing, but if someone’s gotten in your head so well that you’d vent about them aloud, then I think I’m entitled to know who. Else you’ve definitely got some psychotic thing going on.”

“Technically I’m not in your head,” Edward muttered as he directed a sour look to Roy’s foot. “You, however, are still in my leg.”

Roy had enough attention to spare Edward to give a wiggle of his foot, just because he could imagine the ghost’s expression. But otherwise, his attention was solely for his mother as he sat forward protectively, ice cream sundae forgotten. “Even if I told you what’s going on with me, you’d think me crazy. I’d rather keep my silence and still be crazy. Just leave it alone.”

“Have you so little faith in me?” Daphne asked him in tired surprise. “Roy, that’s more like a challenge to me than a warning.”

Roy was more shocked than anything when she stood up.

“Don’t run off, but think about letting me in.” Daphne told him, green eyes searching her son’s defensive face. She knew he wouldn’t run, not with the way he was standing his ground. “Whoever it is… they clearly mean a lot to you. You’ve had few and far between people like that in your life, is it really so hard for you to understand why I want a little information so badly?”

Roy didn’t have the heart or the ground to stand on anymore to refute there being anyone. Not when she’d dropped the bombshell that she’d heard him ranting about a someone. “Mom…” he began softly as he looked down impassively at the melted ice cream sundae, “thanks for worrying about me, but I’m okay, really. And you know it. So let’s move on from there.”

Daphne, having walked to the hallway entrance rested her hand on the frame as she looked back over at him with an unseen smile. “You of all people should know that secrets can’t be kept forever. Have a little faith that your mother might believe in you, no matter what crazy things you might say. Because I’m your mom, honey, and I’ve seen you crazy before… this, this is not it.”

Roy heard her walk away, and his eyes slipped shut with a tired sigh as he slumped back into the chair. Only feeling now how tense he’d been, leaning over Edward as if it did any good in blocking him as the subject, albeit unknowingly to her.

“You should tell her.” Edward said at last from where he sat, tone as subdued as the silver eyes that
were turned down towards the floor.

“She may not turn me over to a mental facility, but this is a bit more serious than if I were to tell her I have an imaginary friend. I’d be telling her I have a ghost friend.” Roy muttered glumly from under the hand that had fallen over his face.

Edward looked up at him with a sympathizing frown, before reaching up and taking the melted ice cream sundae from Roy’s hand which had been letting it dip rather precariously to one side. “You love her. You’ve expended a lot of effort to keep her safe and the world thinking you don’t have a living mother. To have her not believe you about me… we’ve become very close. I know it would make you feel sad.”

Roy lowered his hand to look down, intentionally drowning himself in those silver eyes and feeling desperate to do so. Edward was right… about all of it. Edward was special to him in a way that he couldn’t even fathom, and had been trying to fathom most of the train ride here. But it wasn’t entirely worry of being disbelieved that made him draw back with a stern “no.”

Edward blinked, drawing back just slightly in shock at Roy’s tone. “Just like that? I know something like this you don’t get a second shot at but –”

“I don’t want a first.” Roy interrupted before briskly standing up, eyes still firmly fixed on the silvery apparition staring back up at him in shock. “Nor do I want you to attempt to tell her about yourself in your own clever ways.”

Edward set the melting ice cream sundae aside carefully, his frown more curious than angry as he floated up off the floor. “I wouldn’t, if this is what you want. She’s your mother and I respect that boundary, but at least tell me why?”

Roy had to look away, frustrated at the guilt whispering against the back of his mind. What right, truly, did he have to feel this way over Edward? It had been the same with Elysia, when he’d thought for that too-long moment that she could see Edward. He’d been jealous. Far more jealous than he could remember ever feeling before. Jealous that a little girl might be able to wiggle into the circle that he lived in with Edward. And with Edward now suggesting they tell Daphne about his presence? What right did he have to condemn the idea because of what, jealousy?

“Roy?” Edward asked in growing concern, floating around to Roy’s side.

Roy felt the frustration flare up hotter, and suddenly he shot an almost angry look at Edward. “I won’t let anyone, even her, push you to do anything.” And he wondered at how easily a convincing cover, barely free of being a lie, could come so easily to him in this moment. But he took it anyway.

Anything to spare him the misery of this day also being tainted by Edward’s revulsion of the truth.

Edward was confused, but that confusion only grew when Roy suddenly strode, defensive, from the room. “Roy!” And he pelted after the man instinctively, only to find himself alone in the hallway beyond, with Roy nowhere in sight. “Damn it, Roy! Where’d you go? What’s the matter with you all of a sudden?!”

A growl of frustration escaped him, and Edward chose one of the few directions that was not certain to encounter mostly whiteness he could not cross. He could only hope Roy hadn’t crossed it, he’d never find the man then.

After several minutes of searching he’d uncovered neither Roy or Daphne, and was beginning to panic just a little at being alone in a strange place when he found himself outside again. With a
dawning idea, he made his way around towards the back of the house where he and Roy had been much of the time since coming here. And when he saw a familiar frame against the railing he breathed a sigh of relief.

“That idiot.” Edward murmured as he dropped to the deck and began to walk across it towards Roy. The man was standing there like a glaring statue, looking out over the vineyards as his hands gripped hard to the railing. Edward turned a rueful look up at him as he slipped beside Roy, standing similarly. “I’ll think of a better idea, Roy… I will.”

Roy startled, not having realized Edward was there, before a different sort of guilt crashed down around him as he looked down at the spirit’s hands. “It’s not that. You don’t have to fix anything, Edward. There’s nothing to fix.”

Edward considered him worriedly. “But you’re not happy. What’s wrong? I know it’s not about your mom, you were fine up until she left. So that leaves me.”

“What?” Roy looked stunned at the very idea, before “fucking hell.” Which earned him a look he ignored in his haste. “Edward, it’s not you! It’s me I’m upset with!”

“Then what’s so wrong that you stormed out on me?” Edward demanded rather more calmly than he felt.

Roy grumbled his way through several choice phrases which Edward dutifully frowned at. Then he was closing his eyes as a deep sigh escaped him. “Sometimes I realize I’m an asshole. It’s not a pleasant thing for me. So let’s just leave my faults alone.”

Edward found himself smiling, and he slung his arms forward over the railing, bending over to rest the side of his head against it as he gazed warmly up at Roy. “I already figured you can be an asshole. But perfect or not, I’m still here, aren’t I? I don’t leave you so easily… or haven’t you noticed.”

And for a long time, they stood there together in silence. Edward still peacefully smiling up at Roy, Roy at internal war that Edward could not discern. Until at last, Roy’s stony expression wavered into something more vulnerable.

“I’ve become selfish over you.” Roy bit out before he lost his nerve, and his shut eyes clenched in a visible repression of anger. Whether it was the so-far truth of Edward’s words, or the sadistic need to test them, or a moment of sheer idiocy in his natural desire not to lie to Edward, out of anyone, he said it.

Edward studied Roy closely for several long seconds, too long, as far as Roy was concerned, before he began to smile again. “Selfish? I hate to disappoint you, Roy Mustang, but being selfish doesn’t automatically make you an asshole. A bastard maybe, because it has a nicer ring, but –”

“Don’t you get it?!” Roy snapped, rounding on Edward in self-loathing. “The very thought that someone else might see you makes me jealous. I want you all to myself. When I thought Elysia might be able to see you, I was jealous. And then I was glad when she couldn’t. Now do you understand why I can’t tell my mother about you? I want you, and I want to be the only one to have you.”

Edward slowly straightened, silver eyes wide as they gazed up at Roy, a feeling so unfamiliar yet so close to excitement welling up inside him. He couldn’t explain it, by all rights he should be mad at this confession, and yet… “I chose you, Roy. Remember?” He asked softly as he drew closer, “I chose to stay with you. Want me all you want, but you’re a fool if you can’t see I’m already yours.”
Roy searched Edward’s face almost desperately, and then in an alert sort of intense relief as his hands fought to stay on the railing. Knowing it was futile to try and touch the ghost before him, and not understanding why he so desperately wanted to hold onto Edward in this moment and not let him go. It scared a part of him, to realize just how badly he seemed to need Edward in his life. So he kept his hands where they were. “I’m being so unfair to you. I’m sorry… but I don’t want anyone to come between us.”

Edward smiled lopsidedly as he settled in next to Roy, almost passing through the man, and contentedly he looked up to meet regretful and troubled dark eyes. “No one could. Even if she knows, or Maes knows… at the end of the day I still live with you. But I understand now… you don’t have to tell her.”

“At least let me try to wrap my head around it. Something like this isn’t easy for me.” Roy compromised quietly, feeling more than soothed by Edward’s words and continued presence at his side. If anything it made him feel even guiltier for feeling so selfish about the silvery ghost. But at least Edward accepted it, and he began to smile back, albeit nervously. “I want to deserve you.”

“Deserve me?” Edward echoed with the beginnings of a laugh. “Roy Mustang, you really are a fool. It’s not about deserving me, you have me.” And he met Roy’s gaze with a glimmer of a tease in his own eyes. “So don’t worry about keeping me around, I’m not going anywhere. No matter who else might enter the picture, or not.”

“Even another ghost?” Roy asked, surprising himself with his own abrupt, verging on suspicious question.

Edward grinned and couldn’t help himself, “as long as they find their own living human. I think you’ll find you’re not the only one who has it in them to be selfish.”

Roy couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed as he began to slowly smile back. He still wasn’t sure how he could ever deserve Edward, no matter what he said… but he was exceedingly grateful to whatever power had allowed them to be together. “You couldn’t be selfish if you tried.”

Edward merely smiled.

“We should have at least three more hours until she hunts me down for dinner.” Roy continued quickly, “want to see some other memorable spots of the Flame Alchemist?”

“I am a fan.” Edward smirked with a glimmer of humor in his eyes. “And so far I can’t complain about my tour guide. He seems very knowledgeable.”

“So I’ll be getting a good tip, then?” Roy smirked back as he drew away from the railing that had been his anchor.

“I’ll think of something.” Edward assured him, and this time when Roy began to leave, he was able to keep up. He wasn’t planning to lose sight of Roy again so soon, especially not with another tour on the horizon.

It came as little surprise and as something of an unsaid relief that for their walk they were removed from possible prying eyes. Lost deep in the vineyard or the woods beyond, Roy introduced Ed to those spots a child really could never forget. Much like the secret base Edward had spoken about in Risembool, these places had stories behind them. And for the first time, Roy was letting someone else into that chapter of his life.

About the time that Roy knew his mother would be finishing up whatever was for dinner he was
lounging with Edward in grass far too high to see over, granting him only a view of the sky and the strange sight of bronzing blades of grass spearing up through Edward.

“It’s strange,” Edward mused as he stared up at the wisps of clouds and a dimming sky, “how this can make you feel entirely alone, but it doesn’t matter, because it makes you feel secure. The world seems so much smaller it just makes you be you.”

“A child with invincibility delusions and a penchant for fire loose in a field, thinking he’s the only one around for miles.” Roy chuckled at the images that conjured. “It’s a miracle that I never started a forest fire.”

“That you’ll admit to.” Edward smiled amusedly.

Roy felt a grin creep onto his face, and he didn’t denounce the claim. Instead he sat up straight, his head just barely poking out over the overgrown wild grass. “Come on, we’ve been laying in here a while. We should head back.”

Edward rose up into the air agreeably, hovering near Roy’s height as the man stood. “Just no more yelling at me unless you’re sure we’re alone.”

Roy fought back a flinch, sending a guilty look towards the apparition. “I shouldn’t ever yell at you anyway, raise my voice to you like that... I just worry about you.”

Edward’s head fell curiously to the side before he shook it with a smile. “At least I know you were serious. Not just trying to be a stuck-up prick. I know you want to take care of me… you told me yourself on the train. So don’t worry about it, instead let’s go get you dinner before I discover if starvation makes you grouchy.”

It wasn’t exactly a proposed plan that Roy could argue with, and so he led the way back to the house, a house that he believed to have far too many windows after the events of this afternoon. He’d let his guard down being here, by habit. Something he knew he would not be able to do again so long as he kept Edward’s existence a secret.

“Roy?”

Roy grunted curiously in response, flicking a quick gaze the ghost’s way as they walked.

“Thanks, for bringing me here.” Edward answered, staring closely at the grass. “I know it hasn’t been easy for you.”

“Our friendship isn’t exactly simple, but don’t ever start thinking that I don’t like it that way.” Roy replied with a brooding expression, and they finally reached the house again without being dived down upon by inquisitive mothers.

They entered the kitchen, both feeling reasonably apprehensive about what dinner would bring, but Daphne only greeted Roy with a cheerful smile and told him to help her set the food out on the table. Which was puzzling and only served to make Roy more suspicious and on guard. Edward could only watch with worried amusement as Roy put himself through it.

But he knew he had no right to try to change Roy’s mind and make things potentially easier on him, it was something the man would have to do himself.

When the two Mustangs sat down at last for dinner, Edward could only sit himself in the air beside Roy, unable to take a chair for himself considering how far they were pushed in. But it didn’t matter to him much, it still gave him an acceptable vantage point to watch the dinner events unfold.
Over the salad, Roy proceeded to do the classic human self-preservation technique of averting attention as far away from himself as possible, questioning his mother into the scalloped potatoes about how the business was doing.

Daphne countered over the salmon, grilling Roy in a clearly enthusiastic way about how the State Alchemist certification exams had gone.

Roy fought back by giving her all the details. At least, all the details not pertaining to some involvement of Ed. From the weather of the practical exam day to the number of pencils snapped in the written exam. He gave it all to her.

Edward was torn between exasperation and amusement at the both of them.

The ghost had ended up resting an elbow down on the table to rest his chin, and he kept pivoting his head back and forth as the two of them engaged in a sort of strange ritual, as he suspected this wasn’t uncommon between mother and son based on what he’d already witnessed. He wondered what exactly the point of it was, as it did seem to have one judging on how seriously they both took it despite the evidence that they were both having fun with it.

It was in the lull between dinner and dessert, wherein Daphne got up to get the apple pie and Roy was clearing away the dishes that Edward felt something in the air visibly relax.

The dishes were cleared, the pie was cut into and served, and Roy finished topping his slice with whipped cream before, after a pause, he set aside the canister with a final-sounding dull clunk.

“I’m not saying this because I want to,” Roy began quietly, fork stabbed through the triangle of pie, staring resolutely at the wood grain of the table. “I’m saying this because, no matter what he says…”

Edward’s head whipped around sharply, silver eyes wide in shock.

“I won’t become like what keeps him caged. That’s not who I am in this… even if right now I wish you were a deaf fool.”

Daphne set her own fork aside delicately, as if any noise or swift movement might break the spell. “He?” She ventured cautiously against the internal buildup of excitement, not that she’d been right, because she knew she’d been right, but that her son was clearly so affected by whoever it was that he’d do something he didn’t want to do just to appease his conscience regarding the person.

“Roy…” Edward whispered in a tone not far from being saddened, “I’d never think that of you.”

Roy lifted his gaze from the table not to look at his mother, but to look into silvery eyes. “I won’t take the chance,” he answered softly, “you mean too much to me.” Only then did he look over at his mother who, for once in her life, looked absolutely speechless and confused. He might have enjoyed the look on her more if what he was about to say wasn’t so serious to him.

“His name is Edward, and he’s a ghost.”

A true silence fell over the table at Roy’s words, one that seemed interminable, and when broken felt too abrupt.

Daphne let out her breath slowly, her green eyes never leaving her son, who had been staring her down ever since his admission. Everything about him from his unyielding posture and hard eyes told her that he wasn’t backing down in this, he’d meant what he said. It was times like this that she was reminded of just who her son was, no matter how much she’d like to always imagine him as just her child. “And I imagine he came here with you?”
“I brought him here.” Roy agreed firmly, “I wanted him to see this place.”

“I can prove I’m here, just tell me to.” Edward offered to him, his eyes fixed on Daphne.

Daphne continued to watch her son closely, bafflement at the idea of what Roy was telling her and amazement at the possibility both jockeying inside her. “I wasn’t expecting this.” She admitted at last with something of a laugh.

Roy smiled at her, getting a bit of enjoyment from the confession. “I never expected it either… but I can’t imagine him not being around.” And he turned his gaze to Edward with a small nod. “You can do what you want, just try not to break anything, hm?”

“I only break Grand’s things.” Edward scoffed, before turning thoughtful, adding, “and Grand. He’s fun to break.” Before perking up and dropping to the floor so he could assess what he had to work with.

Roy chuckled, rolling his eyes before looking over at his mother and holding his hands up so she could visibly see he wasn’t doing anything with them. “I don’t know what he’s going to do, as you can see I am totally innocent and not participating in this.”

Edward leered Roy’s way, “you gave me permission, remember.” And stepped over to where Daphne was sitting.

Daphne was giving her son an odd look, seeming torn between laughing and bafflement at this one side of a conversation she was hearing. Only to swiftly abandon both with a fork-clattering startle as the whipped cream canister suddenly flew into the air and nozzle pointing downward, began to top her pie for her.

“You want to get me the caramel sauce while you’re at it, Ed?” Roy suggested with a laugh at the look on his mother’s face.

Edward promptly abandoned topping the pie, which was now sufficiently topped as it was, and aimed the nozzle of the canister at Roy to spray the man with handy projectile whipping cream. Smirking as Roy cursed and dove off his chair for cover.

Laughing, Edward set the whipping cream down and grabbed the caramel sauce on his way over the table to peer down over it to where Roy had fallen for cover. “Look, I’ve got your caramel sauce.”

“Why is it you’re always attacking me with dessert toppings?” Roy asked through a laugh as he grinned up at Edward.

“Because you’re always asking for it.” Edward informed him happily, but didn’t launch any caramel sauce as Roy picked himself up off the floor. Only handed over the caramel sauce when Roy held out a hand for it, smiling in success as the man wiped whipped cream off his neck with his other hand.

“Brat.” Roy chided the happy spirit fondly.

Edward only beamed, watching contently as Roy licked the whipping cream off his fingers.

“This has happened before between you two?”

Edward startled, mostly at realizing he’d forgotten she was there. Roy, on the other hand, was more composed as he looked at her with a smile, setting down the caramel sauce. “Once. Except that time he chased me around the house.”
Daphne didn’t bother hiding her smile. Although she believed that if Roy realized what she were truly smiling about she’d be in mortal danger. She didn’t want to risk her life needlessly… and besides, she didn’t want to cheat herself out of watching her son. Not when he was acting the way he was. “You two get along well, I’ve never known you to be chased in your own home.”

“You try having a ghost intent on revenge come at you with cake icing and see what you do.” Roy defended over Edward’s laughter… not that she could hear it. “Ghosts are inescapable, and it’s not like I can grab him to restrain him. Even if I’d want to.”

Daphne felt as if time had momentarily jerked to a stop before resuming as she stared at her son, “you mean… you can’t touch him?”

“I know he’s there, even if I can’t feel him.” Roy answered quietly, sharing a look with Edward that ended in a lopsided smile before he looked back at his mother. “He can only touch inanimate objects. I think it’s because he’s… well –”

“Not among the living.” Edward filled in quietly.

“Yeah.” Roy ended lamely, not even bothering to fill in what Edward had said for his mother’s benefit. She was a smart woman, she could fill in her own blanks.

Daphne sat back with a silent, thoughtful huff as she considered her son who she could only now assume was looking at Edward. “Well for the record, I believe you.” And at Roy’s look, smiled. “Hard not to after Edward’s little demonstration.”

“Nothing about me is little.” Edward pouted.

Roy grinned, but at his mother’s enquiring look, shook his head.

“And,” Daphne continued, “I do know you Roy… have a bit of faith in your mom that she can take some strange news. I did raise you after all.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Roy scowled at her, crossing his arms over his chest.

Edward laughed, ignoring it when he was scowled at as well.

Daphne chuckled lightly, before clearing her throat and sitting up a little straighter. “Now then, I think it’s very rude of me not to get to know a guest. Are you feeling up to being my medium?”

Roy thought about it a moment after having almost answered affirmatively, and he looked over at Edward with a raised brow. “I don’t mind… but if you want to write to her? I know you’ve tried to do that to people before, she’ll not think it’s the drugs. Although whether or not it’s all the wine making her so agreeable is another matter. But I don’t want to make you feel handicapped if you don’t need to be.”
“Thanks.” Edward murmured to Roy, clutching the notebook to his chest as he floated down to sit on the floor in front of the coffee table in the sitting room of before.

Roy handed him a pen in answer, and as Edward opened and placed the notebook on the table, he settled down next to the ghost, nursing a mug of hot coffee that he’d improved with chocolate cream liqueur.

Daphne, with the helpful directions of her son, sat down on Edward’s other side.

“He doesn’t like anyone passing through him.” Roy explained, “so don’t shift over else I’ll have to listen to him be grumpy.”

“At you.” Edward smiled, doubly so when Roy snorted derisively, and poising the pen over the paper his expression shifted to one of uncertainty, “I should introduce myself, right? I haven’t exactly… I don’t have much practice with this anymore. You’re the only one I’ve met since I died.”

Roy set aside his mug of coffee, reaching a hand over to rest it just above Edward’s wrist. “Just start with your name.”

Edward obediently began to write as soon as Roy removed his hand, and from beside him, Daphne watched with rapt, amazed attention as he wrote out ‘I’m Edward Elric’ in an untidy scrawl that made Roy snort again and remark that they needed to work on his eleven-year-old’s penmanship.

Daphne had to wonder if she should be glad that Edward didn’t pen down his response to that when Roy childishly stuck out his tongue. But it did raise a question, and she pursed her lips contemplatively before looking over in the general direction she believed Edward to be judging by Roy’s area of focus. “How old are you, Edward?”

Underneath where he’d written his name, Edward took his time writing out ‘18’ before smirking proudly over at Roy.

Roy grinned, and grabbing his coffee he gave a quick chuckle before taking a hearty sip.

Daphne bit down on a smile at the news, flicking a quick gaze to her son before turning back to the general open space that Edward seemed to be occupying. “How did you meet Roy?”

At that question, Edward found himself smiling and quickly writing again. ‘His office was my home for seven years. He thought he was hallucinating me at first, but he came around.’

“He was trapped in there.” Roy added solemnly when Edward raised the pen, finished. “We don’t know how or why, much less how or why I was able to get him out of there… but he stays with me now at my place.”

Daphne nodded slowly to herself, unable to keep from letting her smile begin to slip through. “And how long has that been going on?” She asked, only to feel her smile tug a bit wider when the hovering pen didn’t move, and Roy was looking at the open air that was Edward with puzzlement.

Edward blinked at Roy thoughtfully, head tilted as if it would help him find the answer. “How long has it been? It feels like so long, but it can’t have been that long.”
“Two? Three weeks? Somewhere around there?” Roy ventured in guesstimate, and at Edward’s puzzled nod of acceptance looked up at his mother. “Something like that.”

Edward turned a shy grin down towards the notebook, fiddling with the pen. “It doesn’t seem like much… we’ve grown so close.”

Daphne took note of the fond look on Roy’s face, a look certainly not directed at her, and considered her next question a moment before asking, “why do you stay with him?”

“Mom!”

Daphne laughed, ignoring her son’s enraged outburst before waving Edward on. “Seriously, why. I’m guessing you’re not trapped anymore, so why does a free spirit, if I may, stay with my son?”

Edward could only smile softly down at the notebook, and after a moment of enjoying Roy’s indignation about the matter, began to write. ‘I can’t imagine leaving him.’

It was more than Roy having freed him, more than the fact that his world could only expand if he was with Roy, it was so much more than that. He didn’t have to stay, he’d known this from the beginning. But he stayed, because he wanted to. Because he knew he belonged beside Roy… and that was exactly where he’d stay.

Daphne nodded slowly as she absorbed that along with the visual cues she was getting from Roy. Honestly, her son was like an open book around Edward now that the secret was out. It was amazing to her to witness it, knowing that it wasn’t her that he’d opened up too like this. It wasn’t her who was meant to see. “I don’t doubt that…” she said with a gentle smile, “no… I don’t doubt that at all. For either of you.”

Roy glanced over at her before finding himself looking back at the words written in the notebook. Feeling the gravity of them all the more after this afternoon. “We’re rarely separated, mom. Since the night he was able to get free of my office we’ve almost always been together.”

‘When he’s not being a manwhore.’ Edward quickly penned with a wicked smirk that didn’t fade at Roy’s affronted noise.

Daphne didn’t even try to fight back the laugh, and grinning still she shook her head at her son in mock disgust before turning her attention presumably back to Edward. “I’d say he was worse as a teenager, but only because him having a career now doesn’t allow him to flirt all day.”

‘He spends every other night with me.’ Edward wrote with a flare of pride, smiling at the paper. ‘Maybe he’s slowly getting better? And this past week he decided to take me out somewhere instead of someone else. So he stayed with me two nights.’

Daphne’s eyebrows crept towards her hairline before her face relaxed and she looked at the written words thoughtfully before she looked over at Roy who seemed to be quite fascinated with his coffee, although she was no idiot, and she knew that he wasn’t smiling in that tender way because of coffee. “Maybe you’re right, Edward.”

“I was worried about you.” Roy defended gently, as if he wasn’t even sure why he was trying to defend his actions that night.

Daphne slowly nodded, something that felt very much of relief beginning to settle over her. But that wasn’t to say that she wasn’t a bit worried in her own right. “What do you two do when you’re together?”
Edward stilled for several moments, eyes gazing at the paper and still barely seeing it. His eyes saw other, far more nostalgic things in this moment. Ones that, perhaps to an outsider, didn’t seem all that special or significant, but to him… to him those simple moments were priceless. And with a distant seeming smile, he began to write once more. ‘He takes me to the parks a lot. One in particular where it’s easy for us to be alone.’ And then underneath that he added, ‘And he’s been teaching me to ride a bike.’

“And I’m taking you to the theatre Tuesday night, don’t forget.” Roy added softly, intended mostly for Edward’s ears alone.

‘We do a lot of things together,’ Edward was adding, even as he warmed at the reminder. ‘Read, go on trips like this one, play chess, and we talk a lot… and I tag along with him to a certain point when he has nights to himself. I made one of the latest victims trip and fall before he got to Roy, that was fun.’

“Not as much fun as it was for me.” Roy pitched in smugly, smirking in the face of Edward’s reproachful scowl.

Daphne had quickly compiled it all, and her green eyes flicked back and forth between the two of them – at least, as best she could with her only reference of Edward being where Roy was looking. “For only having known each other less than a month, I admit you could probably have tricked me into believing it’s been longer.”

Roy looked over at her now with a frown. “How do you mean?”

But Daphne ignored him as she asked Edward directly, “are you happy even just doing nothing with him?”

‘I’m happy as long as I’m with him.’ Edward wrote out, ignoring the faint fluttering of embarrassment inside him.

Daphne smiled to herself before looking to her son in a rather more serious light than she had the rest of this unorthodox conversation. “What is it you were yelling at him about?” And then to Edward, “he doesn’t yell at you a lot, does he?”

“Grand.” Roy bit out, it wasn’t as if he were keeping any of that from her as it was, but his displeasure was more regarding Edward’s questioning than his own. “And I shouldn’t ever yell at him, what kind of man do you think you raised me to become that I’d yell at him day in and day out?”

‘That’s the only time I can remember him raising his voice to me like that.’ Edward scribbled as he shot Roy an appeasing look. “I’ve yelled at you a fair bit.”

“I believe I was deserving of it.” Roy muttered before responding instinctively to the question he knew would otherwise be coming, “just because Edward is dead doesn’t give me the right to use him to help me in my battle with Grand on the principle that he wouldn’t get hurt. I wanted to forbid him from helping me if something were to happen…but he was right,” he conceded, “I can’t stop him from acting.”

“We always try to protect the ones we care about.” Daphne agreed with a simple gentleness as she turned away a moment to direct a nostalgic smile towards the table. “That you have found someone to care so much about in such a short time, Roy, is… I’m glad of it. It’s not many that you’d try and protect like that.”
Roy found his eyes locking with Edward’s, drawn into them in that way he’d begun to feel less nervous about now that he had no secrets from the ghost. No longer so afraid that Edward might be able to see into his soul.

“Even if I were alive, Roy,” Edward spoke quietly as he reached a hand out to hover just over Roy’s forearm, “I’d do anything I could to protect you. She’s right about you… and I never thought I’d ever have anyone to care about again.”

“You’ve already done so much.” Roy replied, his gaze still locked onto Edward’s. “But I get it now, I do.”

Daphne watched them unseen, smiling unseen with the way Roy seemed unable to look away from Edward. Her son really had changed since she’d last heard from him, it had been clear to her before, and sitting here now it was inescapable. Edward had an undeniable affect on her son, and one in particular that she had once lamented that she might not ever see.

Looking down at the paper that Edward’s answers thus far were written across, she gave herself a mental nod of permission before looking to Roy once again. “Roy… there’s something I’d like to ask Edward alone, if you don’t mind.”

The gaze between them broke as they both turned to look at her, and Roy met her unrevealing eyes for several minutes before taking a firmer hold on his coffee mug. “I’ll go get some more coffee, and perhaps a bit more liqueur for it.” And as he rose said to Edward, “don’t let her ask you anything unnecessary.”

Daphne scoffed as Edward smiled up at him reassuringly. “I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“Give me at least five minutes.” Daphne instructed her impertinent son, but smiled after him as he rolled his eyes and made himself scarce. Only then did she turn to where she still trusted Edward to be. “You said he spends every other night with you?”

‘Yes.’

She nodded and settled herself back a bit more comfortably on the floor as she finally looked up from the word and to Edward again. She realized this might be meddling on her part… but she wanted confirmation of what she already suspected. “How does it make you feel when he goes with someone else for the night?”

Taken aback a bit by the question, Edward hesitated as he thought back to those nights. Barely remembering the first ones when he and Roy had just barely begun to live together. Seeing them in far more clarity since that cake incident. Head bowed, his expression tightened as the pen hovered still unmoving over the paper seconds more before he began to write once more after a staggered start. ‘It’s who he is.’

“Yes,” Daphne agreed gently, knowing all too well herself the truth of it. “But what about you?”

‘I already impose enough on his life. I want him to have time to himself. It doesn’t make me happy though that he settles for so much less than he deserves to have. He thinks I’m old fashioned for it, but he should find someone he loves. He’d be happier that way, and I want him to be happy like that. Not fooling himself.’

Daphne knew then that she’d finally gotten Edward to the point she had wanted, if that sudden paragraph that finally stopped was anything to go by. “So you’d be happy if he found someone to love? Maybe even marry?”
Edward frowned at her, he’d thought that was the gist of what he had been getting at. Yet he found himself unable to write straight away, the pen seeming stuck against the paper as her words echoed in his mind. ‘Yes’ he finally managed to write, frustrated at himself.

Daphne nodded and looked towards the window. “I think if Roy can ever open himself up to what he’d believe to be the preposterous idea of him being in love… I think he’d be very happy. Being in love is never what you expect it to be, it never is what you think, and it’s never easy,” she laughed there, shaking her head, “I realized that myself when I met my husband. But you know, I really do love him, even after all these years after his death.” And she looked away from the window, back towards Edward again. “Love isn’t easy… and it wouldn’t mean as much, or be so wonderful if it were.”

‘What was Roy’s father like?’ Edward queried after a moment spent contemplating the appropriateness of the inquiry. ‘Was he anything like Roy?’

Daphne’s mouth quirked into a smile. “If you’re asking whether or not he was a manwhore, as you put it –” Edward smiled in kind, “– no.” And her green eyes gained a softer look to them as she reminisced. “Roy has a lot of his father in him though. And I imagine any person lucky enough to steal Roy’s heart would understand why I never remarried.”

Roy had slumped against the frame of the entryway, dark eyes shadowed from his mother’s words as he took a last look at Edward before silently turning so that his back was against the wall. He didn’t know what Edward had written, only that his mother was speaking more about his father, and he listened with half an ear and closed eyes… unable to truly get those words out of his head. “Any person lucky enough to steal Roy’s heart…” but he didn’t want that to happen.

No matter what Edward desired for him… he wouldn’t yield such a thing. Because of Edward he couldn’t. And let that be the last and final secret he’d ever keep from the ghost.

Finally he knew he couldn’t linger any longer without announcing he was there, and so he pushed off from the wall and crossed over to Edward again. “She didn’t ask you anything embarrassing, did she?”

Edward whipped around in surprise and with a beaming smile. “Of course not, I get the feeling she only asks you those things.”

Roy had to admit, the spirit was right on at least that front. “It’s only because you died well before you could have a sex life, otherwise trust me, she’d be trying to embarrass you.”

“Roy,” Edward laughed, “your sex life is worthy of trying to embarrass you of.”

“Thanks.” Roy rolled his eyes as he settled back down fully next to his companion before looking over at his mother who seemed even more smug than usual about something. But it wasn’t a purely gleeful smugness, something held her reserved. “What’s wrong with you? What information did you drag out of him?” He asked, looking down at the paper.

Edward let him read it, not having anything to hide. It wasn’t anything he’d not told to Roy before. But still, he waited with an edge of nerves.

“Still doesn’t explain what’s up with that look, mom.” Roy studied her in a calculative manner before remarking idly to Edward. “And you’re still an archaic romantic.”

“One day you may understand… and I hope you do.” Daphne answered simply, looking between the two of them.
“One of us has to be, you’re hopeless.” Edward shot back dryly.

Roy grunted noncommittally.

For several more hours the three of them spoke and answered questions, and Edward went through a significant amount of paper. Paper that Roy eventually pocketed for the ghost when Daphne decided it was time for her to check on a few things and head to bed.

Roy made sure to pass on Edward’s wish of a good night to her, and waited until he was assured of her being out of earshot before looking back to the ghost. “That was… I’m glad it ended up well.” He admitted with a lengthy sigh.

Edward smiled at him consolingly. “Me too.” And as he passed Roy the pen he’d been using, asked, “do you remember your father even a little bit?”

Roy slipped the pen away with a distant expression, and didn’t answer right away. Instead he rose from the floor and walked over to one of the bookshelves, taking from atop one of the higher shelves a framed photograph.

Edward had risen to follow him, and as Roy turned, holding it out, he took it in hand.

“I barely remember him.” Roy replied as he stared at the cardboard backing securing the photograph. But unlike the time prior that Edward had asked about his memories regarding his father, he didn’t stop there. “But I remember that day… more than any other flash of his face in my mind.”

A photograph of Daphne in her younger years yet all the same unmistakable, she was lounging on a picnic blanket back against the side of a man who smiled at the camera with Roy’s dark eyes and in his arms a child barely free of being a toddler.

A toddler who seemed to be attempting to grab for the camera despite his father’s hold.

Edward had to smile at that, before his eyes were attracted to the man in the photograph. He had Roy’s eyes, but dark brown hair that gleamed red in the sunlight took the place of the black hair he’d grown so familiar with.

“He’s very handsome.” Edward said at last, continuing to study the photograph. “I wonder how you’d look in a tie.”

Roy snorted and grabbed the photograph back, “that’s my dad you’re drooling over, if you don’t mind.”

Edward grinned unrepentant. “I can appreciate a good looking person without wanting to bed them, unlike yourself. But since you’re feeling left out, you were adorable as a child.” And promptly snatched the photograph back.

Roy scowled at the term, even more so as Edward had the audacity to laugh. “If I recall correctly you left before I was fully finished with the photo album of your childhood pictures. You wouldn’t appreciate it if I called you adorable, now would you?”

Edward glanced up from the photograph and his latest musing which he didn’t think he’d share with Roy. Somehow he wasn’t sure Roy would ever let him get a hold of the photograph a third time if he remarked upon wondering how Roy would look in glasses. The man’s father certainly wore them well. Much like Maes… but then that wasn’t a comment he was sure would go over well either. “Actually… if you seriously did, I wouldn’t mind.”
“It’s nothing compared to you now.” Roy said softly, looking away with a flush of embarrassment.

Edward ducked his head, his eyes focusing on the toddler-sized Roy once more, feeling oddly self-aware in this moment. “In a roundabout way you once called me beautiful, I remember.” He whispered back, and absently decided that green onesies were a fantastic clothing choice for Roy.

Roy darted a sidelong look at the spirit, feeling himself soften inexplicably more. And closing his eyes, he couldn’t help but think he hadn’t been wrong in his assessment that one afternoon. For being only a silvery apparition that glowed in ethereal light… it was all Edward needed. “That picture...” he began abruptly as he forced his thoughts to clear, “it was taken about a week or two before he died. It was just some silly picnic, but it’s one of the last and few memories I have of him and I know it’s because of that photograph. It helps me remember and not forget.”

Edward looked up at him then, offering the photograph into Roy’s outstretched hand. “I’m sure he was a good father to you, even if you can’t remember hardly any of it.”

Roy scanned the photograph briefly, his eyes lingering the longest on the man in question. “I know he was, from what little I remember, and how much mom still loves him.”

“I’m glad of that.” Edward said honestly, watching as Roy put the photograph back where he’d gotten it. “Can I see more of your pictures?”

Roy chuckled lightly, sending the ghost a teasing look over his shoulder. “Not just yet… there’s still one place I want to show you before tomorrow.”

It was agreed to, and Edward followed Roy from the house once more.

And so it was that Edward was taken on a tour of the winery itself. One lit only by his own ghostly light and the single lamp Roy had lit. But it was not so much the hundreds of barrels of wine, or the machines that was the true subject of the tour. It was something a bit more familiar…

“When I came back from Ishval we were all on a military leave to recuperate.” Roy said as he ran a hand along a slightly dusty shelf in the out-of-the-way room, “I came here… and apparently the way I was dealing with such a harsh difference of realities was to make these.”

Edward had carefully picked up one of the old wine bottles. But it was no ordinary bottle that he’d seen before. With these wine bottles, none of them were the same despite that they were all different from the ordinary. The one he currently held was a deep sapphire blue, the glass textured like gentle ripples on water, and inside those ripples small bubbles had formed making their way up to the rim as they reflected ghostly light.

“My two worlds joined… it was good therapy for me to make these.” Roy murmured as he picked up another: clear glass with sooty lines embedded that curled into smoky shapes.

“They’re beautiful.” Edward breathed, carefully setting the sapphire bottle back upon the shelf as his widened eyes took in the rows and rows of them in this shrine of a room. “If not for your military ambitions… you should have become an artist.”

Roy smiled faintly as he examined the bottle in his hand. “These were never sold to the public, these bottles. We had put wine in them, but my mother only opened them for the vineyard tours. I remember she got some fair offers for some of them, but she couldn’t part with them. To her they’re priceless.”

“I wouldn’t part with them either.” Edward agreed softly as he took down another of orange tinted glass and ash colored shadows of what appeared to be flowers. “How do you manage this stuff…”
“That one was the result of throwing in orange flowers just before it was finished.” Roy recalled with a fond smile. “My mother developed a limited amount of wine that had hints of orange because of that bottle. The regular bottles all sold out on that day’s wine tour.”

“You should make more one day.” Edward decided as his fingers trailed over a rose hued bottle that had puffs of white like miniature clouds enwrapping it.

Roy looked back to them all, the suggestion weighing on his mind. It was rare he’d made something like this with his alchemy, created art just to create it. Before it had been to certify as a state alchemist and prove he knew his alchemy frontwards and back, and then later as coping methods. And then Edward had entered his life. “… I’ll think about it.”

They spent a while longer in the room, looking at all the bottles, before they began the walk back to the dark house together. And once there, Roy, after much insistence and glaring on Edward’s part, relinquished the photo album that held childhood pictures of him with his family.

Edward had gleefully perched himself in the center of Roy’s bed. It wasn’t nearly as large as the one the man had back home, but it was suitable to his purposes as he opened the album across the sheets and bent down over supported by his elbows to flip through enthusiastically.

“Awwah,” Edward cooed at one point, “you had chubby cheeks.”

Roy came to lounge next to Edward with a sardonic roll of his eyes. “I was six years old, of course I did. So did you, I’ve seen the evidence.” And he stretched out a bit further, supporting himself with one hand placed on the bed behind his back as he looked down at the photographs with Edward.

Edward looked over at him with a teasing smirk, “yeah, but the rest of you looks chubby as well.”

“It’s the lighting!”

“It is not.”

Roy glared and huffed as Edward smugly went back to his snooping. Still following along with said snooping, he reached his free hand up to begin unbuttoning his shirt and when finished slipped it off to set it aside a moment with a thoughtful glimmer in his eyes.

For several pages more Roy was subjected to telling Edward what he could remember about the photographs… although he absolutely refused to explain the one where he was eight years old and sitting in his mother’s closet surrounded by all her shoes.

Edward had just moved on with a last little laugh when he felt something settle over his back and shoulders. “Wha–” he trailed off as he looked over at himself to find Roy’s shirt draped across him in a perfect imitation of wearing it, and his eyebrows climbed towards his hairline as he looked up at the man. “I am not your laundry hamper.”

Roy chuckled quietly, his gaze soft as he observed the effect of the white shirt against the silvery glow. “It’s the weekend…” he replied in almost a whisper, as if it were the only explanation necessary.

“And?” Edward’s eyebrows climbed higher, but he didn’t attempt to rid himself of the shirt.

“And,” Roy continued for him, “I haven’t tried to fluster you yet… you look good in my shirt.”

Edward’s eyebrows went back down only to gather in an amused sort of frown as he tried not to smile. “You’ve already flustered me today, Roy Mustang.” He replied in quiet honesty. “More than
once. Although the return of your atrocious flirtation attempts is always refreshing.” He finished with a smirk.

“Have I?” Roy questioned as he reached for the shirt, startling as his hand only passed through it.

Edward smiled at the shocked surprise on the man’s face. “It’s touched me for too long. You can’t have it back until I give it up. It’s far too thin a barrier between you and me.” And making no move to dislodge the shirt, turned his attention back to the photo album with a little smile.

Roy found himself smiling, and didn’t ask for the shirt back, nor did Edward make any inclination that he was going to get rid of it. It stayed on him until the photo album had been flipped through, and Edward sprawled face-down on the bed to watch through his silver fringe as Roy got up to put the album away, not looking away even as the man stripped out of his black slacks before rejoining him on the bed.

“Roy?” Edward murmured, finally closing his eyes as he felt Roy’s weight dip down near to him.

Roy hummed questioningly as he pillowed his head on his arms, facing the apparition just inches from him.

“These weekend trips… they’ve been hard on the both of us.” Edward spoke, barely able to be heard in his growing relaxation. “But thank you for taking me on them.”

Roy readjusted so that he could find some form of blankets and pulled them up over him… and Edward, as he smiled faintly. “I’ll have to think of where next to take you. Maybe somewhere where it’s just the two of us.”

Edward smiled, still not opening his eyes even when he felt the extra pressure settle over him. He’d heard Roy rustling around and knew what must have happened – he didn’t try and escape it either. Only continued to lay there next to Roy, secured in by the pressure of the covers over him and Roy’s shirt. He continued to lay there long after he’d heard the man’s breathing even out, but eventually he did open his eyes to look across the sparse inches separating them.

For a long time, all he could do was watch Roy sleep as he lost himself in his thoughts.

He may not have confirmed when Roy questioned him on it, but he hadn’t been lying when he’d said the man had flustered him several times throughout the day. And yet... it wasn’t the flustered feeling he remembered once having. There had been no exasperation or as had followed later, wants to allow the floor to swallow him up – as he could very well manage.

He couldn’t remember, thinking back now, when things had changed. Only that somewhere along the line, they had… and after Roy’s impassioned confession of earlier, there was no way he could miss it now.

That excitement that felt so familiar to him, yet so foreign. The warmth that filled him when Roy had all but called him beautiful once again. That strange thrill of pride that he was wearing Roy’s shirt – pride which made absolutely no sense at all.

And then here he was, laying on Roy’s side of the bed… and far closer to him than he’d ever dared lay before. It didn’t matter that Roy had been the one to close the distance, he was the one accepting of it. Even welcoming it.

“I’m not used to feeling anything anymore.” The words barely a whisper due to their nearness. “And then I met you… and now I don’t understand what I feel. Is that normal, Roy?” Edward asked, moving a hand from underneath the covers to rest it just against, but not through, Roy’s face. “Is this
why you dare not let many get close to you? Why you keep me closer than anyone else?” And his hand slipped away down past Roy’s parted lips until it rested against the bed in the small distance between them. “I didn’t lie… I’m possessive over you too… and I don’t want anyone else to feel like this with you. Even if I don’t understand what this is.”

Tonight, he was feeling clearly his eleven-year-olds experience with grown-up emotions.
Chapter 35

It was barely dawn when the smells of cooking breakfast made Roy groan and shift in his sleep, but it was the quiet, familiar laughter that made him open his eyes at last. “G’morning.” He murmured a bit drowsily, smiling through a yawn at the ghost who still lay at his side.

Edward’s head was resting in the pillow of an arm as he smiled back. “What is it that was making you fidget so?”

Roy breathed in deeply the smells of cooking sausages and the richness of what he suspected were the muffins he loved so much. “She’s already cooking, and apparently I’m hungry.”

Edward laughed again softly, making no move to get out of bed at the news. If anything, he only relaxed in deeper as he felt Roy shift back closer to him to regain the distance they’d lost in his fidgeting. “One of these days, I will see you doing pushups.”

Roy gave a half-hearted roll of his eyes at the comment before being interrupted by another yawn. “I’ll keep that in mind for a day when I want to easily please you.” He muttered amusedly before smiling as he gave a tug to the blankets covering them. “I should get in the shower, you want to still have a lie in?”

Edward pushed himself up enough to lean over Roy, resting his hands on either side of the man. “I am not easy to please, Roy Mustang.” He rebuked him as firmly as he could, though he could do nothing about the amused smile that threatened to become a grin.

Roy laughed softly as he stared up into the happy silver eyes, and he lifted his hand to brush at the hair that fell forward. “Then I’ll be sure to add some weightlifting as well, my difficult ghost.”

“See that you do.” Edward laughed, before falling quiet as he gazed a bit too long into those dark and humored eyes. How long he was unable to break free of them he didn’t know, much less notice, and as Roy made to sit up, he eased himself back to give the man room until they were both sitting with the covers tangled around them.

“I’ll be out shortly.” Roy said gently, and with effort managed to tear his gaze from Edward’s as he slipped out of bed.

Edward was left sitting in the bed as he watched the bathroom door close behind Roy, and when he looked away it was with an expression of uncertainty. But after a minute or two of listening to the shower he finally managed to shake his thoughts and rise from the bed himself.

Meanwhile the creator of the appetizing smells radiating from the kitchen was looking towards the large windows surrounding the table as she drizzled warm icing over the cinnamon buns.

Daphne made not one wrong line across the buns despite her lack of visual focus. A focus that only shifted back to the buns when she had finished the last one. “Perfect.” She murmured to herself, pleased.

She had just finished setting all the food out onto the table when she heard Roy announce himself with a humorously long yawn.

“What could you have possibly been up doing so late to merit giving me that greeting.” She
chastised her son even as she moved in to reciprocate the hug he had moved in to give.

“We were looking at pictures all night.” Roy told her with a slight mumble. “Edward has an attachment to photographs.”

Having heard the latest comment, Edward shot the man a playful scowl as he floated up beside him. “You have stranger attachments, Mustang.”

“And how is Edward this morning?” Daphne asked as she released her son from the hug and looked to him for direction as to where the ghost was at present.

“He’s being difficult.” Roy answered pleasantly for the ghost.

“I am not!” Edward protested as Roy grinned at him.

Daphne didn’t need to exactly know what was happening on the other side of the conversation to know that Roy wasn’t exactly telling her what Edward would have preferred him to. But instead of pursuing it she shook her head with a slight grin. “Then he’s a good influence on you.”

Roy looked back around at her with a doubtful expression. “How do you figure that?”

Edward harrumphed and folded his arms as he doubled his scowl. “Keep digging that hole there, mister.”

Roy immediately clapped his hand over his mother’s mouth. “How about that breakfast!” He declared with exuberance, before fairly fleeing for the table.

Both Edward and Daphne looked after him with amused expressions and shakes of the head. Sometimes that was all you could do when dealing with that man, and they both knew it well.

Roy had nearly finished piling his plate when they joined him at the table. His mother sitting down first in her usual seat, and he glanced up at her in just enough time to see her eyes widen marginally when the other chair at his side was pulled out from the table by, to her, an invisible force.

“It will still take some getting accustomed to.” Daphne admitted as the chair scooted back forward.

Edward chuckled lightly and selected an apple to set on Roy’s plate to help fill the remaining room. “Same here. I’m not accustomed to not being careful around everyone but you, Roy.”

Roy smiled at Edward first before looking over at his mother. “I’m not sure just when it stopped being weird for me… but I know it probably helps that I can actually see him.”

Daphne smiled back at him, her smile growing thoughtful as she forked two waffles onto her plate. “Speaking of… what does he look like?” Before she hurriedly turned to the chair she knew Edward to be sitting in. “Not to be rude and not ask you, of course.”

Edward smiled, but turned his further attention to Roy with one eyebrow raised in question. “Yes, Roy, what do I look like?”

“Mmm… besides a brat, you mean?” He asked, earning himself a kick to his chair. He winked at the ghost before turning to his mother. “Well he looks human, if that’s what you’re getting at. He’s just incorporeal, I can see through him just a bit.”

“No.” Daphne refused the explanation with an indulgent smile. “What does he look like, Roy?”

Roy flicked a sidelong glance to the ghost, then ducked his gaze to stare at the plate in front of him,
the singularity of it giving him a sense of security he hadn’t realized he’d needed. “He’s…” and he could see clearly the stolen photograph, could see Edward as he’d been that first night of freedom, and slowly, without even truly realizing he was speaking, began to. “He’s silver light that is always glowing. Every now and then he forgets that he tries to seem taller than me by floating.” He was not unaware of the noise that issued from said ghost. “Either he’s forgotten, or he’s letting his hair grow out, but it’s almost halfway down your back now… you know that? And he’s got these eyes… like he can see straight through me, but I’ve given up worrying that he can.”

Edward had forgotten why he’d lifted a hand to his hair, and it lowered slowly as he stared at Roy wonderingly… entirely stunned.

“Even sitting here now with all this light, he still manages to glow…” Roy continued softly, before abruptly jerking back to himself and in an attempt not to color under the intense gaze he could feel on him from more than his mother, flippantly added, “I think it’s because of his stubborn personality.”

“Hey!” Edward scowled indignantly. “I have to be stubborn to keep up with you, but I was glowing long before I met you.”

Roy’s smile was small, but it was there, and he flicked a brief look up at the ghost before turning as calmly as he could back to his waffles that were starting to become soggy in their syrup.

Daphne studied her son in silence as he ate, clearly trying to move as far away as possible from his pathetic attempt at distraction. But it would take more than that to distract her from the quite personalized and at times flattering words. Fortunately for him, she couldn’t meddle with that.

Unfortunately she couldn’t meddle with a lot of this.

Meanwhile Edward seemed to have abruptly remembered the comment about his hair, and reached for it again to pull it around. “I haven’t really noticed…”

Roy glanced up to see what Edward was talking about, and immediately pointed a finger at the ghost to forestall any decision making. “Good, leave it alone.”

Daphne wasn’t too sure what they were talking about now, Roy’s words could be taken in any number of ways. Unfortunately the paper from the night before hadn’t made a reappearance, and right now Roy didn’t seem keen on filling her in on the missing halves of a conversation.

Shaking her head with a smile she looked away from Roy, her gaze lingering a moment longer than normal on the tree line that lay beyond the window, before she finished off her waffles and cinnamon bun with precise neatness. Only then did she get up from the table, leaving her plate where it was.

“Try not to eat all of it, Roy. I’m still a bit hungry.”

Roy frowned up at her, distracted from demolishing his third cinnamon bun that he’d been forking into his mouth with bits of bacon. “Then you shouldn’t leave me alone with it.”

Daphne smiled and rolled her eyes, “Edward, make sure he saves me some.”

Edward laughed, and though she could not hear nor see, made a salute to the woman. “Oh I know ways to detain him.”

“I’m still not sure I should have introduced you two.” Roy moaned, but continued to eat as his mother slipped away.

Daphne made her way to her bedroom, leaving Roy in Edward’s capable hands for the time being. If
she was right, then Roy wouldn’t have much time allotted to stuff away all the food before he was dragged from the table.

…but she did hope she wasn’t right.

Kneeling down at her bedside she reached under to pull free what she was looking for, and made her way out of her room and out one of the side doors of the house.

It was a cool morning still, but lacked any form of a breeze as she calmly made her way around the veranda to the rear of the house, facing the grapevines.

Daphne didn’t take her focus from the potentially confusing lines of grapevines, her bright green eyes were steady and hard as she waited for the next flicker of movement. And when she saw the vines rustle not two hundred yards in past their beginning, with an accompanying out of place flash of blue, she quickly sank to her knees as she whipped the gleaming rifle forward out from where she’d kept it hidden behind her.

Wedging the butt firmly against her shoulder, she took careful aim between the vertical porch railings and waited with slow, even breaths as her finger curled around the trigger. Holding it steady she slowly tracked the area back and forth, knowing she’d soon see that telltale blue again.

And then her target shifted weight, directly into her line of sight. “Gotcha.” She whispered with a steady gleam in her eyes, and pulled the trigger.

The rifle shot ripped through the peaceful morning air, punctuated by a scream and the startled cawing of birds.

But Daphne didn’t move, not yet, save for palming the spare shells from her dress and onto the porch deck within easy reach. Just in case. The entire time she had her rifle up and ready, peering out into the vineyard where, so far, there was no more rustling.

“Mom!” Roy’s boots thudded loudly on the porch as he ran around the corner, ducking down into a slide to bring him partially under cover and to her side. And though he placed a hand on her shoulder, he too didn’t look away from where his mother was clearly focused. “Same as before?”

“I do think someone followed you here Roy.” She agreed in a distracted voice. “I thought I saw him sneaking around earlier this morning, but wasn’t entirely sure. Now I am.”

“Roy!” Edward darted out then from the wall to land next to the pair, worry written clearly on his face. The one thing he’d never expected to hear here was a gunshot! “Is she okay?”

“She’s okay, Ed.” Roy reassured the ghost, and looked over at his mother. “Cover me, I’ll go get him, whoever he is. You didn’t kill him, did you?”

Daphne’s mouth pulled into an almost amused smile. “I can aim, kid. He probably just fainted from my blowing a hole in his shoulder.” And as Roy got up, her aim on the vineyard never wavered. “I’ve got you covered.”

“Stay with my mom.” Roy said as he turned to Edward, meeting the ghost’s eyes seriously when it appeared as if Edward would argue. “Because if she missed and blew his head off, I don’t want you to see something like that.”

“I take offence to that, I’ll have you know.” Daphne groused as she continued to cover them all until she knew Roy had his hands on whoever it was out there. “He’ll be okay, Edward, and he’s right. Stay here. There are some things no one should see if they don’t have to. Just in case I missed.” She
Edward fidgeted with worry, but under Roy’s unrelenting stare, he gave in. “Okay. But be careful.”

Roy couldn’t help the way his expression softened at the words, and raising a hand up towards Edward’s cheek as if to brush against it, nodded. “I won’t be more than a minute. You’ll see.”

Edward could only watch as Roy hopped the porch railing and began striding out over the lawn, and he drifted closer to Daphne who was keeping a careful eye on the entire scene.

“I’ve never before screwed up a shot, not when interrogation is so valuable to Roy.” Daphne began to say to the spirit she could only go by blind faith was there still. “And I’ve only gotten hit by return fire once. I’ll just say on that matter that Roy was far from pleased when he found out. I’ve never envied anyone less.”

Edward could only imagine, he had seen how Roy had flown from the table at the sound of the rifle. He knew how adamant Roy was to protect those he cared about. “Just don’t let him get hit by return fire.” He murmured worriedly as he watched Roy’s progress.

The man was nearly to the grapevines now…

Roy broke into a trot upon hearing the rustling, and gasps and groans of a man in severe pain. With narrowed eyes, Roy promised more pain shortly as he spotted the rivulets of blood that led him about a yard into the grapevines.

There, laying prone on the soil and clutching with ragged gasps to his right shoulder, was an officer of the military he definitely did not recognize.

Roy didn’t hesitate as he strode right over, kicking harshly at the officer’s hand when the man made a frantic grab for the gun at his belt. “Now there will be none of that.” He informed the bleeding individual as he yanked the gun out himself.

The man on the ground glared up through the pain, teeth gritting against his words. “Even if you kill –”

“– you, whoever sent you will know.” Roy finished for him sternly as he emptied the pistol of its rounds and slipped them into his pocket, the pistol itself into the waistband of his jeans. “I’ve heard it before. You think you’re the first one to lie bleeding on this dirt?”

The man screamed out as Roy yanked him to his feet by his injured shoulder… what was left of it.

“Move!” Roy commanded, shoving the officer forward, heedless of the fact that the arm he was shoving against was barely attached anymore and bleeding profusely. “Too much blood isn’t good for the wine.”

On the veranda, Daphne gathered the remaining rifle shells and stood up. “Come on, Edward.”

Edward didn’t need any further permission, and flew from the porch towards the gruesome scene coming towards him with howls of pain.

“Edward, you may not want to be out here for this.” Roy called out over the screams of the resistant man he continued to shove along. “I’m not about to be nice.”

“I don’t care.” Edward told him insistently as he reached Roy’s side, taking a good look at the military officer in custody. The man’s right arm was barely attached anymore, and blood had long
started soaking what was left of a once blue uniform red. “What happened to me looked a lot worse.”

Roy shoved his captive several more steps before sending him pitilessly to the grass with a yank backwards to the nearly blown off right arm and a sharp boot to the back of the left knee. As the man fell to the grass with another scream, he stared at this crying creature stonily even as his voice gentled in direction to Edward. “I don’t want you to think badly of me, for what I’m going to do.”

Edward looked to Roy, expression neutral and calm. “That’s why I won’t leave you alone to do this.”

Roy let his eyes meet the steady silver ones, searching for doubt he didn’t find. And as his mother came over to join the scene, he looked away. “Then… thank you.” He whispered softly, before a choking, pained cough drove him back to the situation that was kneeling at his feet.

“Roy?”

Roy looked up at his mother and nodded once. “Just keep the rifle on him.” And as his mother lifted the loaded rifle to aim it unwaveringly at the military officer’s head, he walked around to the front of the man and crouched down.

“The quicker you answer my questions, the sooner the pain gets to end.” Roy began in a steady, smooth voice that gave nothing away, not even anger.

“I… no!” The military officer refused in pale-faced anger, shaking violently from blood loss and the knowledge of who had him at his nonexistent mercy.

“No.” Roy repeated silkily, and as the man began to careen forward in pain and fatigue, whipped free the pistol he’d taken and shoved it deep into the tender skin just below what was missing. It elicited another scream, and the officer jerked away from it to remain kneeling when Roy’s iron grip in his hair kept him from falling back. “I’ve heard that one before.”

His answer was gurgling blood.

“Try again.” Roy whispered icily, lightly digging the muzzle of the pistol into the injured skin. “Who sent you to spy on me?”

“…fu –” The response was cut off by another scream.

Roy shook his head condescendingly. “Refrain from using such language in front of my mother.”

Daphne might have been amused were she not entirely focused on keeping her rifle on the man.

“A name.” Roy continued in the same silky, dangerous tone as his grip tightened viciously in his captive’s hair and dug the muzzle of the pistol a bit deeper as blood began to drip heavily off of it.

The military officer gave another scream as the muzzle twisted, but this time, his scream was a word. “Grand!” And he gasped harshly before, “god damnit!”

“God has nothing to do with this.” Edward whispered, and did not meet Roy’s eyes when the man briefly looked his way.

Roy looked back, and found a new place to prod with the pistol muzzle. “I thought I told you not to use such language in front of my mother.” And he filed away the information that Grand had sent a spy to tail him, and he did so with wry satisfaction. This was good, it meant that Grand was worried. “When did Grand send you?”
He punctuated his question with another muzzle twist. They seemed to be most effective on this individual.

“Friday!”

Roy breathed out in relief at the news. That meant there was no possible way the man could have gotten any form of information back to Grand yet. “I just have one last question for you, and I want you to think really hard before you answer, okay princess?”

His answer was something meant to be a growl.

“Where does Grand take the people he kidnaps?” Roy asked with steel in his eyes.

Daphne frowned, that was certainly a new question. But after everything Roy had told her yesterday afternoon, it made sense. Yet she knew they might be grasping at straws here asking a question about such a highly secretive matter to a common lackey sent out to tail her son.

“Where!” Roy reinforced his question with another sharp muzzle twist in a previously untouched area, shocking the once drifting man back out of the growing grasp of unconsciousness.

“I don’t –!” A series of coughs that splattered the grass with fresh blood interrupted him, and the man glared at Roy with nothing short of pure hatred. “Don’t know what…” he received a rough shake as he began to drift off again, “you’re talking about!”

Roy stared hard at the man a moment more, before abruptly releasing him, shoving him back away to help the already collapsing man fall to the ground in a blood-saturated heap of trembles. “I’ve interrogated enough to know… he’s not lying.”

Daphne nodded, lowering her rifle as she looked at her son thoughtfully. “You were a lot nicer to this –”

“Mom, you finish that sentence and I swear to the –”

“Finished.” Daphne quickly interrupted him, but smiled. She had a fairly good idea why Roy hadn’t hauled off and tortured the man as well as she knew he could. And casting a last look at the military officer who lay barely on the edge of consciousness, she turned and began making her way back towards the house. It was best to give Roy room for this.

Edward looked to Roy who had dumped the pistol and its shells onto the limp body at their feet. “Grand, huh?”

“Rather expected it would have been him, but I like to know for certain.” Roy replied as he stepped back from the dying spy, motioning Edward to move away as well. And once the ghost had, he took one last cold look at the body lying there, barely still alive, and adjusted his glove.

The next thing Edward knew was an explosion of flames engulfing the body, an explosion so powerful he could feel the ground tremble and quake underneath his feet.

And then, in seconds, it was gone. All of it… even the body.

“Roy…” Edward breathed softly, eyes wide.

Roy glanced over at the ghost, and smiled a small smile. “So easy to impress.” He teased lightly
before bowing his head with a lengthy exhale and turning to begin making his way away from the charred earth that remained the only evidence of anything at all happening there.

Edward was about to protest, but all thoughts of it fled him as he too turned, to hurry after Roy. “Hey…” he broke in quietly as he settled in beside the man. “Are you okay?”

Roy didn’t look up from where his eyes were watching the ground. “I should be asking you that.”

“Roy.” Edward said softly, as if it was all that needed to be said.

“Doing that to someone else, who was only following orders… it bothers me, yes,” Roy admitted as he finally looked at the ghost, stopping where he was. “But like everything else, I’ve gotten used to it. Know how to put it behind me. But it bothers me that you had to see me hurt anyone.”

Edward floated down to rest on the ground, a frown beginning to gather as he considered the man. “I had a choice, Roy. I didn’t have to stay.”

“But –”

“No.” Edward cut across firmly. “If we’re going to take down Grand together, you have to trust me that seeing you do what needs to be done won’t scare me off. Or whatever it is you’re worried about. It’s not like…” he pursed his lips a moment as he considered, “I’m not frightened of you, Roy. I know you’d never try and hurt me.”

“Of course I wouldn’t!” Roy objected passionately.

Edward smiled, reaching a hand out towards the man’s face. “I don’t have to be able to see straight through you to know you’re a good person. And I’ll stay beside you, to keep you from ever doubting that.”

Roy found himself unable to look away from the silver gaze, and found he didn’t really want to. “Is that the only reason you stay? Why you can’t imagine leaving me?”

Edward’s smile twitched in a fleeting show of humor. “That and the squirrel. I know you’d never let me take Hazel from you if I left.”

Roy couldn’t help but laugh quietly, and he threw his hands up in the air in mock surrender as he resumed marching back to the house. “See? And this is why I never let people come home with me. Even you fell victim to Hazel.”

Edward looked after him with a smile, and with one last look to the charred earth, turned and hurried after Roy.

They were silent until they reached the door, when Roy hesitated, slowly closing it the bare amount he’d opened it to look at Edward with a look the ghost couldn’t place.

“You said you don’t have to be able to see through me… can you?”

Edward tilted his head with a faint smile, and pushed some of his hair behind one ear. “That’s a secret,” he raised a finger to his lips with that same smile before grabbing the door himself.

It took the Mustang household plus an Elric a bit of time to get back to the breakfast table, but get back they did. Roy freshly cleaned of any sign that he’d once been shoving around a bleeding man, and Daphne having freshly cleaned her rifle.
“How many times has this happened?” Edward asked quietly after a moment was spent in silence and reacquainting with the food.

Roy rolled a sausage link through some syrup as he thought back. “To me? Over thirty times. Three of which were here.” And he looked over at his mother. “He wants to know how many times we’ve caught a spy.”

Daphne nodded and did a quick mental calculation. “I only had two show up here when Roy wasn’t. Those were some of the longer interrogations Roy did, and I believe they resulted in several more missing persons as well.”

“So Grand is after you now.” Edward decided quietly, his resolve only strengthening. “We’re doing something right... not that I like that he keeps wasting people’s lives like this.”

“This is actually a good thing.” Roy said rather grimly, biting off a piece of his sausage and swallowing before adding, “he’ll know what happened when his spy doesn’t return. Worthless man…” and he viciously dunked his sausage link in the syrup. “None of my team would have ever talked. Why is it all these others always do.”

Daphne rolled her eyes, “don’t knock it, kid. It’s come in handy.”

“Grand will be even more wary of you now.” Edward pieced together thoughtfully. “He may slip up.”

“Yes.” Roy answered, to both.

There was a moment more of silence before Edward suddenly asked brightly.

“Can she teach me how to shoot a gun?”

Roy inhaled a sausage link, coughing violently to remove it. He had barely cleared the passage when he rounded on Edward, spluttering. “Absolutely not! I stand by what I said before, you know where the kitchen knives are.”

Edward smiled cattily at him, mischievousness shining in his eyes. “Are you okay, Roy?”

“Wait until I’ve properly swallowed, next time you ask something like that.” Roy complained, his head falling into his hand as his other moved the fork away from his remaining sausage link which suddenly looked a lot more intimidating.

Daphne observed the half of the exchange she could see with eyebrows raised, cautiously venturing, “should I even ask?”

Roy groaned, “no. And if he does, I’ll have him exorcized.”

“Does what?”

“Ask.”

Edward, meanwhile, had fallen into a fit of near-silent laughter.

Somehow, although Roy admittedly wasn’t sure how, he got through the remainder of breakfast without suffocating on it. Or having his mother sneak away from the table to go shoot at wayward militia without previously informing him, at that.

“So what are you two going to do before you need to head back?” Daphne asked as she began
clearing the table of dishes. “When are you heading back, anyway?”

“If I had it my way I’d not leave for another week.” Roy admitted through a heavy breath, but looked towards the clock on the oven. “A few more hours. I thought I might take Edward around town, that is,” he turned to the ghost, “if you’d like to.”

Edward smiled at him hopefully, “it’ll be the third town I’ve seen together with you.”

“Then we’ll pack and get going.” Roy promised, and got up to meet his mother’s look. “You okay if we leave so soon?”

Daphne smiled, and barely refrained from shaking her head, knowing he’d not take it for its true reason. She never did like seeing him go, but knew that he must, and in this case… she couldn’t even think of preventing him from spending time like that with Edward. Time, she felt, was quite personal and private to them both. “I know you’ll be back again, as soon as you can manage it. So don’t worry about me. Your trip here was for Edward, spend it with him.”

“Indeed it was.” Roy agreed in a soft voice, meant more for the still seated ghost he held a hand out to. “Edward, will you come with me?”

Edward’s attention jolted back up to Roy in recognition of those words, they echoed in his head … and not just from this moment. And slowly he reached his own hand up, letting it join into Roy’s, letting the man’s movements dictate his own as he rose to his feet, and still he didn’t remove his hand as he found himself caught in Roy’s gaze.

“Come.” Roy said fondly, only now lowering his hand and turning away, meeting his mother’s look briefly. “We’ll be in my room.”

Edward could only trail after him, inexplicably at a loss for words.

Back in Roy’s bedroom, the man began packing up what few things did need to go back in his suitcase still, leaving Edward to his own devices for the moment. The nice thing, well, one of the nice things about coming here was that he already had quite a lot of what he already needed waiting for him permanently. It made coming and going very easy, considering he didn’t always come for visits when it was entirely allowable.

Edward left him to it after following the man into the one place in this house he hadn’t seen yet besides that which was exclusively Daphne’s. Roy’s bathroom. It seemed like a strange place to want to see, but a part of him was still greedy over gaining as much freedom from that whiteness as it could. He had truly had every intention of following the man out and attempting to see how long he could shadow right behind Roy before the man noticed, when he noticed something else.

Something else that made Roy’s words of before come back to him abruptly.

Setting down onto the floor, Edward stepped a step closer to the mirror as he looked at himself. Really looked at himself… and freed the hair that was still tucked behind his ear. “When did it grow...?” he wondered aloud to himself, fingers stroking through it thoughtfully.

It really was nearly to the middle of his back now.

“It looks good on you long, you know.”

Edward whipped around in surprise, eyes landing on Roy who was leaning against the doorframe, watching him with an unreadable, yet deep expression. “I…” he glanced back at himself in the mirror with a slight frown, “I’m not so sure about that.”
“I am.” Roy told him, recapturing the ghost’s attention. “It’s not that much longer than you originally had it when we first met… but honestly, I prefer it this way.”

“Prefer it all you like, I’m the one who’s wearing it.” Edward muttered.

Roy tilted his head, straightening up from the doorframe as he crossed what distance separated them to reach his hand towards the hair in question. Not once hesitating for the fact he wouldn’t be able to feel it. “I suppose you could cut it… but I think it’d be a shame.”

And then Edward found himself suddenly alone again in the bathroom, not quite sure that he’d ever given his hair this much thought before, and being unable to help doing so. Yet eventually he rejoined Roy, who had finished packing his suitcase, and together they went to say goodbye to Daphne.

She was in the kitchen still, but when she saw Roy appear immediately abandoned what she was doing in order to come and wrap him in a crushing hug that he wheezingly returned. And for the reason of not knowing where exactly Edward was, said softly, “he means a lot to you… do right by him.”

Roy’s brow furrowed, but his hold on her didn’t relax any, and he fought not to look Edward’s way as he gave a small shake of his head. “I will deserve him one day, no matter what he says.”

Daphne’s smile was hidden in her son’s shirt, and as she pulled away from him, knew with a flicker of sadness that her son didn’t truly realize what he’d said. What he had. “I know you will.” She merely agreed, reaching up to stroke at his hair fondly. “Don’t stay away too long again, and keep bringing Edward with you.”

“Even if I wanted to leave him behind, I couldn’t.” Roy replied, mostly in tease to the ghost in question who, upon hearing that, let out an indignant noise.

“Oh see if I go anywhere with you now.” Edward grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest in mock defiance.

Roy rolled his eyes, but motioned towards Edward for his mother’s benefit. “He’s over there.” And after a moment added with a grin and a holding of one hand to mid-chest level, “and he’s about this high if you want to make eye contact.”

“Roy!”

“Well you are!” Roy laughed.

Edward’s answer was a silent glare.

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“Well you are!” Roy laughed.

Edward’s answer was a silent glare.

Daphne could only imagine what grief that her son would get, and probably had gotten, for mentioning Edward’s height to him… but she took the information with a thoughtful glimmer in her eyes as she turned to the direction, and height, indicated. “You don’t know just how rare a treat it was to meet you, Edward. I do want you to come back again soon. In fact, if you don’t, I’ll probably have to beat my son.”

“Go right ahead.” Edward glowered Roy’s way, before perking up for purely Daphne’s benefit as he smiled at her. “Tell her I am happy that she is the first person you’ve introduced me to.”

Roy did so.

Daphne nodded, “I’m glad you convinced Roy to do it.” And she looked back at her son with a fond
smile, “be safe, kid… and… you don’t have to do it alone.”

“I know he wouldn’t let me.” Roy replied softly, glancing to Edward with a tender expression.

No. Edward wouldn’t, the ghost knew that well. And when at last the final goodbyes had been said, and they had been ejected from the house on the accusation that they’d make Daphne cry, he fell into step with Roy as they began to walk down the dirt road, making their way back to the town and the train station.

“It’s only fair, you know.” Edward spoke up, voice quiet even in the stillness of the forest around them. “You’re always there for me when I need you, you’re always there for me even when I don’t realize I need you. I’ll be there for you as well. Just like always. It doesn’t matter for what.”

Roy looked over at the silvery apparition with a lopsided smile. “I thought you didn’t believe in equivalent exchange anymore.”

Edward looked at the ruts in the dirt road with a grim, but not entirely solemn expression. “I don’t. But this isn’t equivalence, Roy. This is you and me, and rules don’t apply to what we have.”

There was silence for a long time afterwards before, “I just hope your mom will be okay.”

Roy cracked a grin at that, “Edward, were you not the one asking if she could teach you how to shoot a gun?”

“Can she?”

“No!”
Chapter Thirty-Six

Their trip through the town had been relatively short lived, but fun. Short lived considering their need to be at the train station early so as to not risk missing the departure; and fun considering Edward got to watch Roy be harassed by townspeople who had grown up knowing the Colonel as a chubby baby who wore green onesies.

The past hour or so was a fond memory resting in the back of Edward’s mind as he waited on a station bench with Roy. The two of them were entirely alone, save the ticket seller who was in a small covered kiosk several yards away. It didn’t appear as if many people from this town would be joining them to Central, and according to Roy, that was typical. It was just that the trains were required to stop in places with populations over a certain amount.

“I know you like to keep anyone from finding out that you have a mother,” Edward wondered aloud as he lay back on the bench with his head almost touching Roy’s thigh, “but how does that work with her coming into town and such? And with these people knowing you grew up here.”

Roy was watching several pigeons root around near the train tracks, and frowned just a bit at the question. “There’s this strange thing about small towns, Ed, that had you lived even a few more years you would have understood. Seeing as how you grew up in Risembool. Small towns have a strange way of keeping to themselves about their own.” His attention shifted as the pigeons took flight, and he looked down to the ghost. “I know one day something might slip, might happen, and she does as well. Nothing is ever perfect, or will stay so forever, we’re both prepared for the day when the world might know… but we’re enjoying what time we have in peace.”

“I’d be glad for a day when neither of you needed to worry about it.” Edward murmured as he stared up at the clear sky.

Roy found his attention drifting again, this time towards the far side of the railroad tracks where the trees were rustling gently in a breeze he knew the ghost could not feel. “Me too… maybe one day.”

“Maybe one day when you’re fuhrer, and the political games aren’t so widespread and dangerous.” Edward mused. “Seems to me you have a lot more to worry about when you’re at the bottom fighting your way to the top. At least at the top, you have the high ground over the most opponents.”

“Until then, all of us know what to do. And even when that day does come, I won’t let down my guard.” Roy promised gravely, hand clenching unconsciously. “I can’t right the wrongs of this country if I’m dead.”

“Being dead isn’t so bad,” Edward offered with a small smile, “but I agree. It’d be difficult to be fuhrer if no one could see you, only see the results of your actions.”

Roy flicked a searching look over to the ghost, but had just as soon looked away without giving voice to his thoughts. Without asking if Edward was speaking from personal experiences. He knew that whatever the answer, that Edward would only focus on how he could be seen, even if only by one person. And Roy was smiling to himself as he looked at the train tracks.

However long later, neither were sure, the train did arrive to the station and they boarded it without preamble. Roy led them to a private cabin, securely shutting the door just as the train began to pull away from the platform, and they settled in to wait out the trip back to Central with a deck of cards.
and Edward being taught how to play poker.

As it turned out, Roy was beginning to suspect that Edward was far too much a genius for it to be fair on any level, as the ghost quickly began to get the hang of the card game.

“Finally!” Roy groaned as the announcement crackled over the intercom system that the train would be pulling into the station at Central within a few minutes. “Another five minutes and I’d have lost my shirt.”

Edward laughed as he handed Roy his cards so the man could put the deck away, “I wasn’t aware we were playing for clothing.” And with a coy smile tilted towards the man as if to impart a dire secret, “I already won your shirt last night.”

Roy regarded the ghost through a humored smile he was having difficulty trying to stifle, “would you like my pants then?”

Edward gazed up into the teasing dark eyes, barely aware that Roy was trying to fluster him against the unfamiliar steadiness that had consumed him at the offer. Shifting a bit straighter, but closer to Roy, he rested one hand on the other side of the man’s legs as he leaned in just a bit closer, his eyes never releasing Roy’s. “Is that all that’s on offer?”

Roy’s mouth slipped slightly open, stunned to silence by the question before realization that he was slowly coloring incited embarrassment into overdrive, thus causing self-preservation to kick in as he fought to regain himself before Edward noticed. “Greedy ghost.” He managed to get out, though he wasn’t too certain of how his voice had managed as he slipped quickly to the side to get to his feet as Edward was forced to move away.

Edward shifted to look up at him, not yet rising from the seat himself, his head tilted slightly in confusion at Roy’s sudden jitters. As Roy moved to grab the suitcase, however, he forced himself up as his confusion morphed into a different sort as his attention darted between Roy’s uncertain looking figure and his strangely firm reflection on his own words.

“Train’s stopped.” Roy announced as he slung his suitcase over his shoulder, gripping it loosely by the handle as he looked down at Edward. “Ready to go home?”

Edward nodded silently, subdued, and floated up off the bench to follow Roy; noticing that as soon as they had disembarked the train that Roy seemed entirely normal once again. He wished he could say the same for himself as he tried to understand just what it was that Roy had thought he wanted… what it was that he had wanted.

But all of that was pushed to the back of his mind as their walk home drew closer to an end as they rounded the corner of the housing block. Seeing the familiar gate only houses more away caused Edward to remember something that made him look up at Roy hesitantly.

“Remember how you said it’s our house?”

Roy had to give himself a bit of a shake, so focused he’d been on pulling himself back together after Edward had succeeded in fluster ing him, and he looked over at Edward uncomprehendingly. “Sorry, what?”

“You said it’s our house?” Edward repeated with a frown.

Roy gave the spirit an odd look. “Of course. I’d put your name on the deed if I could.”

Edward felt a leap of warmth at the unexpected admission, and he couldn’t hold back the overjoyed
smile that broke onto his face. He’d always known he’d had a permanent home here with Roy, but it had never been put that way.

“Why do you ask?” Roy pressed, even as he was unable to help smiling at Edward’s clear happiness.

“Because…” Edward trailed off as he passed through the fence to the yard and waited for Roy to mess with the gate, “I’m sure then that you must remember that it’s your house when it’s a mess.”

Roy closed the gate behind him with a short bark of a laugh and a sending of a glare over to the now grinning ghost. “You won’t think like that when Hazel starts getting into your stuff and strewing it everywhere.”

“He would never!” Edward declared with conviction, and bounded his way up the lawn to pass through the unopened front door.

Roy followed at a more sedate pace, and upon reaching the door let the key rest in front of the lock a moment as he lowered his head with a sigh and a close of his eyes that had nothing to do with the mess he knew awaited him inside. At least… not that mess.

In all his years of fooling around and handing out and being handed flirtations, nothing had ever phased him. Nothing had ever gotten to him. And then, when Edward had entered his life, it had been normal for him to try and fluster the ghost, fun. Even if Edward told him his flirtations were horrid… he’d enjoyed the accusations.

Then six little words brought it all crashing down, and suddenly, for the first time in his life… Edward had gotten to him. And maybe it was the unexpectedness of it, and maybe it was those eyes and how calm and pure they’d been in making such a question he wasn’t even entirely sure that Edward understood.

But it had shaken him.

Opening his eyes again, Roy sucked in a deep breath and fitted the key into the lock. He needed to forget about how rattled he’d been and find some way to turn this all back on Edward and get the embarrassment he’d been hoping for out of the ghost. At least now he knew Edward was capable of giving back as good as he got… he wouldn’t be caught off guard again.

Ghosts really were tricky, clever things. Even more so, it turns out, when they live with you.

He let himself inside.

“There you are!” Edward rolled his eyes as he watched Roy close the door behind him. “I thought you’d tried to make a run for it.”

Roy turned, giving his companion a reproachful look. “I thought about it, but our house will never get clean again if I leave it to you. I have no choice.” And he reached for the light switch, the ethereal light emanating from Edward not being enough to fully see by.

As the light flicked on, they both turned to look.

“Look, Roy!” Edward exclaimed in devilish delight as he dove through the air to fall back first onto the white powder covered floor. “Flour angel!” And he began eagerly flailing his arms and legs back and forth through the thick dusting of flour that appeared to be covering most of the entryway.

Roy’s laugh was somewhat pained, but he was laughing even so as he crossed over to carefully step through the flour and avoid Edward’s flailing limbs. “You’re not helping.” He chastised through a
“Glad you agree.” Edward grinned up at him in a moment of pause, before eagerly going back to making his flour angel.

Roy’s laughter renewed as he waved a hand in front of his face against the floury cloud that was rising from Edward’s antics. “I guess I’m saving the flour for last…” And he continued on to the living room where he proceeded to groan loud enough that Edward cackled.

Edward wasn’t quite sure what had happened to the living room, but by the time Roy finally made a reappearance, he’d managed to make a second flour angel as well as draw a rather large recreation of the flamel his teacher had bore, a flamel that he had been meant to carry as well.

Things had changed since then… but he’d managed to remember clearly what it had looked like.

“You’ve not drawn that one before.” Roy spoke, stooping down next to the silvery apparition who was now on his knees contemplating the remaining flour to play around in. “What is it?”

“Something my teacher had tattooed on her chest.” Edward answered distractedly.

Roy spluttered nonsensically as he jumped to his feet. “Edward!”

“What?” Edward griped, before realizing what exactly Roy was thinking, and laughed. “Roy! Not like that, you idiot. I was a kid!”

“You’ll be the death of me one day, I swear.” Roy muttered tiredly and stepped around the floury mural. “Try to keep all the flour from spreading out any more.”

“Yes, mother.” Edward chortled and began to draw an alchemy circle.

Roy left him to it, and ventured into the kitchen where he was met with the true disaster that had befallen it and its contents.

Not only was the bag of flour missing, but the bread bag had been ripped into and partially eaten slices were everywhere. The kitchen drawers were open, most of their contents scattered to the floor. There was a strange, sticky orange residue spread along one of the countertops. The salt shaker had been upended, and three of four dining room chairs were on their sides.

“I love my pet…” Roy began to chant as he threw himself into cleaning the disaster, “I love my pet, I love my pet.”

It was a several hour mission to get the house cleaned again. After the kitchen, the laundry room, and after the laundry room, the general downstairs area, which meant that Edward was forced to give up his flour angels and other creations to the wielded vacuum.

After the vacuum had been set away, it gave Roy time to pause.

It had been something of a slight bother to him, a prickling in the back of his mind as he cleaned, that as of yet, he’d not happened upon the culprit. So far, Hazel was nowhere to be found.

“Must be upstairs.” Roy could have groaned as he looked up the staircase, as if it led to some forbidding, dangerous warzone. Yet let no one say he was never a soldier, for he began to mount the stairs in determination.

Edward made his way up the stairs as well… via the handrail. “I thought we closed all the doors up
here before we left.”

“Yes.” Roy agreed, but there was a note of reservation in his voice.

Edward, who made it up the handrail faster than Roy made it up the stairs, had jumped down onto the second floor landing and taken a quick look around before he uttered an ominous “oh”.

“What is that suppo–” Roy stopped speaking, and at first, thinking, as he saw what exactly ‘oh’ referred to. And then he uttered a simple, but all-around appropriate, “shit.”

For there at one end of the hallway, was an open door, and beyond that open door were not only clothes that belonged in a closet, but scattered among them glinting flashes of light and colors that most certainly did not belong in his closet. Or on his floor. Or anywhere that anyone else could see them, for that matter.

“Edward, go back downstairs.” Roy uttered weakly.

Edward snorted and trotted forward. “What? No. I want to see you catch Hazel. It’s priceless and hilarious and absolutely blackmail worthy.”

Roy was frozen for only moments before making a fruitless lunge for the ghost. It did no good, his hand passed right through Edward’s arm, and Edward didn’t even realize such was the ghost’s outward focus. “Edward…!”

But Edward had ended up in the middle of it all, looking around with curious puzzlement at the mess. One part of the mess in particular. “Roy… did you buy more toys for Hazel? I don’t recognize this.” He said as he grabbed one such toy up and brandished it at the man.

Roy wasn’t sure at this point that embarrassment was an option. Indeed, it was far from his mind as he began to laugh, helplessly.

Edward looked from the overcome man to the toy in his hand, and back again as his confusion only grew. “Roy?”

Roy burst out into fresh laughter, moisture beginning to gather at the corners of his eyes as he looked at what Edward was holding. “Ed… that’s not Hazel’s toy.”

Edward blinked, looking back to the toy with a frown. “But then –”

“It’s not Hazel’s toy.” Roy clarified through his unending laughter, and wiped at his eyes.

“But it –” Edward stopped abruptly, and feeling very much like a deer-in-the-headlights, looked slowly back around at what he was holding… before flinging it away from him with a frantic squeal of alarm. “Why do you – why did you – why do – YEUCH – Roy!”

Roy laughed even harder as Edward fled like quicksilver through the nearest wall, and stumbling further into his room his eyes landed on Hazel, who looked quite perplexed and uncertain as to why he was in this state and not angry. “Good –” he gave another burst of laughter before trying to fight it back, “good one, Hazel. But you’re still in for it as soon as I can breathe!”

And he began to pick up the mess as he worked on stifling his laughter.

It wasn’t too long before Edward heard Roy trampling his way down the stairs, apparently done picking up those… those… objects, and as the man came within hearing range he pouted his way. “I can’t believe you let me pick that up, what’s wrong with you.”
Roy grinned, settling himself down on the sofa next to his companion. “You just seemed so eager, I thought you might know what it was.”

He was promptly smacked with a sofa throw pillow.

“My mistake.”

Edward huffed and curled himself around the pillow as if it were a protective force field from the things up in Roy’s room. “Can’t even imagine how you would have used that thing…” he muttered.

Roy lifted an eyebrow as he smirked evilly, “I’d show you, but –”

“Don’t you dare!”

The panicked outburst was enough to send Roy into fresh fits of laughter, which caused Edward in turn to resume pouting as he glared at the man every so often. But eventually, when Roy managed to calm himself, he got up from the sofa with a smile to the ghost.

“I’m going to go make myself some dinner. Don’t worry about the bedroom, I made sure it’s all clean for your sanity.” And he walked away with a flash of a grin as Edward began to mutter darkly under his breath. “At least you didn’t walk in on me using it!” He called over his shoulder.

Edward’s head whipped around so he could stick his tongue out at the man’s retreating back. “I wouldn’t even want to walk in on you naked!” He retorted back, feeling rather pleased with his rejoinder as he settled himself back firmly into the sofa.

His answer was more laughter.

The rest of the night passed by similarly. With much laughter, and the eventual caving of Roy’s resolve to Hazel’s overly large apologetic eyes – which inspired laughter from Edward’s end; and they spent the remaining hour before they went to bed quietly talking about their weekend trip as Hazel continued to cuddle against Roy fawningly.

Eventually, though, they did go to bed, and Edward could only smirk as Hazel curled up on the other half of Roy’s pillow.

“I think he really missed you this time.”

Roy yawned as he shifted about under the covers and blinked up at the dark ceiling. “I’ve never taken so many weekend trips as I did before I met you. Maybe one day he’ll get used to it.”

“Maybe one day we can take him with us.” Edward smiled as he too settled in.

The comment went unanswered, but Edward didn’t mind, and as Roy drifted off to sleep he closed his own eyes. Not to sleep, never to sleep, but merely content just to be there as he waited for the next day to come. A passage of time that didn’t seem near so long since he’d come to live here.

And as dawn broke, it was to more laughter, as Edward watched Hazel harass Roy into wakefulness.

A few minutes later saw Roy finally, sluggishly, making his way to the shower as Hazel rushed in after the man in determination not to be left behind. It left Edward alone, though, and the ghost shook his head with a smile as he made his way downstairs to see what he could do about breakfast for the man.

Unfortunately there was not much he could do without flour to bake with, nor bread to make toast
with, so Roy would be forced to endure eggs not on toast. Something the man was able to manage admirably, along with an apple that he cut half the peel off of to pass up to Hazel’s eagerly grasping paws.

Apple peel, as it turned out, was quite messy to clean up when a squirrel had been nibbling on it. Pieces of red peel with bits of flesh still attached were dusted all along the left shoulder of Roy’s uniform jacket, causing him to have to bend backwards over the sink and hit himself repeatedly until Edward declared the last bits gone.

Then they were out the door, making their way along yet another new route to Headquarters.

“How long do you think it will take for me to have seen the whole city?” Edward asked, face tossed back to enjoy the sunshine he couldn’t feel and hands stretched high as if to grab it.

Roy hummed thoughtfully to himself a moment before, “maybe one weekend I’ll just borrow a car and we can drive up and down all the streets.”

“Or you could pull out your motorcycle?” Edward proposed with an interested gleam as he looked Roy’s way.

“I’m not willing to risk you riding on it behind me and causing me to perhaps fall through.” Roy’s look was apologetic, “I don’t really know how much solid material has to be between us, and I don’t really fancy a road burn on my ass.”

“That would make it hard for you to get dates.” Edward sympathized, deadpan.

Roy grunted agreement, but the proposition still hadn’t fully left his mind… in fact, it got him thinking. But he wasn’t about to fill Edward in on the path his mind was taking, it was something that if he was able to manage it, he’d like to surprise Edward with it.

“I don’t know…” Edward mused after they’d gone a block more down their route, “I kinda like this. Just walking around with you. I think I see more that way.”

Roy glanced over at him, smiling faintly at the sentiment, and as he looked away, he didn’t find himself disagreeing that he enjoyed it too. Seeing the city alone didn’t seem nearly as much fun a thought as seeing it with Edward did. And in knowing that this was what the rest of his life was going to be like, this private little world he shared with Edward, he didn’t find himself unhappy.

“I think I see more too.”

And they continued to walk along, since having to fall silent as this route turned out to be one more heavily populated with those walking to work. At least, Edward might have spoken, but it wasn’t nearly as much fun when all he’d be able to get out of Roy were grunts. But at least they were close to arriving at their destination, then nothing would be able to save Roy from his chatter.

Roy wasn’t feeling the absence of conversation quite so hard… but he figured he had Edward’s antics to blame for that. The ghost was most definitely over his culture shock regarding crowds. He wasn’t sure exactly when it had happened, but considering that Edward had spent a good part of his time on this sidewalk pranking the other pedestrians? He figured that Edward was in the clear for that particular psychological setback.

The most recent event had been the ghost causing several parking meters to malfunction and spew out coins against cars, pavement, sidewalk, and eagerly frantic people alike as they scrambled to collect on the good fortune.
Roy hadn’t the heart nor opportunity to tell Ed that he probably would cause several cars to now be towed, and as the din faded in the background as they moved on, figured that Edward had probably concluded that and done it anyway. He was a ghost, after all.

“Am I breaking laws, Colonel?” Edward laughed.

Roy rolled his eyes, sending a pointed look at the ghost. A look that quickly blanked in masked shock as he abruptly stopped in his tracks, staring past Edward at the yellow coffeehouse door that had just swung shut behind a departing patron.

“Roy?” Edward frowned, and quickly looked behind him before looking back at the man. “What’re you – Roy!”

Roy didn’t heed the call as he pelted headlong through the throngs of pedestrians, vaguely he knew that Edward was following him, so he only moved faster, knowing the ghost could easily keep up. And timing it so just as his quarry was about to pass by an alley, Roy closed the remaining distance with one last spurt of speed.

His hand closed hard around thick brown woolen coat, and he yanked its wearer not to a halt, but into the alley whereupon he whirled the individual around and slammed him up against the filthy wall with one hand tightly fisted in loose white shirt, and the other firmly pressed against throat.

“You bastard,” Roy growled in anger that had only been building since he’d seen this man leave the coffee shop, and voice rising into an angry yell plunged on, “how could you!”

“Roy!” Edward dove to stand on the ground, his eyes wide in alarm at the scene the man was causing, “what’s gotten into yo–” he trailed off as he finally lit eyes upon the man Roy had pinned, ”-ou.” And for an interminably long second, all he could do was stare in open-mouthed shock before a single, quiet syllable fell from his lips. “Dad?”

Hohenheim didn’t even struggle against the confining holds against him, threatening to choke him, he merely stood there as the back of his head buzzed slightly from being knocked against the brick wall behind it. “I remember you…” he said slowly, still bringing the memory up as he stared in unshakable calm at the man before him.

“Do you remember your sons?!” Roy flared up, yanking Hohenheim away from the wall harshly in order to drag him further down the alley where they’d not attract so much attention, and he lost no time in sending the man flying into the next suitable wall with a solid right hook to the jaw.

“Roy!” Edward was at his side in an instant, eyes wide as he tried to grasp everything that was happening. That his father was here and alive. And he could barely take his eyes from the man who was now picking himself up off the dirty alley floor.

“Maybe that punch cleared up your memory!” Roy snarled, slamming the ghost’s father into the nearest wall and keeping a firm stranglehold on him.

“My…” Hohenheim tried again against the restricted air he was being allowed. “Edward… and Alphonse.”

“Yes, Edward!” Roy agreed heatedly. “Alphonse too. How dare you abandon them! Abandon him! Alphonse believes you’re dead, and Edward is dead, and you’re strolling around Central getting coffee! I just don’t understand how you could abandon Edward for coffee!”

Edward watched with widened eyes, caught in some sort of petrified state as Roy finished raging with a slam of his fist against the wall only bare millimeters from Hohenheim’s head.
Hohenheim felt the hand around his throat relax somewhat in Mustang’s release of anger against the wall, but he didn’t try and escape. “I remember you now, Roy Mustang.” He began quietly, his golden-brown eyes studying his captor calmly, though pain flickered in their depths. “I didn’t abandon them for coffee, I didn’t abandon them at all.”

Roy’s growl was almost animalistic as he raised his eyes to glare maliciously at the man.

“I left because I had no other choice.” Hohenheim continued, a steely-cold sadness of regret beginning to creep into his voice. “You think I would willingly leave my sons? I never meant to be gone so long! I thought I could fix this before it got so far!”

Edward shifted an unconscious step back under the sudden outbreak of emotion that fractured that collected demeanor he always remembered his father having, a small noise of confusion pulling from his lips.

“What the hell could be so important for you to fix that it broke apart your family!” Roy demanded now, not backing down in the least. Not realizing just how truly angry he was at Edward’s father for leaving the boys. For leaving Edward. “How could anyone leave Edward…” he whispered, not even really realizing that he had as his hand clenched around Hohenheim’s throat unconsciously.

Edward wasn’t the only one who’s attention suddenly darted to Roy at those words, but his was the most searching as he felt something inside him soften.

Hohenheim, for his part, let the wall behind him take most of his weight as he closed his eyes with a slow sigh. “Do you think I haven’t asked myself before if I am doing the right thing? Especially when I heard that my wife and son had died? I’ve wanted to go back… so many times…”

“Why didn’t you?!” Edward suddenly burst out, looking frantic and hurt and far too vulnerable as his hands clenched at his sides. “All I – all Alphonse ever really wanted was a father! We just wanted you to come home!” And he deflated where he stood, every line in his body miserable as he whispered softly, “just to come home.”

Roy felt his anger fracture within him as those words sent a raw pain through him, and abruptly he released Hohenheim, half-turning from him as he shook his head in consuming disappointment. “Just tell me what’s so important – more important than your family. I want to understand…” and he sent a hard sideways look at Hohenheim through the black hair that had fallen out of neatness during his tirade. “I want to understand what could be more important than Edward… so I can remove it from existence.”

Hohenheim had finished straightening his clothing, and adjusted his glasses before wiping at his clotting, but still bleeding nose with one gloved hand. He studied the man before him with the calm he was beginning to regain again, this strange man he’d once met long ago. Before the last war. He was a different man now, that much was easy to see. But one of the differences was puzzling him. “You really care about Edward, don’t you.”

Roy whipped around in a sudden regaining of his anger, “of course I do!”

Hohenheim smiled then, kindly. “Then we will talk. But not here… someplace where we can sit down. I’m not as young as I used to be.”

Roy glared. “You can sit right there.”

“Roy.” Edward appeased, sounding emotionally worn.

Roy withheld a sigh, but relented. “I warn you, Hohenheim, you try anything funny and Edward’s
dad or not, I swear to you that I’ll light you on fire. Actually, I should do that anyway, but for now, just cooperate.”

“If you wish to light me on fire later, I’ll give you a fair chance at it.” Hohenheim agreed placidly, and began to walk with measured strides around the man to head out of the alley. “This way, Colonel. There are some tables nearby.”

Roy followed without a word, his expression hard as he stared at the back of Hohenheim’s head. They were nearly out of the alley when a soft sound that cut through him like a knife caused him to quickly look down at his side.

Edward’s arms were wrapped around him, his body shaking slightly as he tried to pull himself together. Not from tears, he couldn’t cry, but from every emotion and memory that seeing his father again was bringing back to the surface. He hadn’t realized just how badly he’d wanted to see his father again. As a child he’d only known anger, but he knew now… he knew he’d only been trying to protect himself behind his anger.

He’d been trying to protect himself from the hurt, because he had wanted his father to come home. For him… and for Alphonse. He had wanted so badly to know that it wasn’t his fault his father had gone. That his father still loved him…

He’d only wanted to know his father still loved him.

“Oh, Edward…” Roy murmured, reaching out to the ghost.

Edward glanced up at Roy through a silver fringe of hair, giving him a painfully sad smile as he fitted his hand as best he could against Roy’s. “At least… it sounds like he didn’t leave because of me.”

Roy’s eye twitched, and before Edward could even blink, he’d lunged forward to smack Hohenheim across the back of the head. “How dare you make your sons think that!”

Hohenheim had whirled around with a sharp noise of protest, and rubbing at the back of his head looked oddly at Roy. But shaking his head, he left the matter lie as he frowned at Roy thoughtfully before motioning to a table that sat outside one of the many cafes lining the street. “Sit, I’ll answer your questions.”

Roy looked around, about to protest that there were far too many people about for the types of questions and yelling he was about to engage in, when he blinked, a feeling of uncertainty creeping onto him as he realized they were somehow down a street he hadn’t remembered turning on. One far less busy, and almost unsettling in its quietness. “How did –”

“Sit.” Hohenheim insisted, taking a seat himself as he looked up at the Colonel. “Please.”

Roy sat heavily, still looking around disconcertedly. He’d never seen this street before, and he was strongly familiar with this area of Central. “Where are we?”

Hohenheim folded his hands atop the table as he considered the man. “Central. I just took the liberty of picking a different type of alley.”

Edward was regarding his father uncertainly as he sat in the air next to Roy, staying close to the side of the man. “Don’t let him throw you off.”

Roy could have rolled his eyes, but instead he fixed a hard look on the ghost’s father. “What is more important than your family.” He demanded with icy resolve.
Hohenheim opened the satchel at his side, setting on the table a paper-wrapped croissant and a bottle of water. “I had to leave because of my family.” And quickly he held up a hand to try and diffuse the explosion he could see about to happen from Roy’s end. “Let me finish.”

Roy didn’t, his anger only emboldened by how that little remark had affected Edward who looked as if he’d been wounded. “You stay because of family. Especially for your family! You have no idea what you’ve done to your sons, what you’re still doing to them!”

Hohenheim finished breaking the croissant in half, before laying both halves down as he fixed Roy with a world-weary expression. “You don’t understand, let me explain.”

“Explain.” Roy commanded, eyes narrowed.

“I had no choice, it was to protect them all.” Hohenheim began, voice somewhat distant as he recalled the night he’d been forced to come to that very decision. “Trisha… the boys, I didn’t want them to find out what I had done. What I was. So I left to try and find a way to set everything right again, to make things safe for the family I never thought I’d be privileged enough to have. To protect them.”

“Was Edward protected when he gave his life for Alphonse, because you weren’t there to be the father they needed?!” Roy slammed his fist against the table, causing the bottle of water atop it to crash onto its side.

“I didn’t know she’d get sick,” Hohenheim hadn’t flinched at the show of anger, but his tone was subdued. “I didn’t know any of it… by the time I heard what had happened my wife was dead, and so was my son.”

“And what about Alphonse?” Roy growled, “you’d just abandon him still? Can’t you see what your absence has done to your family?”

“I didn’t know!” Hohenheim shot back, before visibly forcing himself to calm as he stiffly righted his bottle of water. “If I went back to him… the things I’ve done since I left have attracted a lot of the wrong attention, as careful as I was. I’d just be putting him in danger. It’s safer if I stay away from him until I’ve fixed the damage I’ve caused.”

Roy stewed unhappily, his glove tightly stretched over a clenched fist. “You did cause it.” He accused in a dangerous voice. “You left those damn books lying on your desk.”

“Books?” Hohenheim frowned now, swallowing the bit of croissant he’d eaten. “Which books?”

“The ones with the instructions for human transmutation, you irresponsible bastard!” Roy flared up.


Roy sat back in stunned silence. The man really didn’t know? He only knew that his wife and son were dead, but not how? “He and his brother tried to bring their mother back to life. The Gate went after them and Edward sacrificed himself to save Al.”

Hohenheim let out a heavy breath, his complexion having turned almost white. “Was there anything there afterwards? Anything?”

“Yeah, my blood.” Edward huffed, still not seeming quite recovered.

Roy stared the man down, “you mean besides Alphonse? No, that’s all that’s left.”
Hohenheim shook his head, almost glaring at the man. “I mean anything else. What happened to the transmutation ingredients? Was there anything there.”

“You mean, did they succeed?” Roy pressed, and was suddenly unsure if he could get more disgusted than he was at the man’s seeming unconcern that Edward was dead. “No. Of course not.”

Hohenheim slowly shook his head, “you misunderstand me. Of course they succeeded, else the Gate wouldn’t have come after them. Human transmutations do work, but what they bring back isn’t human.” And he speared Roy with a thoughtful look. “A lot like that Fuhrer of yours.”

Roy was severely unbalanced by that and he spent a moment gaping before spluttering out, “what?!”

“What does he mean, it worked?” Edward burst out. “Our mom wasn’t there when we went back to see Alphonse!”

“I wonder… Alphonse was probably too distraught to notice. I wonder if it survived.” Hohenheim’s eyes narrowed in deep thought as he frowned at the croissant he was now picking apart. “I wonder if what they brought back was anything even close to being considered a something.”

“What are you fucking talking about!” Roy snapped, not liking this one-sided conversation that Hohenheim seemed to be having with himself. “What do you mean it worked, and what does it have to do with the Fuhrer?!”

Hohenheim looked back up sharply. “Edward and Alphonse did succeed, they’re my sons, alchemy is in their blood in a way you could never imagine. But when a human transmutation happens, there is always a result. The results that manage to survive are homunculi. Nearly immortal, and quite destructive. Your Fuhrer is one such creature.”

“You’re trying to —”

“Roy.” Edward cut across quickly, though he didn’t raise his voice to do so. “I reacted to the Fuhrer, remember?”

Roy fell silent, eyes shadowed in thought. Yes. He did remember. How could he forget? He’d been so concerned for Edward that it had taken all his resolve not to chase after him when the ghost had fled in pain.

“Mustang?”

Roy looked up, eyes hard as they tried to come to terms with this… something he found was probably infinitely easier since meeting Edward. Edward rather defied the laws of what he’d thought the world was capable of. “Are they connected to the Gate then?”

Hohenheim nodded simply. “They are from the Gate.”

“And he’s practically immortal, the Fuhrer?”

“Yes.” Hohenheim agreed, after a moment adding, “if he were to die enough successive human deaths, and not have a chance to replenish his life source, he would die as well. Or, if you can find his remains, the ones from the human he’d once been, those would weaken him enough that he could be killed.”

Edward laughed weakly, causing Roy to startle. “Good thing you’ll have me for that fight, Roy. I think you’ll need the otherworldly assistance.”
Roy decided he’d speak to Edward about *that* later. For now he fixed Hohenheim with a sharp stare. “What, exactly, are you up to that’s so dangerous you couldn’t stay with your family. That you can’t go back to Alphonse. He wants to move away from that house, you know.”

“It relates in part to the homunculi.” Hohenheim revealed easily enough, his golden-brown eyes glimmering in thought as he considered the Colonel across from him. “How do you know so much about my family.”

Roy didn’t react, save for a humorless laugh. “Edward’s letters trying to reach you reached me instead. I went to go help him if I could, but before I could leave he was already dead. Not too long ago I went to visit Alphonse, and pay some respects to Edward.”

“Still…” Hohenheim frowned, sitting back in his seat as he stared hard at the man. “You care about Edward, the majority of the time you’ve yelled at me, you’ve mentioned him. I thought it was strange but… I’ve spent a lot of time around souls, Roy Mustang. Yours is exceptionally strong, but without your anger flaring around I know now what seemed off about you before, different than when we’d last seen each other… Edward is there with you, isn’t he.”
“Edward is there with you, isn’t he…”

To say that they were stunned was an understatement.

Both Edward and Roy were left entirely thrown and without words at Hohenheim’s evaluation. An evaluation that had come out of nowhere for both of them. An evaluation that caused Edward to sit heavily on the arm of the chair Roy sat in as he stared at his father with wide eyes. Roy barely had the awareness to notice as he sat practically frozen in shock.

“I see.” Hohenheim breathed out heavily, his regret clear even in that as he bowed his head.

“No!” Roy suddenly lashed out, the fresh rush of anger melting the stillness that had overtaken him.

“You have the audacity to think you can just happen upon a chance to apologize and everything will be fine?!”

“Roy,” Edward managed quietly, a touch of faint humor evident in his tone, “that’s not very fair.”

“Fuck fair, Ed!” Roy rounded on the ghost, no longer quite so concerned with keeping up a certain façade. “I remember you telling me one day that you hoped he’d died for what he did to all of you, whether or not this,” he jabbed a finger at Hohenheim, “has changed your feelings is up to you. But I’m apparently still pissed off at him and I think that entitles me to being a bit of an ass for a while.”

Edward couldn’t help it, he let out a small laugh that only seemed to incite Roy more, but he smiled fondly at the man with shining eyes. “My hero.”

Roy huffed petulantly, not noticing that he colored slightly. “Don’t mock me, brat.”

Hohenheim watched all of this, at least, what part of it he could with a faint smile. He hadn’t been wrong, Roy really did care about his son. But he did sober at about the same time Roy was turning back around to face him. “I’d not blame him if he hated me.” He admitted quietly.

Roy regarded him stonily.

Edward, on the other hand, seemed to deflate under the weight of everything that had happened this morning. “I’m not sure I can ever forgive him for it.” He said softly, carefully, “and I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to understand. I should be more like you, raging at him and demanding answers and yet… I’ve hated him and yet I…” he looked over at Roy now with a broken-down glance, “right now, I just want to know my dad still loves me.”

Roy considered Edward in silence, face expressionless before his eyes softened in defeat. “I think I can help you there.” And he directed his gaze over to an attentive Hohenheim. “You’d best answer truthfully, else I’ll have to light you on fire as Edward has once made known he wouldn’t mind.”

Hohenheim merely nodded, not once bringing into question, even in his own mind, just how good a judge of character and honesty that Roy Mustang was.

“Do you love Edward?” Roy asked the question with far more gravity than he could recall ever asking anything with before. He hadn’t realized just how much the answer meant to him, as well, but
it didn’t even phase him as he pinned the man with a steady stare.

Hohenheim wasn’t sure he could ever have properly expressed just how much he loved his sons. Both of them. How much he loved Trisha. They were the family he never thought he’d ever be privileged enough to have… the family that had flashed by him in the blink of an eye. He lowered his gaze sadly to the croissant he now could no longer stomach, feeling the whole sense of his loss begin to settle over him. “I’ve always loved you, Edward. From the very first moment I held you I loved you.”

Edward felt something inside him clench at the words he’d never known he longed so badly to hear, to know. Yet it wasn’t happiness that possessed him as he looked unwaveringly at his father. “Then no more half answers. Why did he leave?”

Roy was still trying to ignore what had come over him when Hohenheim had answered Edward’s desires to know love, it had grinded on a part of him he couldn’t identify, an ugly beast rearing its head inside him saying that Hohenheim wasn’t worthy. But worthy of what was eluding him just out of reach, and now it didn’t matter. Edward needed him. “You owe it to your son to be more upfront with him than you’ve been with me. Tell him why you left, no more dancing around all the sordid little details you think may tarnish your image in our eyes, because I assure you, right now you’re as tarnished in mine as a human could possibly be.”

Hohenheim met Roy’s steely gaze dead on before he shifted it to where he could sense the vaguest impression of a separate soul, that of his son’s. “That actually would lead us into the territory I’m surprised you’ve not punched me for as well, Mustang.”

“Have I been remiss?” Roy shot back with a snarl as he shot to his feet so quickly the table rattled. “Allow me to correct that.”

“Roy!” Edward grabbed the table to pull it hard back into the man’s thighs, causing Roy to stagger back with a swear.

“Edward!” Roy glared at the ghost, his temper banked for the moment as he rubbed at the coming bruises. “You’re lucky I’m taller than you. I know you don’t need yours, but I kind of need mine.”

Edward rolled his eyes, “celibacy would do you good.”

Roy only glared.

Hohenheim had risen to his feet during the disruption, and a part of him was amused at the one-sided scuffle of words that was taking place, but the rest of him was completely serious, subdued, as he came around the table. “As I said, I’ve spent a lot of time around souls… but that takes us closer to the end than the beginning.”

Roy’s attention didn’t waver from Edward, but the hand that snapped out to seize the man by his shirt once more was still exactly on target. “Then get started with the beginning,” he growled as he slowly looked around at him. This whole thing had been doomed to be messy since the moment he’d taken off after this bastard, but he’d never imagined it’d become this disorganized. He’d thought he’d have dictated the entire thing from initial to final punch, but none of that was going according to plan… aside from the initial punch. It was pissing him off.

Hohenheim didn’t attempt to dislodge the firm grip Roy had on his shirt, and his eyes were steady as they stared down his captor. “I think you already have some idea as to the beginning, Mustang… or haven’t you told Edward?”
“Told me what?” Edward asked with a growing frown, looking from his father to Roy uncertainly, and back again.

“I’ve heard that the military, you, has been looking for me. I’m not a fool.”

“I’d gladly argue that one.” Roy decided with sarcastic happiness, and released the man with a backwards shove. “What I have or haven’t told Edward is my own business, right now you’re the one answering questions, so get answering. Don’t try and change the subject again, let that be a final warning. As good an alchemist as you are, I’ll happily try my luck.”

Hohenheim caught his balance easily, straightening his clothes for what felt the millionth time since he’d been abruptly reacquainted with the Flame Alchemist. “Then please, sit back down.” And he resumed his seat himself.

Roy took his seat again, resembling an annoyed porcupine.

Edward settled in as well, in the air at Roy’s side once more, pushing aside for now the insinuation that Roy knew more about Hohenheim than his friend had let on.

For Hohenheim, he knew that neither his son nor Roy could possibly have understood what they were asking from him. The explanation they were about to receive. It was one he had never spoken of to another soul… and he found a flicker of irony there. It was an explanation that he knew was probably madness to give, but Edward had died indirectly as a result of his actions, all stemming from a mess he’d let drag on for far too long.

He owed it to Edward, and in part to Roy, to tell them the truth. No matter how wrong it felt to even begin to admit aloud the truth of who he was. Of course, he could never admit to everything, at least... not to Roy. But he would say what he could, what was necessary, to try and make Edward understand.

And if not at least understand, to know.

They’d forgive him later if it took a moment for the words to start coming, as the memories came back to him.

“Around four centuries ago, close to five,” Hohenheim began with hardened, distant eyes, “there was a grave accident in Xerxes that led to the destruction of the country and its people. You know this already thanks to historic records of other countries, but none of those records ever got the truth of that accident correct. I had never, not then, and to an extent not even now, wanted to admit that in many ways, I was that accident.”

Edward slowly slipped through the air as he tried to absorb what his father was saying, and he landed heavily on the arm of Roy’s chair once more.

“Xerxes was annihilated because I made a mistake.” Hohenheim continued sadly, slowly, as he remembered that cataclysmic moment. “Although I can never give back all the lives that were sacrificed unknowingly to me to make me what I am, I have been trying. I live each day on borrowed lives, a philosopher’s stone inside me filled with murdered souls who keep me immortal. To this day I’ve been trying to correct what happened, and though it is only a small solace, I have grown to know the individual souls who are a part of the stone… it’s why I can sense Edward. After four centuries of living like this… it’s second nature to realize that he’s there. I knew the feel of my son’s soul since the first moment I held him.”

And even still, Hohenheim could not bring himself to look up. Not for shame, but for something that
ran far deeper than that. “But I was not the only one who survived the disaster that befell my country. That is why I left. That is what I’m trying to correct. So that perhaps one day, I might live in peace knowing that my family is safe. I’d only hoped that they’d not know the truth of me, and that despite the philosopher’s stone… I am a breaking man.”

Hohenheim stopped there, looking visibly relieved in the manner of a man having confessed his sins on the way to the executioner, as if it might somehow save even a piece of his soul. But he retained a tension at finally having gotten his lifelong secret out into the open. Something he’d never planned to do… and certainly not in hearing distance of a State Alchemist, but the situation and variables were different. This was his deceased son asking, asking through a man who cared for him. And so he waited for judgment to be passed down upon him, sitting silently under the weight of Roy’s stare.

Edward was by all appearances frozen from the shock of what he had been told. With not even a breeze able to ruffle his hair, he truly did appear paralyzed. His father was a philosopher’s stone? From four hundred years ago? But if his father wasn’t the only one… what sort of danger had his family potentially been in had his father stayed? “Who? Who’s the other one.”

Roy forced himself out of the stunned state he’d fallen into. Yes, one of those revelations he’d guessed to… he just hadn’t known, hadn’t even guessed the enormity of what he’d once pursued to know. It was no wonder to him now that Hohenheim was lauded as such a brilliant alchemist. Who wouldn’t be after nearly five centuries of practice? But he shoved all that away, for the interim, and echoed Edward’s question.

At that, Hohenheim held back a world-weary sigh. He had expected it might be asked, but that didn’t mean he had to like the fact it had been. “You could say, that in a way… it’s my other half.”

“I was… half Xerxesian?” Edward breathed out, giving a mirthless wry chuckle. “Well that race truly is a dying breed, isn’t it.”

“Edward.” Roy scolded on principle, giving the ghost a good look before turning back to Hohenheim. “And when this other Xerxesian is dead, you’ll go back to Alphonse?”

Hohenheim smiled thinly and nodded. To be honest, he wasn’t sure that even if he won the fight that he’d survive. He was attempting to walk into a battle with another immortal, and he just couldn’t be sure of the outcome of such a clash. To his knowledge, it hadn’t been done before. “Yes. It was always my intention to return to my family.”

“You’re sure taking your time.” Roy muttered darkly, still too caught up in repeating Hohenheim’s explanation in his head to indulge in what would have been an appropriate angry outburst.

“What’s the accident that destroyed Xerxes?” Edward asked softly. “What did he do?”

Roy wasn’t a man to put a halt to a good question. “What happened to Xerxes? What exactly did you do to it?”

Hohenheim barely held back a flinch at the words, unpolished and harsh… but Roy couldn’t have known. No one did. Except them. “I placed trust in the wrong hands, and the country paid for it with their lives while I was saved. I never asked to be saved.” He shook his head darkly before a sad smile overcame him. “Not like that. Trisha… she truly saved me. In a way a philosopher’s stone never could have.”

Edward’s gaze darkened, and he clenched one hand into a tight fist in forcible restraint not to hurt the man for daring to mention his mother in such a way.
Roy seemed to sense the danger on the horizon, and quickly seized a change of direction. “If you can sense Edward’s presence… have you sensed others like him before?”

Hohenheim’s fingers came together at a point, and he regarded Roy over their tips as he occasionally looked towards the area he could feel pulsed with the presence of his son’s soul. “In all the centuries I’ve been like this, I’ve never come across the anomaly that Edward is presenting himself to be.”

“I’m a ghost.” Edward grumbled petulantly. “Not an anomaly.”

“Ghost.” Roy corrected with a firm look. “He’s a ghost.”

Hohenheim couldn’t help but smile. “I’ve never run across another ghost, then.” But then he sobered as one hand came up to rub at his chin, fingers tangling in the neatly trimmed beard. “Which makes his presence strange, to say the least.”

“I happen to enjoy his strange presence.” Roy muttered, mostly to himself.

Edward smiled down at the man, knowing he shared the sentiment.

Nothing further was said at the table for a time afterwards, and the eerie absence of other people went unnoticed as they all tried to find level footing after everything that had transpired.

Hohenheim particularly had fallen into pensive frowning as he considered the state of his son, and the Gate who was clearly behind this. He was the first to broach the silence with a tentative question, realizing he might be asking this on unstable ground.

“How did you two meet?”

Roy flicked his gaze towards the man, his displeasure evident but not actively expressed as he still grappled for stable footing for his brain. “No one seems to be able to see him but me, and he was trapped in my office until I managed to get him free.”

“Free?” Hohenheim echoed in concerned confusion.

Edward noted the signs that Roy was about to become ornery, and stepped in firmly. “Tell him. There’s the chance that he might prove of some help about this, he is my father, and we both know how you view him as an alchemist.”

Roy closed his eyes, knowing Edward was right. In his eyes, Hohenheim was the one alchemist left standing who he truly believed to be more powerful than him. Grand’s artillery circus act was dangerous in the way a moving car was dangerous to a pigeon. Hohenheim was like a runaway steam locomotive against a blind, three-legged kitten. “We believe he was trapped in the office by the Gate. I’m not sure how I was able to get him free… but he’s contained by what he calls a white world that he can’t penetrate without me – at least now – looking at it. I have to see what he sees.”

“I see.” Hohenheim said, rather appropriately.

“Enlighten us.” Roy commanded with a slight growl. “If you can. Edward has unhelpfully reminded me that while he is brilliant, so are you. So try.”

Hohenheim had to smile, he knew what it must have cost Roy to say that based on the way the man’s hackles had bristled. Yet in this… he wasn’t sure how much help he’d be. Which really grated on him, one of the few things he could do for his son, and he was at a loss as to most of it. “Entrapment of that sort isn’t a kind I’m accustomed to,” and here, he smiled thinly at the memories before he brushed those shadows from his mind.
Edward made a noise quite close to a huff as he looked away with a swish of his hair before looking back sharply as something else came to mind. “Ask him if he knows why the Fuhrer affects me so badly.” He insisted firmly, drawing himself up straight as he shifted to stand on the sidewalk, his silver eyes glowing in determination as they stared down his father.

Roy turned his head to look at the ghost, having an idea of where this was possibly going later just between the two of them, based on the answer Hohenheim gave. He didn’t like it one bit, but he knew better than to refuse to ask the question. Truthfully… he was curious to know now too. “Edward wants to know…” he began as he focused back on Hohenheim who had shifted into alertness, and he paused before starting over. “A while back Edward got into the line of sight of the Fuhrer, it caused him a great deal of pain and some flashes of the Gate and this strange symbol. I haven’t had time to research what it is yet, but that’s not the point… why would the Fuhrer cause him pain?”

Hohenheim perked up at the question, a question that truly stimulated all his accumulated knowledge. “If Bradley caused Edward pain then he would have felt something too. You…” Hohenheim trailed off as his face pulled into a slight grimace, “you won’t like what I’m about to say. Homunculi are sins against nature and twisted products produced by the Gate. Edward’s existence isn’t natural either – he isn’t supposed to be able to exist. They more than likely cause each other pain by, in their own ways, recognizing an incompatible existence. Two wrongs only equal pain.”

“Oh I know I’m not natural.” Edward muttered with almost cynical humor. “I’m supernatural.”

“And how is it that Edward can exist?” Roy growled, really trying not to punch Hohenheim for calling Ed unnatural and wrong.

Hohenheim’s face pulled into an apologetic look, and he shook his head. “Sorry… it’s never happened before that I know of. Not in centuries. I don’t know why or how he’s able to be there with you. Or why you should be able to see him at all. Like I said, anomaly.”

Roy didn’t like it, but he couldn’t see how he could help change that answer. If the man had no idea, he had no idea. But there was something else, “could the Fuhrer hurt Ed?” And his gaze grew even more serious as he leaned forward partially. “Setting aside the pain they both apparently caused each other, could he hurt Edward?”

“You’re worried that Edward can be… I supposed killed isn’t exactly appropriate… destroyed?” Hohenheim said for the man, and his lips pulled into a thin smile. “It’s unknown. Edward’s existence goes against all logic and rules.”

“Roy, even if he could hurt me,” Edward began almost scoldingly, “what in our history together makes you believe that I’d let it deter me? Chances are he hasn’t a clue what happened to him if he really ended up feeling pain as well. It means I have the advantage, and he literally won’t see me coming if he ever tries to attack you.”

“I’m more worried about you getting mixed up with him than Grand.” Roy replied as he turned to Edward seriously. “We’ll talk about this later, not here. Not now. Certainly not in the presence of your father. I don’t trust him entirely.”

Hohenheim took the abuse graciously without a flinch.

“That makes two of us.” Edward breathed out heavily and turned to his father once more. “At least see if he knows why only you can see me.”

Roy did.
Hohenheim didn’t react at first, save for a troubled breath they weren’t supposed to see, and he opened his mouth once, shut it to rethink, before continuing forward with the question he wasn’t entirely sure would go over too well. “Edward, may I speak to you alone?”

“You damn well may not!” Roy snapped in fierce protectiveness as he slammed his hands to the table. “I’m not leaving him with you. You’ve done enough to him.”

At this, Hohenheim drew himself to his feet, not entirely caring that Roy had copied the move in a defensive manner. His eyes were hard with a sudden lacking of his timeless patience, and his tone was clipped and without the warmth of before. He knew his sins, every single one of them, personally, whether Roy believed it or not. He wasn’t about to take the abuse in this as well. “I am not suggesting you leave. In fact, I believe that would prove entirely useless.”

“You’d find me highly uncooperative.” Roy bit back.

Hohenheim’s eyes flashed with steely resolve, “just stay out of earshot, that’s all I ask of you. But I wasn’t talking to you, I was talking to my son. He may refuse if he wishes. I can hardly force him to do anything.”

Roy didn’t back down, even though the self-preservation that had kept him alive in Ishval now had him on high alert that Hohenheim was no longer sending off the easy-to-punch vibes. He was suddenly, acutely aware that this was Van Hohenheim he had been assaulting… and that was rarely a good thing.

“Enough.” Edward broke in quickly, sensing a sudden need, and floated around in front of Roy, merging with the table as he commanded Roy’s attention. “Whatever he wants to answer, clearly he feels safer telling just me… which probably makes no sense considering what I’ve done to Grand but, Roy… I want to hear and,” he trailed off, glancing down towards the table hesitantly, “I need this.”

Roy could only stare at first, his guard still sending off blaring warning signals to the part of his brain that didn’t seem to like listening when it concerned Edward. But gradually he keyed himself down to focus on Edward, even if it took him a moment to process what the ghost had said. “You know…” Roy began at last with a bit of a tired laugh, “you have a funny way of showing you hate someone.”

Edward smiled up at him brightly at first, then it softened into something more melancholy. “I guess I do. I guess… I hated him because I didn’t know. And while I still don’t understand why he couldn’t have told mom, and while I know he still isn’t telling us the truth… the way I hate him is different from the way I hate Grand.”

Roy remained steady only a moment longer before he gave in with a sigh and a lopsided smile to the apparition. “I’m here if you need me.”

The brightness returned to Edward’s smile, and he nodded as he reached a hand out towards Roy’s as if to touch it lightly. “I always need you, but I also need this. It’ll probably be the last time I ever see my father, given his track record… I died and have stayed dead for seven years with no regrets. I don’t want to start gathering them now.”

Roy shook his head, more in defeat than disagreement, and he raised his gaze to glare sternly at Hohenheim. “Try anything funny with him and I swear on his grave that I will give that immortality thing of yours a try when I set you ablaze.”

Hohenheim’s eyes softened a shade, and he gave a steady nod. “You’ve my word.” He would never have been able to stomach doing something to Edward anyway, but he was quite pleased to see how
protective Roy was. It was… intriguing to say the least of it. Roy was an entirely different, relaxed and laughing person when he was interacting with Edward.

Yet he knew without a doubt that it did not mean that Roy wasn’t still on guard. He wagered that his current immortality would mean nothing to Roy if it meant defending Edward. Which was scary enough on its own without adding in the fact that he believed Roy was an alchemist of capabilities to be respected.

Roy turned back to Edward, conceding defeat with a nod before beginning to dig in his pockets in order to produce a charcoal pencil and a wrinkled bit of paper. “In case you need it.” He murmured as he passed them into Edward’s hands.

“If he needs to be yelled at I’ll ask you to translate,” Edward smiled as he gripped them. “You sound scarier than a bunch of exclamation marks on paper.”

“All you have to do is say the word and I’ll set him on fire for you.” Roy suggested gravely.

Hohenheim had no idea what Edward answered, but whatever it was it had caused Roy to smile again. Something he couldn’t help but smile at himself, albeit a bit sadly. But those thoughts were for neither here nor there, and he drew his distracted attention from the paper he could clearly see Edward was now able to hold. “We’ll just go over here a bit, so Roy can keep an eye on you.”

“My hero.” Tossed Ed back over his shoulder, not minding Roy’s scowl. With a flash of a grin he floated after his father to the opposite end of the eerie, still deserted street that truly looked as if it should have been occupied.

Only when they were in the partial shadow of a tree on the opposite sidewalk, nearby a brick wall of a music shop, did Hohenheim stop and turn to where the impression of his son’s soul, the ghost, was holding a paper and pencil.

“You wanted to know why only Roy can see you?” Hohenheim paused, but not for long, knowing that he could hardly expect Edward to write out an answer unless it was in the negative, and the pencil was not moving. “I can only make surmises as to that, but I’ll get to those in a moment.”

Edward frowned, but made no attempt to communicate as he stared his father down.

Hohenheim slowly took in a breath as he nodded, more to himself than anything. “Edward… not everything I said back there was the truth, and in some cases, the whole truth, but I’m telling you the truth now, and I’ll leave it up to you to decide whether or not you can tell him.”

At this, Edward’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “I knew it… you lying bastard.”

But as Hohenheim could not hear this, although he could wager a guess as to his son’s reaction, he continued on with a grave expression. “There are things you deserve and need to know, about me, and about yourself. Your existence isn’t natural, that much is true – ”

From across the empty street Roy was standing leaning back against the edge of the table, his eyes narrowed calculatingly as he watched father and son. His arms were folded across his chest in a show of his displeasure, but one hand was carefully loose from the fold, just in case.

And as the minutes began to pass by with excruciating slowness, Roy only got more suspicious and dedicated in his observation of the pair. Especially at the point when Edward began to write frantically on the paper, far faster than he’d ever seen Edward write before… and he knew the ghost well enough to see that Edward was uneasy about something.
And Edward was, even as the conversation drew to a clear close. If it could even have been called a conversation. He wasn’t at all sure what something like that could be called. Much less what he was supposed to feel. His mind was swimming with what his father had told him, and he bowed his head as he looked down at the paper crinkling in his grip, burning all the words written on it into his mind before he flipped it over and wrote one last thing.

‘Burn this’

He held it out to Hohenheim resolutely.

Hohenheim took the paper, read the two simple words, and nodded somberly. “I am sorry, son.”

“A bit too late for that, isn’t it.” Edward whispered, and as the piece of paper was destroyed by a show of alchemy that should have unnerved him, he turned away. His eyes landed on Roy, and without paying his father any more mind, he began to hasten back to the man, knowing in his very base instincts, that Roy was stable ground.

Roy didn’t have to wait for Edward to reach him to see that something was definitely upsetting the ghost. Which only meant one thing. But before he dealt with that, he needed to be sure that Edward was okay. And he quickly intercepted his companion. “What did he say, what’s wrong?”

Edward met Roy’s eyes with uncertainty, feeling rather out of sorts as he shook his head with regret, apology. “Roy… I can’t.” And an absurd part of him began to wish that Roy might start humming, like he used to do when the world was so scary and new.

“Can’t what?” Roy frowned, taking a second to glare at Hohenheim who was looking more than a bit regretful himself.

Edward took a deep breath that he didn’t at all need, but the long-ago familiarity of it helped a bit. If only in his head as he clarified softly, “can’t tell you. I can’t lie to you… and I can’t tell you.”

“You can’t tell me.” Roy repeated softly, suddenly certain that he was going to have a headache. But the look on Edward’s face… he knew that for right now, he couldn’t press the ghost. Whatever it was his father had told him, it was bothering Edward. He wouldn’t get very far at all by trying to push the ghost, knowing that with Edward as he currently was, it would most likely only cause the ghost to draw away from him emotionally. So without much other choice, slowly he nodded in consent. “All right.”

Fortunately, there was one individual he could take his coming headache out on.

Roy seized Hohenheim’s coat in one hand and purely on principle, connected a solid right hook into the man’s jaw to send him sprawling onto the empty road. “There, now I feel much better.”

Edward blinked down at the scene, stupefied as if he couldn’t quite believe that Roy had knocked Hohenheim down again. And suddenly, he couldn’t help it. He began to laugh. Helplessly.

Hohenheim, meanwhile, grunted as he pushed himself into a seated position, one hand rubbing tenderly at his abused jaw before he popped it fully back into place. “If only I could say the same for myself.”

Roy sniffed down at the man, “you’ll get over it. You abandoned Edward, you deserved that and more.”

Hohenheim looked up at the man with a placid calm, a small smile beginning to work its way across his lips. “You care a lot for him… so take good care of him. Whether you’ve realized it yet or not,
Roy Mustang, you’re his family now too.”

“Are you looking to get punched again?!” Roy demanded, incensed by the insinuation that he didn’t realize how greatly Edward figured into his life now.

Edward, still somewhat overcome with laughter, turned to Roy with shining eyes. “Are you mad at him for your sake now, or for mine?”

“Shut up, Eddie.” Roy growled, smirking in the face of Edward’s glowering look, before the sound of something strange caught both of their attention, and they slowly looked down, miffed, at Hohenheim.

The man was almost overcome with laughter, his glasses askew even more haphazardly as laughter shook his body.

“Roy, just how hard did you hit my good-for-nothing father?” Edward asked mildly.

Roy was beginning to wonder the same thing as he scowled and sharply nudged at the man with his boot. “Just what’s so funny.” He demanded, not at all pleased that Hohenheim should be getting any sort of amusement out of this meeting.

“Not funny…” Hohenheim laughed unconvincingly a few more times before sobering with a truly pleased smile. “I’m just happy he has you.”

Roy wasn’t entirely too sure what to make of that, and he was sure the bewildered expression on his face spoke of his sentiments clearly. However he knew one answer that would certainly suit, and promptly drove his fist down onto Hohenheim’s head. “Shut up!”

It was quickly becoming a favorite catchphrase when dealing with insane Elrics. He wondered if it was a Xerxesian blood trait, some sort of deficiency.

“I’m happy I have you too.” Edward offered out, grinning as Roy turned to scowl at him.

“What is it you want, I know you. I know you want something.” Roy accused, not fooled by the light dancing in Edward’s eyes. It wasn’t the light of innocence, it was the light of playfulness. And a playful Edward could mean many things.

Hohenheim decided it was time to make it back to his feet, although to be honest he’d had his doubts about whether or not it was worth getting back up again. But as Roy clearly began to banter back and forth with Edward, he smiled wistfully before turning away, casting a lingering look to the dark-haired alchemist who watched over his son before he slipped away into the shadows, bidding a silent goodbye to his son.

It hurt to leave this way, but there was little choice. Roy would become violent more than likely, there was no knowing for him how Edward would react, and he couldn’t afford to dally any longer. Not now that he was planning an unexpected side trip.

He had something he now knew he needed to do… and it was a place they could not follow.

Edward had just happily won the argument when he suddenly noticed something was off, and as he looked, he swore. “Damn him! Where the hell did he go?”

Roy too, looked around quickly before growling his displeasure as his head fell back onto his shoulders. “Least I know where you learned your skills at sneaking.”
“Don’t you toss me in with that man!” Edward berated before sighing in bitter disappointment. “I didn’t even get a chance to dump him out of his chair.”

Roy frowned and looked around at their still empty surroundings, repressing a shiver as he turned back to Edward. “We’ll find him another day I’m sure, and when we do, I’ll make sure you get to dump him out of as many chairs as you want. But for now, let’s get out of here.”

Edward too looked around, beginning to become just the least bit unsettled at the unnatural quietness of this street. “You’re going to be so late for work.” He pointed out as he followed after Roy, heading, hopefully, back to someplace they recognized.

“It was worth it.” Roy said with a steely hardness in his voice, and he barely blinked as he led them out onto a street that was almost jarringly busy compared to the one they’d just departed. “No one just leaves you and gets away with it. Not you.”

Edward felt the smile appear on his face, but he remained silent as he diligently followed after Roy as they made their way to Central Headquarters. Not even to mention to Roy that when he’d looked behind him, there was no possible entrance to this street they could have come out of. He had far more pressing things on his mind as he again tried to understand just what his father had meant.

And he hoped that Roy didn’t notice he was floating a bit closer, but when on a quieter street the soothing sounds of Roy humming reached his ears, he knew it was a lost cause, and with a smile, let the sound put him back at ease.

Meanwhile in an empty alleyway, Hohenheim stepped back to view his handiwork.

In the grimy filth that generally littered places like this, he had drawn a transmutation circle with his cane, and the sight of it made him hesitate. This was one thing he had never wanted to do… but he had to. He had to know for sure.

Rubbing his sore jaw absently, he stepped forward into the circle with dignity that far outshone his current grubby surroundings. He’d never imagined that would he make such a circle, it would be in an alleyway… there seemed far more appropriate places… but perhaps in the light of the nature of this venture, this was entirely too appropriate.

He waited only a moment longer before activating the circle, and in a flash of brilliant bluish-white light, he vanished.

“Such a crude method you use to visit me.”

Hohenheim didn’t falter at the welcome, only drew himself up into his full imposing height as he stared ahead, unafraid. “You would know all about crude methods, wouldn’t you. What has been done to my son?”

“He acted beyond his mortal status in a way far less elegant than you, Van Hohenheim. His consequence was of his own choosing.”

“I doubt you gave him the choice of ghost. They’re not supposed to exist!”

“Neither are you.” Was the reply, hinged on tinkling laughter. “Like father, like son. Such a shame that Alphonse stays away from using alchemy now… I was curious to see just how volatile your bloodline truly is to the proper order of the world.”

Hohenheim stiffened, eyes hardening with steely warning. “Do not manipulate Alphonse.”
“I hardly need to manipulate you, or anyone else you create.” Came the sardonic response. “You fall into place like dominos on strings… all except for Edward.”

“What did you do to Edward!” Hohenheim demanded with explosive fervor.

The Gate began to laugh.
“Hawkeye is going to be so mad at you.” Edward murmured as he hurried alongside Roy up the flight of stairs that would put them nearest to the man’s office.

“She can be mad.” Roy stated uncaringly, his hand sliding along the balustrade as they climbed. “First time since I moved here that I’ll be late. And as far as I’m concerned, entirely worth it.”

Edward glanced over at him with a wry, lopsided smile and a knowing look in his eyes. “She just better not shoot at you.”

Roy had given a huff that bordered on being amused, but when he turned to look at Edward, what exactly he’d been amused at left him. The look now on the ghost’s face, that preoccupied, unsettled, and wholly lost look that was eerily ghost-like…it did things to his composure that he didn’t like. He didn’t like seeing Edward like this. Like a ghost. Before he’d met Edward, he might have guessed this was what a ghost would look like. Lost.

But he knew Edward. He knew such a vision wasn’t correct…and yet, it was here before him now. He didn’t like it. He didn’t like the way it made him feel useless and adrift. Apart from Edward.

More than once he was aware of opening his mouth to say something, but more than once no words would come out, and at last he had to give up as they reached the top of the stairs. And he was left with only silent curses to Hohenheim, that the man had driven this wedge between he and Edward.

It was as expected when they reached the office complex containing Roy’s office and subordinates. They were all already present, and looked on at his late arrival with varying reactions of amusement, resign, borderline frustrations, and in the case of Havoc and Falman, money changing hands.

“Colonel,” Hawkeye immediately began as Edward would have expected, “now is not the time to fall back into bad habits.”

Roy might have bantered the point with her any other day, but not today. Too much had happened to him today, too much was on his mind. He gave her a cursory glance before turning his steps to his office. “It couldn’t be helped.”

Hawkeye could only stare after him, her eyes starting to grow concerned, thoughtful, as she slowly sat back down. But it wasn’t a true coming to rest as she suddenly rose from the chair again and quickly left the office, only saying “I’m going to find Maes” before the door closed behind her.

Meanwhile inside the office, Roy had just assumed his office chair.

Edward curled up into the corner of the couch nearest Roy, his arms pulling his knees close to his chest as he stared down at them. Slowly he shifted to rest his chin on his knees, staring instead over at the picture of the sunrise that was still mounted on the office wall. Letting himself get lost in the colors, and the skyline, as he tried not to hear the echoes of what his father had said. Distantly, he knew Roy wasn’t working, could only guess that the man was watching over him instead, and knew with a flicker of warm amusement that they probably wouldn’t get in any chess games today.

As much as he had needed, in a way, to see his father again. And as much as it had meant to him to know that his father loved him, hadn’t left because of him, something inside him still hurt. Hurt to now know all the secrets his father had kept from them, and probably would never tell even
Alphonse if the man did make good on his word to one day go back to his only remaining, living relation. It hurt to know that his father had left again, still without ever saying goodbye.

And it hurt to know that he’d most likely never see the man again.

It was strange to him, in a detached way, that only now, in the aftermath, were his thoughts now taking this turn. When he’d actually been with his father, shock and the strange self preservation that had kept him on edge with sarcasm had kept him from thinking too heavily on it all.

It had been as if his father’s mere presence had thrown him for such a curve that all true thought had left him, and he was only now recovering.

His father, who had called him unnatural and more than implied that he shouldn’t exist – shouldn’t be allowed to exist. Had implied he was no better than the homunculi, and was an upset to the natural order of the world. But he did exist… he existed for Roy’s eyes only. Wasn’t that worth something to his father?

Against all supposed logic and rules, the Gate had let him exist and bound him to Roy. There was no light to walk into for him, just Roy.

But he hadn’t been able to tell the man that.

But did it truly make him an unnatural being no better than a homunculus? Because he hadn’t chosen this for himself, the only choice he’d ever made in dying was the choice to offer himself in place of any harm coming to Alphonse. But he knew now, sitting here, that his father would never think of it that way. Not truly.

Even so… deep down, buried underneath the anger and rage and sadness… he still loved that man.

Edward smiled bitterly, choking down the mirthless laughter that had threatened to bubble up. Turning his head down so that all he could see were his thighs and the couch beneath him, he stole a barely adequate look towards Roy.

Roy… the man he knew with ironclad certainty, would never leave him. No matter what hell his existence was bringing down around Roy’s head, he’d always be there. He still couldn’t imagine what he’d ever done to deserve this idiot.

This idiot who refused to send him away, even as it became ever clearer that his presence was leading Roy towards a danger the man had never thought to want to face before. But then… that was the irony of it all, wasn’t it. One way or another, Roy would have learned the truth. About the Fuhrer, about Grand… wasn’t it better this way? Better that he had found out with forewarning, and what Edward sensed was yet another argument that he was about to win?

He felt a hopeless smile break onto his face, and slowly, very slowly, he began to laugh in helplessness until within a matter of seconds it had consumed him.

“Edward?” Roy asked in baffled concern, having gotten up from his chair and now approaching the ghost slowly, as if his companion had suddenly gone stark raving insane. And a part of him was onboard with that fear. “What… are you… what is it?”

“Only you…” Edward hiccupped his laughter as he tried to gain back some semblance of control, “we’re going to have another argument, that I’ll win because you’re being stupid –”

Roy had to do a double take at that, and barely kept himself from voicing his disapproval.
“– and because neither of us can leave the other behind. We’re such idiots!” He exclaimed in fresh laughter.

Roy officially believed that Edward had lost some part of his sanity now, but even so, he lowered himself on the couch next to the overcome apparition. “This is about my not wanting you to help me when it comes down to me and the Fuhrer?” He guessed.

Edward gave a few more chuckles before looking up at Roy with defeat in his eyes, but it was a smiling defeat. “Yeah… you know I’ll win, right?”

Roy couldn’t help but smile back at him, even though he wasn’t quite sure what emotion this was that was causing him to smile. “I know…” and he reached out a hand to Edward in insistence of a handshake. “Just know that I’d never forgive myself if anything were to ever happen to you. He’s on the same playing field you are, in a way.”

Edward met his eyes, sobering a bit as his smile softened. “Then you know why I refuse to let you go alone.” And he slipped a hand free to rest it slightly through Roy’s. “Only you would be fool enough to have gotten me.”

“I happen to consider it luck.” Roy corrected quietly, and didn’t lower his hand. “Do you want to try telling me yet what your father said that upset you so much?” And when Edward’s posture began to hunch immediately after asking, added, “was it about why only I can see you?”

“No.” Edward finally answered, after a few minutes spent in unhurried silence. “It was something else. And I… I hadn’t allowed myself to hope like that in a very long time… if ever.” He paused to draw his hand away, curling back into the couch once more, but this time towards Roy, instead of the corner. “I don’t want to put the burden of that hope I had back there, and the knowledge that my father couldn’t… I just think it’s better if you don’t know.”

Roy studied Edward silently for a time, not content not to know… but all the same, he was glad Edward was talking to him a bit about it. Letting out a slow sigh of submission, he rearranged himself on the couch so that he sat back up against it fully and draped an arm over the back of it, where Edward was sitting next to him. “Are there any hopes of yours that I can grant?”

Edward smiled faintly, reaching one hand out to rest it through Roy’s nearest thigh. “I’m no longer alone, Roy. And to me, compared to anything else I might want… that means the most to me.”

Roy knew he didn’t need to say anything, Edward already knew he wouldn’t leave, just as much as he knew he’d be devastated if Edward did leave. “Did he know?” Roy asked instead, “why only I can see you?”

Edward drew his hand away from Roy’s leg, resting it on his own as he directed his attention back to that photograph of the sunrise on the wall. “Surmises, mostly. Although the more I think about it, the more I’m certain it’s linked with how you were able to set me free.”

“The more I think about it, the more I realize that man can talk circles around a straight answer without letting you realize at first, that that’s what he’s doing.” Roy sounded properly annoyed about it, too. “Maybe it’s some sort of Xerxian blood trait that you’re bound to be difficult.”

“Hey!” Edward burst out, glaring at the man as best he could under that smirk that dared him to give in to the laughter he could also feel.

“I’m serious!” Roy teased. Mostly. “Knowing you, and then today with your dad, I think I have a valid case!”
Edward scowled at him, but couldn’t force back the smile for long. “I like to think I’m difficult because I live with you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Roy recoiled back in exaggerated shock, though his arm didn’t budge from where it rested on the back of the couch around Edward. “I am not difficult!”

“Oh yes you are.” Edward insisted with a hint of laughter. “Shall I make a list as proof for you, of all the ways you’re a difficult man? I’m sure I can send a letter to your mother as well, asking for proof from your childhood.”

“Evil spirit.” Roy accused, with a certain degree of fondness.

Edward merely smiled in pride.

“Are you better now?” Roy asked, his hand bending down from the couch to bat at the silvery hair that ignored his attentions, as always. “I don’t do so well when you’re upset.”

“I’m okay.” Edward reassured him calmly, “yes, he said some things to me that I didn’t like, and yes, I had a fleeting hope crushed and it rattled me…but I promise you that I’m okay.”

Roy knew he had no choice but to accept that for now, and he nodded in understanding as he drew his arm away. “Then I’ll get my work done. And I’ll have lunch delivered for me, so we might still get a chess game in.”

Edward nodded, and as Roy was about to rise, he put out a hand quickly, although the hesitant look on his face belied the hurry in which he’d done it. “Are you going out tonight?”

Roy had lowered himself back down obediently, and at the question, he began to smile as the warm pulse of endearment filled him. “No.” He answered without hesitation, and at the shock but light of happiness he saw in Edward’s eyes, his smile remained. “I need to be with you tonight.”

“But,” Edward began, whipping around as Roy had gotten up and nearly made his way around his desk, “you’ve not…” and he tilted his head in confusion, “when was the last time you did?”

“It doesn’t matter. I will Wednesday.” Roy brushed the matter aside as if it were wholly unimportant. “You’ve needed me, and you come first. And tomorrow I’m taking you to the theater, don’t forget. So Wednesday.”

Edward had just had enough time to warm at the reminder of their destination for tomorrow night when there was a quick knock on the door, followed by it opening anyway. Both sounds having caused him to look over, and when Maes had slipped through to shut the door behind him, he smiled brightly in welcome. “Maes!”

Roy couldn’t help but feel happy at Edward’s enthusiasm to see his best friend, but the look he personally turned on Maes was more of the questioning sort than the unbridled delight sort. “What do you want? It’s not more pictures, is it?” He groaned at the mere thought.

Maes laughed, waving his hand as if to bat the question away. “Your jokes are still as bad as ever I see.” But he quickly sobered – although in all fairness, not from the sour look Roy turned his way as the man resumed his seat. “Riza,” he stated as he crossed over to the desk, but perched himself up on the arm of the couch unknowingly right next to Edward.

“You’re married already. See? This is one of the reasons I remain unattached, for when someone new strikes my interest.” Roy deadpanned as he pulled his files closer to him, as if they were a protective barricade or would somehow signal to Maes that he was extremely busy. Neither of which
would work, anyone knew that.

“Not quite.” Maes smiled, not bothered enough to go into odes of why he loved Gracia so much over any other woman. “She said you came in looking strange, and thought you might need your best friend. Did something happen? You look fine.”

Roy abandoned the hope that Maes would be leaving soon, although he was secretly, on a deeper level, quite glad to have him here. As he’d said, Maes really was his best friend. “I ran into Hohenheim this morning.”

Maes let out a low whistle, and his brows drew together in concern as he quickly looked his friend over. “You okay? You don’t look like you got into a fight with him. Unless he’s not quite as good as all the rumors made him out to be.”

Edward had floated around to sit on the coffee table by now, his legs crossed as he studied Maes with a small shadow of a smile remaining. And he looked over at Roy now to see how the man would answer. Something told him he shouldn’t get involved yet. There were certain things that only talking to Maes could do for Roy.

“Actually, I believe I punched him several times.” Roy offered nonchalantly, but with a steely edge that would have gone unheard by anyone less close to the man. “He did something to offend me a long time ago, the time to collect dues on it came.”

Maes’s brows climbed over the rim of his glasses, “you punched him? Not set him on fire?”

“I’m sure he would have given me reason to get to that eventually, had he not managed to escape.” Roy muttered darkly, still not pleased that at the very least, Edward hadn’t gotten to dump his degenerate father out of a chair in that eerie place they’d been led to.

“What did he do, exactly, to offend you?” Maes asked in true confusion, “I wasn’t aware you had a grudge with him. Unless that grudge is that he’s still alive… I know a part of you was hoping he wasn’t.”

Roy’s hand tightened in anger for the briefest moment. “He abandoned his family. His sons. It’s unforgivable to me, no matter the reason.”

Maes practically slid backwards off the armrest of the couch in slack-jawed shock. Did his friend just… “since when are you suddenly the champion of family life?” And he quickly held up his hands in an offering of peace. “No offense.”

Roy only glared for a moment, but shook his head. “It’s complicated.”

“That’s putting it lightly.” Edward breathed out heavily.

“Complicated.” Maes stated firmly, watching his best friend closely. “Roy, since when do you even know that the guy had a family?”

“Again, complicated.” Roy growled out, his pointed look a warning to his friend.

Maes chuckled, though it was part nerves as he held up his hands again. “Don’t tell me that you slept with his wife or something and suddenly you do have children.”

What happened next, Roy would claim was the result of spontaneous combustion. And as the black leather couch exploded into ash underneath Maes, he would also claim he did not smile as he watched his friend slam rear first onto the ashy floor with a yell of shock.
Edward was applauding through wary laughter… and trying not to mourn the fact that Roy had just incinerated his favorite couch.

“I am not that sort of man.” Roy growled, and shifted in his chair in irritation. “It’s just complicated!”

Maes got up, rubbing his bruised tailbone with a good-natured smile. “Sorry. Sorry. I know how you freak about the kids thing.” And he laughed as a muscle in Roy’s face began to twitch. “So I’m guessing seeing him again, and this thing with his family, it’s not settling too well with you?”

Roy gave him a withering look, “I don’t go around punching people for no reason. But I’m not suicidal or about to go on a no-holds-barred rampant throughout Headquarters. You can assure Riza of that.”

“Just going to go on a rampage against me?” Maes smiled, as if amused by the prospect.

“You can handle it.” Roy informed him, well aware that it was a compliment.

Maes chuckled as he considered his friend, really looked at him. It had been a while now since he’d been able to see Roy, and looking at him now… he smiled a small, knowing smile. “You can too, you know.”

Roy gave him a weird look, “what?”

“Nothing!” Maes brushed it off cheerily, and gave the man more of a wave than a salute. “Come have dinner again with us sometime!” And he quickly left before Roy could encase him in flames for interrogation.

Edward watched him go with a true smile and a light-hearted laugh. “I really do like that man.”

Roy huffed out his own laugh, and picked up a pen with a roll of his eyes. “I know how you feel.”

Edward looked back around at him with the same smile. He wasn’t quite sure of the story behind those two becoming best friends… but he was sure it was an amazing one. He’d have to ask sometime. But not now… for now he’d let Roy work.

So he went in search of one of his books, while trying not to look at the spot that was missing a couch.

The day passed in far more peace and quiet than their morning had, and as Roy promised, he’d had his lunch delivered in to him so that he could work through it, trying to get his work done as quickly as possible in order for them to have time to themselves later. Edward had finished the book he’d been reading, and was part way through another when he set it down and rose into the air.

There was something that had been on his mind now for a while, and it needed attending to.

“I’m going to go pay a visit to Grand. See if I can’t do him any harm.”

Roy looked up, the pen going slack in his hand as he shoved the problems the border patrol was having from his mind for the present. “Just be careful.” He said, knowing that he always said that. But unable to keep from saying it all the same. He worried when he wasn’t able to keep an eye on Edward.

“Yes, mother.” Edward smiled teasingly, and then a wicked gleam entered his silver eyes, “or according to Maes, should it be father?”
Roy flung the pen at the impertinent ghost. “Certainly not!”

Edward ducked away with a laugh, and giving the man a short wave, darted through the wall to be on his way.

Roy groaned and stared at his pen that was now mocking him from across the room. “What do you want?” He threatened it, and wondered if it might magically come back to him.

Meanwhile Edward was making his way to Grand’s office, unaware of the showdown that Roy was having with a ballpoint. He was beginning to recognize certain military officers during these personal missions of his, but he didn’t stay to harass any of them as he focused on his goal. In time, they may become his goal too… but for now, he was content with helping try to remove Brigadier General Grand from the picture.

The area surrounding his office was rather quiet, as Edward had become accustomed to it being. The man’s subordinates were involved in their work, and Edward had a hard time not being suspicious of the lot of them. He knew sensibly that even if they were involved in their superiors illegal activities, that they’d never have evidence of it sitting around in broad daylight work hours.

So he passed them all by in favor of entering the General’s office.

It seemed that Grand was having an easier time sitting down these days. He was involved in file reports of some nature, and sported only a few lingering bruises on first look. Although Edward was pleased to note that a cane rested not far from the man. Apparently that patella was taking a proper amount of time to heal. Good.

“You know,” Edward began in a silken, cold voice, “you’re no longer my primary concern as a threat to Roy’s safety… but that doesn’t make your position any safer.” He promised as he floated towards the desk determinedly. “Now I just want you out of the way sooner, so you’ve less time to plan trying to harm Roy. I won’t allow something like that. I never will… from you, or the Fuhrer.”

It seemed, in this moment, a shame to Edward that he couldn’t kill this man. He knew Roy needed him still alive. But it itched at him that Grand could walk around free like this, possibly planning to hurt Roy, and all he could do was pull dangerous pranks on him. The thought of whether or not he could kill a man didn’t cross his mind, not in this.

When it came down to his desire to protect Roy, it couldn’t cross his mind.

“I think it’s time you go home early today for injuries.” Edward decided matter-of-factly. “Or to your little hidden lab. Either way, I want you out of here and doing something that Maes might be able to use against you.” He was certain that if Grand left the building, Maes would tail him.

Edward began to look around, assessing what he had to work with. “Now what sort of fun shall we have today, Brigadier General.”

Unfortunately, where the man currently was, and the fact that he was where he was, it didn’t give Edward very many potential opportunities to exploit. That is, until Edward realized where Grand was, and he began to smile.

The man was sitting at his desk.

With that uplifting knowledge in mind, Edward lowered himself to the floor to begin fiddling as soundlessly as he was able, with the screwed in brackets holding the heaviest side of the desk up on its legs. A few times the wood squeaked in protest, and Edward had had to wait it out until the understandably jumpy man settled back in with his paperwork. But bit by bit, he was able to loosen
the brackets until the screws holding them barely remained affixed to the desk itself.

“I do love the art of carpentry.” Edward murmured pleasantly as he scooted back to admire his work. He’d give it a few minutes before the entire thing came crashing down, based on the sudden vigor with which Grand was writing against the now unbeknownst unstable surface.

But he could hardly consider himself done. Certainly not. Just for a bit of added fun, for the receptionist he knew would come rushing in here, and grab up Grand’s phone to make the alert for the medical ward, he loosened the phone cord in its jack so that in her haste it might become fully disconnected.

Having finished enough for the day, Edward took to sitting in one of Grand’s office chairs to wait it out. Just staring at the man with the patience only a vengeful spirit could muster. He wished that desk would come crashing down soon.

And just as he was beginning to wonder if he’d not done the job good enough, the General slammed his fist onto the desk in a clear show of frustration at something.

The desk gave a last, dying creak of ominous warning, before the legs on the left side splintered free to shoot across the office as the bulk of the desk came crashing down against the greater portion of Grand’s thighs.

The startled, pained shout caused Edward to smile thinly, and he rose from his chair in satisfaction as Grand somehow managed to collapse free of the chair which had been pinning him up against the weight of the broken desk. The man crashed to the floor onto his side amidst all the spilled stationery just as the door was flung open and the receptionist rushed in with a panicked gasp and a frantic “sir!”

Edward chuckled as he floated around to watch Grand squirm in barely repressed pain and a litany of curses that he was sure Roy wouldn’t approve of him hearing. “Maybe that’s how I’ll help Roy get rid of you. From the ground up. Surely you’re not as good an alchemist if you can barely walk.”

“Sir, the phone’s not working in here!” The receptionist said hurriedly, “just stay still while I call from the other room.”

“Don’t fucking bother!” Grand snapped at her, trying to shift into a seated position and not show the wince of pain as he had to support his weight on his hands to do so. “Nothing’s broken!”

“Damn.” Edward muttered in true disappointment.

“Just get me my fucking cane and help me down to the ward!” Grand continued to rage, and he looked at the broken desk in seething anger. “And then I want to know how that thing broke off two legs at once!”

“Suspicious someone’s after you?” Edward asked lightly, smiling as he watched the woman rush to get the cane. “Because I am.”

“Yes, General!” The receptionist answered hurriedly, and helped the injured man to his feet.

Edward took great satisfaction in the hisses of pain that the man tried to repress. “Won’t be able to move so fast in a fight now, will you.” And he watched, waited until the door had closed behind them, before he took a look down at the abandoned, ruined desk. “Now let’s see here…”

Grand wouldn’t notice if his once obsessively organized desk was in disarray. The mere collapse would have done that. So Edward took this golden opportunity to get in some first class snooping.
After several minutes of swift, but thorough searching, all Edward could find that seemed out of the ordinary, were a bunch of papers clearly written in Grand’s own personally devised alchemic code. But alchemic codes weren’t ever things to stop him, and by the time Edward was able to read what was on them, he was hearing footsteps approaching the door once more.

Taking a last, confused glance at them, he shoved them back where he’d found them. Knowing that while Grand might not notice if things were displaced, he’d surely notice if they were missing.

“Until next time.” Edward promised the office, and fled back to Roy.

It was one of the quicker trips he’d made back to the man, having taken full advantage of every shortcut he could access and his unhindered speed. After having spent some time doing recon, he knew he’d lost time in informing Roy that he’d had success.

He barely had made it fully through the office wall before he blurted out, “he should be out of here for the day. Let Maes know.”

Roy looked up at his entrance, but nodded immediately. “Hopefully he’ll choose a different way home today. Surely he needs to check up on progress sooner or later.” And he grabbed the phone on his desk.

Edward waited until Roy had finished talking to Maes, presumably, before alighting on the man’s desk in good spirits. “I made most of his desk collapse onto him!” He divulged proudly.

Roy raised an impressed eyebrow, and tried not to chuckle too much at that little revelation. “Did you now? You’re really stepping it up.”

“I’m getting tired of waiting!” Edward admitted passionately, “I want to at least keep him on the injured side until you can take care of things. But Roy… now that we know the Fuhrer is going to be a harder opponent than you were counting on… I just don’t want to waste time if I have it.”

“I know you’re impatient.” Roy soothed with a bracing smile. “I do know, remember? But don’t worry, I have patience enough for the both of us. It’ll be okay. Knowing when to strike is practically an art, and one I am quite familiar with.”

Edward huffed as he settled in a bit more on the desk. “Good thing you’re in the military and not me. I’d make a mess of things, wouldn’t I.”

Roy laughed at the ghost’s worries. “Probably so, but you’d make it interesting. You do already.”

Edward chanced a grin at him. “Would you put up with me on your team, then?”

“I already do.” Roy rolled his eyes, but smiled. “As if I’d ever let you go anywhere without me. Now stop thinking about that sort of thing and tell me, honestly… it’s important –”

“Yes?” Edward blinked at him.

“You’re not going to drop my desk on me because I turned your couch into ashes, are you?”

Edward snorted, rolling his eyes. “As if that’d be a fitting punishment. You’re fixing that couch later, you know. Or buying me another one. Now do you know why Grand would have a bunch of coded papers referring to a number five?”

“Number five?” Roy echoed, his forehead creasing in a thoughtful frown. “Why?”
“I was snooping after he dragged himself out. All his alchemist coded files referred to a number five, but I couldn’t figure out what it was. The most I could discern was that there’s been a lot of activity at it. But a place with a lot of activity going on… that wouldn’t be a place he’d put a hidden lab. I just thought you might have an idea what he was referring to.” Edward offered.

Roy tapped his pen against the desk before swiveling the chair so that he could look out across the courtyard in thought. “Unfortunately we can’t assume anything right now. I’ll have Maes look into it. I didn’t steal him back from the investigations department for nothing.”

“Roy…” Edward broached, hesitantly at first, “can’t you let me help with it too? Let me help you both research this? I know you are, even if you don’t tell me you are. You really don’t believe I think you just threw the entire thing onto Maes, do you?”

“It’s not that I don’t think you wouldn’t be any help, Edward,” Roy said as he turned back around to face the ghost, “it’s that it’s still too early to involve you. I want to have a more concrete lead before I let you take a look at anything Maes or I have turned up. Because I know you… the moment you think you have the answer, you’ll rush headlong into it. I can’t risk you doing that just yet.”

“You think I’ll prevent you from being able to gather the proof you want to be able to slide into his position as a general.” Edward surmised, his tone slightly reluctant.

“I tend to prefer my way of saying it.” Roy appeased and reached out to the ghost. “Don’t take what I’m doing the wrong way, you have to trust me right now that I know what I’m doing. This isn’t the first time I’ve done something like this… granted never something of this magnitude, but I do know what I’m doing.”

Edward looked around at him with a faint smile, “just don’t keep me in the dark too long. Else I’ll have to start haunting you.”

“That is a truly fearsome prospect.” Roy smiled, only smiling wider as Edward scowled upon realizing he was being teased. “Now go on, I still need to finish these. As much as I enjoy your company.”

Edward snorted, but got off the desk anyway to go grab up his book again. And leaving Roy to his work, he went up to his favorite corner of the ceiling to get in some reading. Even though a large part of him was still awaiting any potential phone calls that Roy may get regarding Grand’s current state of health.

But they heard nothing, and the office was silent for several hours save Roy’s mutterings over his paperwork and the rustling of paper. Eventually Roy did get up, hoisting finished paperwork with him, causing Edward to rouse himself out of his book in excited anticipation.

By the time Roy got back, Edward had already set up the chessboard in his eagerness, causing Roy to laugh.

“What?” Edward complained in an effort to hide his embarrassment. “We haven’t played chess since last week!”

“It’s only Monday.” Roy teased with a smile as he sat in his office chair.

“You know what I mean.” Edward berated him, and soon the game was off to a destructive start for both players.

Roy was glad for the distraction the chess game was giving them from their day, but as it always did, and he knew it always would, the question and answer session started between them as effortlessly
as knocking yet another pawn from the game board.

“How exactly did you make Grand’s desk collapse?” Roy asked, wanting to know how to reinforce his own. Just in case.

“Loosened the brackets of the legs on the heaviest side.” Edward smirked proudly, and snorted at Roy’s expression. “If I wanted to hurt you, I wouldn’t drop part of a desk on your legs. I can get far more creative with you, considering I know where you live.”

“Yeah, where you live.” Roy muttered, just a bit petulantly, but perked up despite it as he managed to remove one of Edward’s bishops from play.

Edward chuckled, and tried not to take the loss too heavily as he considered his remaining options at the same time asking, “when my dad said you hadn’t told me the full story… you know, about looking for him? What did he mean.”

Roy frowned slightly, both at the question and at the predicament Edward had just created for him on the chessboard. “I had suspected for a long time that he wasn’t exactly – well, fact is he never appeared to age. In any photograph I’d ever seen of him. I didn’t realize just what he was until today, but I’d had -my suspicions, especially after Ishval, that he was more of an alchemist than he let on.”

Edward knew it wasn’t his turn for a question, but he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “why? Why not tell me?”

“I didn’t want to insult you, I guess. By telling you I had a suspicion your father was involved in illegal substances… of a fashion.” Roy shrugged his shoulders heavily. “Not that it matters much now. Anyway,” he shook himself away from those thoughts and hoped to bring Edward away from them as well, “I was wondering if you wanted to stay in this coming weekend.”

Edward tilted his head in curiosity. “Stay in? Sure. Hazel definitely wouldn’t complain if he got to see you at least one more day than has been usual.”

Roy chuckled at the mention of the destructive ball of fur he called a pet. “The state of my home wouldn’t either. But actually that’s not quite what I had in mind when I brought it up.” And he chose a new location for his remaining knight. “I was thinking you and I could do some things in town that I’ve been meaning to do with you.”

“Such as?” Edward pressed curiously, but not raising an issue about it.

“Well,” Roy considered the ghost thoughtfully, “I thought I might take you to the carnival that Elysia’s school is having. There will at least be a few amusement rides, and plenty for you to look at.”

Edward grinned at him eagerly. “Really? I’ve never been to anything like that before! You really won’t mind?”

Roy chuckled and shook his head definitively. “Besides, I realize now I need to spend some more time with Maes and the girls anyway. They’ll be glad I came… and you and I can sneak off every now and then to do things by ourselves.”

Edward wasn’t sure his grin would fade anytime soon, but he regarded Roy curiously. “When did you find out about this?”

In answer, Roy smirked as he drew a sheet of paper from his desk to present it for Edward’s view. “Maes slipped this into my paperwork. I was waiting for your answer before I chose.”
Edward reached out curiously, taking the paper in hand, and smiling as he read the invitation to the school carnival he saw that Roy had, in fact, left unchecked the boxes that read either ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in reference to attendance.

“I don’t know of any better way to spend my Saturday.” Edward concluded as he grabbed a pen from Roy’s desk.

Roy had leaned his chin into one hand as he watched the ghost happily mark the paper. Completely oblivious still to the fact that he had emptied all of Edward’s chess pieces off the chessboard. And as Edward handed the paper back to him, he grinned, “so I win?”

Edward was confused only for a moment, before he saw the chessboard. “Roy!”

Roy was grinning down at the marked ‘yes’ checkbox. “I’ll take that as a yes.” He interpreted smugly as he slipped the paper back away to give to Maes later.

“Wait… where’d you put my pieces!” Edward accused, noticing that they’d all vanished. Even the ones that had been knocked off the board earlier.

“What pieces?” Roy asked innocently as he surveyed his success. “I believe this is what they call a “clean sweep” my dearest Ed.”

“I don’t care what you think they call it! I think you cheated and you know it!” Edward pointed a finger at him, just in case there was any doubt in who he was accusing.

“Yes, I know you think I cheated. But did I, in fact, cheat?” Roy queried cheerfully, only to yelp through laughter as Edward lunged through the desk at him in search of the missing chess pieces.
Chapter 39

Predawn the following day found Edward lying quite peacefully next to Roy as he listened distantly to the heralding sounds of the songbirds as they predicted the sunrise. Faintly he could hear the hums of engines as the rare car passed by on the street. And just behind him he could hear the clicking whir of the air conditioner as it debated whether or not to turn on.

All in all, it was rather hypnotic.

So when seconds later, Roy’s rarely used alarm clock blared to life in disturbance of this peace, it was only reasonable that he fell through the bed with a startled jolt.

Edward managed to recover himself, and popped his head up through the mattress to stare in bewilderment as Roy growled his way through turning off the alarm clock. “Roy?” He ventured in his confusion. He’d never seen the man use the actual alarm clock before, it was always Hazel.

Roy shoved himself upright in the bed with a shallow grunt, and as he spotted Edward’s head poking up from the mattress, frowned. “What are you doing down there?”

Edward blinked, making a soft noise of confusion before he realized what Roy meant, and quickly floated his way back up onto the bed itself. “Why did you set that noisy thing?”

Edward’s words redirected Roy’s attention instantly, and with a bit of a smirk he climbed out of the warm haven of his bed. “Come on, get up. You’re seeing this.”

An entirely wary expression overtook Edward’s face as he tracked Roy’s progress to the bathroom door. “I’m not sure I want to see that.”

Roy paused with a frown of confusion, before suddenly understanding with an amused snort. “Your loss. At least get up.”

As the bathroom door snapped shut behind Roy, Edward could only blink after him in puzzled wonderment. Just what was Roy doing? He was almost apt to think the man was sleepwalking, if not for the fact that an alarm clock had been involved. It was the flushing of the toilet that jerked him back to himself, and he clambered off of the bed.

“What are you doing?” Edward asked, the instant the bathroom door opened to reveal an unshowered and still-in-pajamas Roy Mustang. A sight he rarely saw.

Roy glanced over at him with a grin before making his way promptly to the bedroom doorway which stood open for Hazel’s access. “You’ll see. Come on, come on!” He chided eagerly, which to Edward’s ears sounded almost comical coming from the man.

Curiosity and amusement caused Edward to follow after him, and he told himself it was also partly for Roy’s own safety. He wasn’t yet convinced the man was in his right mind. “Roy, are you certain you’re fine?”

Roy scoffed as he looked back over his shoulder at the ghost, “you ask me this now? After living with me for almost a month, now?” But he said nothing further on it save for a resurgence of his grin as he led the way down the stairs, and upon reaching the bottom said cheerily “morning, Hazel!” to the squirrel who fell from his curled and asleep position atop the bottom of the banister to land in a
shocked heap on the floor.

Edward could sympathize only too well with the baffled look Hazel was giving Roy, and gave the squirrel a bracing look.

Roy, on the other hand, found this all too amusing and continued on with a laugh. When he let himself out the back door he turned to smile mysteriously at Edward. “I have a surprise for you. Meet me up on the roof.”

Edward hesitated only long enough for Roy to vanish from his view, and he darted out after the man, spotting him already climbing up the walls like a human incarnation of Hazel. “You do realize you are in your pajamas and haven’t preened yet?”

“Yeah!” Roy called down as he swung a foot up onto a second story window ledge.

“You realize a virgin might see you and run the other way?” Edward called up to him again, before floating after him to catch up.

“Don’t care.” Roy declared as he scrambled up onto the rooftop.

“You don’t…” Edward blinked, and considered this hard evidence that there was something indeed gravely wrong with his friend. He quickly landed on the roof as his mind whirled with the possibilities of what must have gone wrong. “Roy, you – ”

“Edward.” Roy interrupted firmly, but kindly, as he flopped down onto the rooftop and crossed his legs before pointing out at the sky. “Look.”

Edward turned to look on reflex, and barely stifled an awed gasp. Silver eyes wide in wonderment, he slowly sank down to sit next to Roy, never taking his eyes from the horizon. “Is that… what is it?” He asked in a voice barely a whisper, as if anything louder might shatter the scene.

Roy smiled as he watched the solar eclipse, the moon now fully having centered against the sun to cast a halo of white light about it. A serene white light almost perfectly identical to the light Edward emitted, and with that undertone of mystery that could draw any living man like moth to flame. “An eclipse.”

“I’ve never seen one before.” Edward whispered in awe, glad he didn’t need to blink, lest he miss even one flare of the beautiful light. The sight of it made something inside him clench tightly, as if the beauty of it would make it hard to breathe. He remembered how he’d felt when he’d first seen the sun again after so many years in confinement. That was nothing compared to how he felt now as the white light began to flare with spots of red at the edge of the darkness that was the moon.

“I heard there’d be one this morning.” Roy spoke just as quietly, “the guys at work – anyway, I wanted you to see it, and I wanted to see it with you.”

Edward felt a smile slip onto his face. This was the reason Roy had flown out of bed an hour early? To watch the sky with him? As he watched the moon begin to noticeably slip aside, he chanced a quick glance over to the man. “Your mother was right about you, you know.” He murmured fondly as he turned back to watching the eclipse once again.

“She usually is.” Roy agreed, not questioning what about.

Edward smiled to himself, even as he felt a part of him fracture in sadness. Yes, she had been right. Any person lucky enough to steal Roy’s heart… he knew they’d be happy. Lucky. That Roy would pull himself out of bed just to surprise him, a friend, with watching an eclipse while knowing how
much it meant to him… Roy had a big heart. He’d make someone very happy one day.

“And this is just one eclipse.” Roy spoke as he rested back on his hands to keep watching the progression. “I’ll make sure you see them all.”

Edward could only hum in recognition he’d heard, unwilling to look away again just yet, or speak. The crescent of glowing white light was growing larger, and he feared that if he looked away now, lost focus, that it would be over all at once. That the strange comfort that ethereal light gave him would be gone all too soon. That the comforting irony of it would be gone too soon.

The sun and the moon, that together they’d create a light so similar to what he shined with.

How long ago was it now that he’d confessed to Roy why he’d not personally given up what color his hair had been? How long ago was it that Roy had reassured him with those words that had made him feel such happiness and at the same time, emotional pain.

“…I have to let you in on a secret … the moon isn’t any less entrancing or beautiful.”

Even now, they made him smile in a happy, but slightly pained way. Even if he couldn’t understand the reason of the pain. And now here he was, watching an ironic and breathtaking celestial representation of what he’d become. What he was.

It was some time before he noticed that the profile of the man sitting next to him was off from how it had been, and that was curious enough to get him to look over, away from the red glow that had nearly chased away all the glowing white light.

Roy merely smiled as Edward blinked around at him. “Can’t risk looking at it too much anymore for too long. I still have mortal eyes.”

Edward tilted his head slightly in concern, darting a glance to the increasingly bright red glow and then back to Roy. “You don’t have to stay up here with me, if it’ll be too tempting to look.”

Roy chuckled lightly and shook his head with a soft smile. “Watch your eclipse, before it’s over.” And his smile only gentled as Edward did, even after a moment of looking indecisive. But he could see the way the ghost’s eyes lit up as they watched the phenomenon. And slowly lowering himself down onto one elbow so as not to distract Edward, he rested his head in his hand as he watched over the spirit, believing that if he looked hard enough, he could see some of the reddish light reflected in Edward’s own glow.

Edward wasn’t sure how many missed passed before the eclipse was over. In a sudden and yet gradual way, as if it had the power to hypnotize the human mind. But the sun appeared in its full, complete glory, despite seeming somehow diminished as a closing act. And he gazed at it a moment longer in an effort to burn the scene into his mind before he turned to seek out Roy.

He fell still through his turn as he saw that Roy was watching him closely, steadily. The man was just lying there, watching him as if he had all the time in the world to just stare, and wanted to. Edward hesitated a moment longer, before lowering himself down as well to lay facing the man whose attention never wavered.

“I’m not sure Hazel will think to find you up here if you fall asleep.” Edward finally whispered, having found it strangely difficult to speak and break the silence of whatever moment Roy was in.

Roy flashed a small smile before his face relaxed again. “I won’t fall asleep.”

“You say that now.” Edward replied softly, “but isn’t it tempting?”
Roy breathed out contently, curling his arm beneath his head to pillow it there as he never once lifted his gaze from Edward. From those silver eyes that gravity would be envious of. “There are far more tempting things than sleep, right now.” He assured with a flicker of a smile. “Just lay here with me a bit longer.”

Edward made no move to get up, only shifted closer towards Roy until they were barely apart, and closed his eyes in relaxation. “Did you really mean it when you said we’d see all the eclipses?”

Roy smiled faintly as he reached out to brush a hand unfelt through Edward’s hair, and fought back the want to lay his arm over the ghost. It wouldn’t work. So he forced himself to pull his hand away, and instead laid it between them as he studied Edward’s face in repose. “I promise it.” He answered, adding as insurance, “and if I ever break that promise, you may haunt me as you see fit.”

“But aren’t there a lot?” Edward asked, brows drawing together in a frown, though he didn’t open his eyes.

“Not enough.” Roy answered, thinking that once every few years, if that, was hardly enough. Not for the way Edward enjoyed them, with the appreciation of someone who still couldn’t take seeing the sky for granted.

Edward smiled to himself, and sank a bit deeper against the pressure of the roof against him. “Making commitments, Roy?” He teased lightheartedly.

“Commitment sounds far too dreary.” Roy complained, “I prefer to think of it as an oath-bound duty to a friend.”

Edward made a face, opening his eyes to pin Roy with a look verging on repulsion. “Forever the soldier. I’ll have you know that ‘oath-bound duty’ sounds far drearier than ‘commitment’. Damn Military men, spouting things like that, it’s no wonder so many of you are single.”

“Hey!” Roy laughed in argument. “I happen to prefer being single!”

Edward rolled his eyes, “being single is sacred compared to what you do. You’re not allowed to call yourself single. You may call yourself… loose and unattached.”

“Flattering.” Roy deadpanned through a slight growl.

“I am single.” Edward continued without pause.

Roy rolled his eyes at this, and before Edward could prattle on any further, launched himself up off his side to bring his hands to rest on either side of Edward’s head as the startled ghost flipped onto his back to stare up at him with wide, curious and trusting eyes. “You are not allowed to be single.” He said firmly, surprising himself at just how rigidly the words had left his mouth, but he didn’t dwell on it as he turned completely serious, jealousy flaring to a barely restrained life inside of him. “Being single implies the potential to fall in love with someone, and I don’t want to share you like that with anyone.”

“All I have is you.” Edward reminded him softly as he looked up at the man hovering over him. “No matter how many people you introduce me to, you’re still the one I waited seven years for. Besides, you shouldn’t get so worked up over something like that anyway.”

“It’s entirely your fault.” Roy accused without malice, and righted himself so that he was now sitting on the rooftop, gazing partially towards the sun. “We should head back inside now. I have work to get to if I want to finish in enough time to change before we go to the theater.”
Edward brightened at the reminder, having forgotten entirely in the thrill of seeing his first ever solar eclipse. “I still need to find other ghosts for the other tickets!”

Roy snorted in amusement as he began to walk to the edge of the roof so that he could begin climbing back down. “Just what I need, more ghosts.”

“Won’t people think it a bit strange that you reserved a whole box for only one person?” Edward asked, and began to follow Roy over the edge of the roof.

“Let them think I got stood up and had been planning my own entertainment during intermission.” Roy offered.

Edward pulled a face, believing that on some level, the ease with which Roy was able to come up with something like that wasn’t good at all. But there was another, more interesting little matter, that intrigued him more. “Have you been stood up before then?”

Roy paused in his descent down the wall to give Edward a reproachful look. “Of course not! One chance is all someone gets with me, in more ways than one.”

“So in order to take me to the theater, you’re now willing to let people believe the great Roy Mustang was stood up?” Edward clarified with a grin, “it’s not much of an image to ruin, but really?”

Roy felt himself smirk slightly, and he shrugged before resuming his way down the wall. “As long as you enjoy yourself tonight, I don’t care what anyone thinks.”

Edward smiled, and said nothing further to it as he floated down to wait for Roy on the grass, and then followed the man back inside the house after one last smiling glance to the sky.

Within the hour Roy was ready to go to work, and after some brief teasing of a still confused Hazel, they left. Fortunately their walk to work this morning was uneventful in comparison to yesterday, although a small part of Edward wished they’d run into Hohenheim again. He still had yet to properly express his displeasure towards his inept father. But as things were, he was a bit grateful that nothing out of the ordinary opposed them. He just wanted today to be over with as quickly as possible.

He had his first theater play to see!

But get to Headquarters they did, and without incident. Once there they fell into their normal, easy routine. Although Roy might have protested that paperwork was more of a headache than anything easy. In his mind if everything in the Military were easy, paperwork wouldn’t exist. Edward, however, had no complaints at all about the fact he still had a rather nice stack of books to read, and he happily went to it as he floated in his favorite corner of the ceiling.

It wasn’t easy to tell the passage of time in the office, being so absorbed in what you were doing. But after three files of a rather intimidating size had been closed with exhales of relief on Roy’s end, Edward figured they’d been here a while. He still hadn’t finished with the chapter he was on, but as he saw that Roy was looking rather forbiddingly at the next file, decided they both needed a temporary reprieve from their activities.

“What exactly are these files usually about?” Edward asked as he alighted himself on top of the finished stack and cradled his book in his lap.

Roy’s pen fell slack in his grip at the interruption, and he pivoted the chair to peer up at the apparition. “Normally? How our stationed troops nearly avoid starting the next war. They like to
make it sound as if they’re not at fault but… I’ve been a part of such soldiers. I’m not naïve. I review them, as one of the commanding officers and an accomplished State Alchemist and in some cases attach my review.” And he glanced towards the next one awaiting his attention with a deeply calculating look. “As much as I complain about it though, I need to know these things. I need to know which troops have filed the most problems, and who their commanders in the field are. When I’m Fuhrer, I need to know where to make changes first.”

Edward nodded slowly, it was a reasonable aim. One he was proud that Roy had. He’d never really given much thought or care to who was Fuhrer, as a kid, or as a ghost entrapped. As long as the country had one, he figured that there was nothing to worry about. But since meeting Roy he thought differently. For the first time in his life, he cared about the logistics of who was running the country. It wasn’t at all to do with the fact that Roy was the only one truly in his life now. If he felt the man would be a terrible leader, he’d say so. He had no problems voicing his opinions when it came to Roy, he’d proved that time and time again. But he truly believed that Roy would do well as Fuhrer, and he wanted Roy to be Fuhrer.

So he’d help however he could, support him however he could, until Roy reached that goal.

“Otherwise…” Roy began to twirl his pen, “it’s just members of my own team, here and several that I support elsewhere, filing for damage claims or mission reports.”

“When you become Fuhrer, I’ll help protect you.” Edward promised sincerely. “There are evidently some dangers that exist that the others can’t help much with, but you’ve got me.”

Roy closed his eyes against the sigh he could feel building. “We’re not going to have another of these arguments. I don’t want you to do anything unless I need the help. Remember, out of anyone, I think you’d be able to tell if I needed it. So if I don’t, I want you to stay safe. I don’t care if no one else can see or touch you. I can see you. And you’re as real to me as anyone else.”

“We’ll always have this argument,” Edward smiled, “and you know it.”

Roy groaned, but didn’t argue that. Instead he sat straight and opened his eyes again. “Doesn’t help that I can barely get mad at you for it now.”

Edward grinned at him cheekily, and was about to respond when the phone on Roy’s desk began to ring. Shooting it a withering frown, Edward made his way up off the desk as Roy gave him an apologetic look and reached for it. He was about to shrug it off, and tell himself that Roy needed to get back to work anyway, when something that struck familiarity in him flashed in his peripheral vision down in the courtyard the window looked out over.

It only took him the barest of curiously frowning seconds to spot what it had been, before his frown deepened. “I’ll be back. I’ll be safe.” Was all he said, before dropping the book from his hands in order to soar through the window and out into the open air beyond it.

Roy whirled around in his chair, the phone dropping from his grip as he watched Edward do a backwards flip before pelting straight down through the air. Launching himself out of his chair he threw himself against the window, trying to see where Edward had gone, what the devilish brat was up to this time.

When he saw, he immediately whirled to scramble for the phone again. “Maes, I need your help right away.”

Meanwhile past the courtyard, and now among the shaded pathways of the inner gardens that were never used for their purpose of relaxing the State employees and instead were used for covert
meetings, Edward continued to float just behind his quarry. Glad that Roy had expanded his access to Headquarters so thoroughly.

“You’re falling apart before everyone’s eyes.” The Fuhrer assessed in disdain. “Yet you have the audacity to continue to think you are still of use to me. Why?”

Grand knew that he’d been on thin ice before, after the last talk the Fuhrer had given him. But now, he was on fractured ice, and the slightest wrong movement would send him under. “I may have run afoul of some mishaps which I now believe to have been staged against me on purpose, but I’m not your Brigadier General for a lack of not rising to the problem. I’ll take care of it, whoever it is. Besides, name one alchemist who’d do what you ask of me now, besides that lunatic Kimblee. Or Archer, who you know would leave a blood trail back to the lab. They both would, but I’ve managed to keep this entire operation entirely off the grid since it began.”

“Have you.” The Fuhrer voiced neutrally, not sounding as if he cared one way or the other.

Grand scowled, continuing to hobble along with his cane. “Not even Mustang has a clue. I knew it’d be best to keep him close, keep an eye on him, once we got to this stage. We’re nearly complete, and then I’ll have the power to cleanly get rid of him. No collateral damage. That’s why I’m still of use to you.”

“You do not care for taking lives. Many men share this trait.” The Fuhrer noted, dwelling briefly on the notion of what would happen if he decided to release Kimblee just for fun… and then thought better of it. “Move Kimblee in with the next group. I wonder what qualities his tainted soul will have on the end prize.”

“If he still has a soul.” Grand muttered sarcastically.

“The same could be said for you, I’m sure Mustang would agree. You two have never truly seen eye to eye.” The Fuhrer mused, sounding almost humored by it.

“Colonel Roy Mustang,” Grand spat into the begonias. “Flame Alchemist and Hero of the war, I’ll be glad when I can finally kill him.”

The Fuhrer hummed thoughtfully to himself, “I don’t need you to kill him. There are plenty of others who could accomplish the task. But he’s not the real threat right now, not to you. Find out and take care of whoever keeps debilitating you. If your injuries progress to the point where they affect your cleanliness in the operations, I’ll feed you to the Stone myself. You’re gravely mistaken to think I have any loyalty to you just because I made you my Brigadier General. When it comes down to it,” the Fuhrer turned to stare at Grand with cold seriousness in his eye, “you’re just material to me. I’ll recycle you if I must.”

Grand paled, unable to stop from doing so under the discomfort and pain he was in. Not to mention the threats. A façade was out of the question, and honestly, a small part of him believed it to be the best. He dared not let the Fuhrer decide he wasn’t taking this seriously. “Yes, sir.” He said in a strained voice.

The Fuhrer turned away from him with a disdainful huff. “Get out of my sight, and you’d best hope that the next time you see me, it’s because you produced promising results.”

Grand hurriedly saluted, adding in a short bow as best he was able, before hurrying away as fast as his cane and injured body could carry him.

Edward watched Grand go long enough to see him go inside before turning his attention back to the
Fuhrer who still stood in the same spot. “Roy gets to kill him, not you.” He disagreed softly, before his features hardened. “I know what you are now.”

The Fuhrer was glaring out at the trees, their beauty lost on him as he tried to fight the urge to kill every human in sight in his frustration with one. Was what he asked for so immensely difficult? That it must take this long? Yes, he had practically eternity, but he didn’t want to spend it doing this!

Edward frowned at the Fuhrer, and slowly, his determination setting in with an iron will, he stalked across the path to come up on the homunculus’s side with steely fire in his silver eyes. “And you will not kill Roy. He belongs to me.”

The Fuhrer’s eye darkened with suspicion, and he reached up a hand to rub at his eyepatch. He was getting the strangest sensation that he wasn’t alone, but that was ridiculous. Nevertheless, he slowly looked around, seeing not with his visible eye, but his other.

He’d barely managed to look to his left when he was overcome with a sharp wave of agony that sent him collapsing to his knees. As he breathed hard through the lightning flashes of pain that danced color across his normal vision, he growled as he recalled that this wasn’t the first time he’d felt this. But the first time, he’d managed to avoid collapsing by already having been seated.

“What the fuck is happening to me?” The Fuhrer spat angrily as he tried to master himself. He was a homunculus!

Edward was likewise on the ground, gasping and shuddering as he fought back flashes of the Gate and that strange symbol. “Roy…” he moaned pitifully, unable to get to his feet yet, much less the air.

“Damn it.” The Fuhrer snarled, looking up to be sure none had seen him collapse. Only to silently shriek as another wave hit him, and he fell fully to the earth with a solid thump.

“Wonder if I can kill you this way.” Edward gasped through the pain, a hysterical laugh bubbling from him as he managed to make his arms move enough to push him up. Which was more than what the Fuhrer had managed to do. “Because I won’t let you kill Roy. Even if I have to do this to myself to be sure he gets a clean shot at you. It’s worth it, for him.”

The Fuhrer had pulled free his saber, and was now using it to lever himself up from the ground, still sucking in large heaves of air. He hadn’t a fucking clue what was going on, only that when he looked in a certain direction, the consuming pain smashed into him. With a furious yell, he wrenched the saber free, swinging it through the same empty air with his eyes shut.

Edward gasped and tumbled aside, even though he knew it couldn’t touch him. It was easy to fall down, getting up had been the hard part. “I refuse to let my father think of us as similar beings. I’m nothing like you,” he choked out as he tried to regain himself. “We never thought we’d be this way, we never asked for it, and I for one don’t understand my existence, but I know now what I’m supposed to do with it! Who is it you’re trying to protect?!!”

Another wave of agonizing pain engulfed him, and Edward knew that the Fuhrer must have looked his way again. But another slash of the saber didn’t follow, and he only looked up from his trembling and gasping state when he heard crashes through the foliage.

Watching the Fuhrer stagger away in what was clearly a flight, Edward slumped back down to the path, unmoving save for the shakes that wracked his body. The Gate still flashed in front of his eyes intermittently, and it felt almost as though the image were rooted in his brain. Managing to curl up into a fetal ball, Edward continued to tremble, whimpering Roy’s name helplessly.
It felt like hours he’d laid there on the path, realizing how lucky he’d been that the first time this had happened to him, he’d been able to still manage to stay afloat and get away. But this time… this time the Fuhrer must have looked at him directly. Fully. More than once. And he could barely stop trembling enough to work out the strange stiffness that had overtaken his body.

He could only guess, with bitter humor, that it was some kind of ghostly paralysis, brought on by the pain only the Gate could give to him.

“Edward!”

Edward stirred as he heard Roy’s panicked voice, and managed to raise his head as the man dropped hurriedly to his knees beside him. “Roy, I—”

“What’s wrong?!” Roy demanded, sounding on the verge of panicked anger.

“I’m sorry.” Edward whispered, dropping his head to the path again. “I’m so sorry.”

Roy looked at the ghost helplessly, before abruptly sitting in the earth and putting a hand to his head. “It was really bad this time, then?”

“Three times.” Edward correctly softly, slowly managing to uncurl himself.

Roy muttered several curses under his breath before sighing and leaning forward to run his hand through the ghostly hair. “Edward Elric, you’ll be the death of me. Are you going to be okay?”

Edward began to push himself up, managing to do so to a lopsided extent, before pulling himself on his hands until he rested through Roy’s legs and the man’s arms came around him like before, even if neither could feel it. “I knew you’d come find me… I’m sorry.”

“Stop it.” Roy scolded sternly. “You’re impulsive and crazy and Xerxesian. Don’t apologize.”

Edward barely managed a glare as he worked on steadying himself. “It starts to go away faster when you’re with me. I’d have followed him, but I couldn’t make it. I’m sorry. He was stronger than me at pushing through the pain, he managed to get away.”

“Maes told me.” Roy muttered darkly, and looked around at the pruned and preened trees with a sigh. “He was the one who called right before you left. I told him to find the Fuhrer and stick with him, I had a suspicion you’d go after him more than Grand today.”

“Is he around now then?” Edward asked, suddenly worried that they – Roy, was being watched while by all appearances he acted like a crazy person. Even to a best friend.

“No. He followed the Fuhrer up to his office before reporting to me that he’d seen something strange. The Fuhrer convulsing in fits of pain. Seems he was in enough pain and freaked out enough by it that he didn’t notice Maes. For which I’m very grateful… but I knew you had to be in pain too. I sent him to watch Grand so I could come find you in peace.”

“He and Grand… they want you dead, Roy.” Edward whispered worriedly, tracing at the alchemy circle on the back of one of Roy’s gloves. “I won’t let them kill you.”

“I don’t plan on dying.” Roy whispered gently in reassurance. “Don’t worry, I’ve known they’d rather me dead for years now. Many people in the Military would. But just as many, if not more, want me alive. And while I’d feel obligated to keep living for them, it’s for you now that I want to stay alive.”
"They're close, they said so." Edward continued, tilting his face up to Roy’s. "Then Grand plans to come for you. They mentioned a lab."

"Did they now?" Roy queried lightly as if unconcerned, but his eyes narrowed. That, combined with what Edward had mentioned before from his raid of Grand’s office… Maes might only have one field trip after work. "Battling against Grand supercharged by a philosopher’s stone would be difficult… even with the number you’ve done on him… but whether he comes for me, or I come for him, I will stop him."

"The Fuhrer, I think, is on his last straw of patience with Grand. If you want the opportunity to do what you plan, you need to hurry, Roy. Else my delightful other half of wrongness will rob you of the chance." Edward added. "You’ll not find him cut into little bits you can burn, as he tried to do to me, you’ll – "

"He what?!" Roy asked furiously. "The Fuhrer drew his weapon on you!"

"Well, yes." Edward blinked, thinking it perfectly reasonable since the man was overcome with pain and seemed to expect an attack.

"That settles it. He dies after Grand. Painfully. Very painfully." Roy seethed, enraged at the idea that anyone would dare try to harm Edward.

"Don’t lose focus or sight of the first goal." Edward attempted to calm the man, even though he was secretly rather pleased by Roy’s defense of him.

"Of course not." Roy muttered darkly, but gave himself a mental shake. "If you can get up now we really should head back inside. It wouldn’t do for me to be seen out here by any of the Fuhrer’s spies, not after what just happened to him."

Edward nodded as he looked down again, as if it helped him to mentally gather himself. "You’ve no idea the effort it sometimes takes to get airborne." He muttered, but managed to push up from the ground with wavering progression.

"I’m not sure I’ll ever entirely understand the physics of your ability to float." Roy agreed, and as soon as Edward seemed to be making steadier progress, got to his feet himself. "Still seeing the Gate?"

Edward shook his head, coming to rest only inches off the ground and slightly stooped. "I think that little delight has stopped now. But I wouldn’t worry about the Fuhrer mentioning to his spies that they should be on the lookout for anything out here. I… I’m like him enough to know he won’t want anyone to know he was practically crippled just like me. From what he believes to be thin air."

"Still, we don’t want to take any chances. Especially of him happening to look out the right window and notice me."

Edward could agree with that sentiment and concern, and made an effort to get himself floating forward. After the first few moments it became easier, and Roy had caught up to him, hovering like a worried mother hen.

Once they reached Roy’s offices again, the man fielded all queries as to why he’d apparently rushed out the door like a madman, and promptly locked himself in his office.

"You know that won’t help anything." Edward pointed out wryly.

Roy ignored him, instead pointing to the remaining couch with an expression that bore no room for
protest. “Lay down and rest. I don’t want you even considering getting up until we have to leave. I’ll bring you books, whatever you need, but you stay there.”

Edward grumbled at the order, and any other day he might have protested, and still he wanted to… but he’d not noticed before just how exhausted he felt. Stretched too thin, as if the incident earlier had torn into him and just kept tearing. So he went without complaint over to the couch, curling up tightly on it.

“Just rest.” Roy repeated softly, and after a moment unbuttoned and slipped free of his military jacket in order to lay it over Edward’s body. He smiled with fond amusement as he saw that the jacket was quite as big as a curled up Edward, and sat himself on the coffee table to gaze down on the ghost who was blinking tired silver eyes up at him. “I know you’re not anywhere close to being recovered from that. Not yet. So just take it easy for the rest of the day… I want you to be able to enjoy tonight the way I know you wanted to.”

Edward nodded, ducking his head down to burrow his chin under the collar of the jacket. “I’ll be strong enough one day to face him with you and not make you worry. I will be.”

Roy felt something in his chest twist in an emotion that felt quite close to sadness, and he slipped from the table to kneel at Edward’s side. “We’ll have this argument later, brat.”

“Promise?” Edward chuckled faintly and clutched the jacket tighter around him.

“Yeah… I promise.” Roy agreed, and when it was clear to him that Edward wasn’t going to say anything more, rose to his feet and made his way back to his desk. He still had plenty he needed to do, he was just glad that he could concentrate now, knowing that Edward was back here with him and safe again.

All through the day Roy ignored the times the others would knock on his door, the intercom queries Riza voiced through the speaker on the telephone mount, the fact that he’d still not eaten lunch. He kept the door firmly locked, so that no one might see his jacket floating above the couch, and he pushed through the paperwork with a new determination.

At one point, Edward had managed to stretch out along the couch, looking far more like his nimble self. But the ghost had stayed silent, so Roy didn’t call over to him. Merely kept an even closer eye on him until the point he reached the end of his paperwork.

Gathering it all up into his arms he walked over to the couch once more to stoop down and meet the silver gaze Edward turned on him. “We’ll leave as soon as I drop these off to Riza. How are you feeling?”

Edward slowly sat up, testing his limbs carefully before looking up at Roy with a warm smile. “I feel more like myself again. Not so weighted down and stretched.”

“I’m glad.” Roy breathed out a quiet breath of relief before straightening back up with a smile. “I’ll be right back and then we can go.”

Edward nodded, and as Roy finally unlocked the office door and went through to face the questions, he slipped from the couch before laying the military jacket across the back of it. He truly did feel a lot better, and the time he’d spent in silence, just laying there listening to Roy work… it had soothed a different part of him that he hadn’t realized needed it.

As Roy promised, he was soon back. After the man had gathered up his personal items and pulled his jacket back on, they left the office to head for home.
“I’ll have just enough time to change and have dinner brought to me before the show begins.” Roy announced cheerfully enough as they walked.

Edward thought it a bit strange that Roy wanted to change clothes for the play, but then, he supposed he might not like to go in a uniform either to something meant for personal pleasure. “They serve food there?”

“They will to me.” Roy smirked, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Highest paying patrons, which I am, get special treatment. You’re fortunate to have ended up with me.”

Edward rolled his eyes, “I know I am… but not for that. Thank you, for taking care of me today.”

Roy glanced out of the corner of his eye at the ghost, a small smile on his face. “You’re welcome.”

Over the remainder of the walk home, the open air seemed to perk Edward up back to his normal enthusiasm, and Roy was grateful for it. He truly had been worried about the ghost. But now Edward was fairly skipping through the air in enthusiasm as he crowed happily about being able to go to the theater.

Upon reaching the house, Edward didn’t even wait for Roy to get the door before zooming inside. Roy could only shake his head with quiet laughter and follow.

Edward was bouncing in the entryway, his eagerness beginning to show in a different way. “Come on, hurry!” He insisted the moment Roy had locked the front door behind him. “I don’t want to be late… are you sure you need to change clothes? Can’t you just take off the jacket?”

Roy turned an aghast look on the ghost as he began to mount the stairs. “I’ll have you know that I don’t find the pants flattering at all.”

“Why does that matter? I don’t think your lime green boxers are flattering on you either, yet you still wear them.”

Roy nearly tripped up the next stair, spluttering. “What?!”

Edward rolled his eyes and perched on the stair railing beside Roy. “You heard me. So why change?”

Roy rolled his eyes and carefully made his way up the last stairs. “I wasn’t aware you paid such close attention to my boxers.”

“Wouldn’t boxer briefs be better for a man like you?” Edward mused thoughtfully, completely innocent in what he believed an entirely scientific question.

Roy tripped up the last stair, and barely managed to keep himself from face planting into the second-floor landing. In fact, he believed he pulled a muscle in the effort. “Dare I ask – no, I don’t want to know.”

But halfway to his bedroom, he had to admit… Edward had a slight point about the visual appeal. But Edward didn’t approve of his “manwhoring” ways, so why? It truly was bewildering him, and he wondered if Edward wasn’t completely recovered. Pain could do strange things to a person’s mind.

Edward followed cheerfully but curiously after the man, ending up behind him and peering over his shoulder as Roy looked through his closet. “Don’t just stand there, grab something!”
Roy looked over his shoulder with a withering glance. “I’m not going to just grab something.”

Edward raised his hands up on either side of him in a gesture of defeat, and floated over to the bed where he descended with several bounces before settling in. Pulling the covers up around him until only his head poked free he continued to watch Roy root about in the closet.

At first, he wasn’t sure just what Roy was doing. Initially he thought he’d seen the man act this way before, and had been about to call him out on acting like he was going out with one of those poor virgins, when he realized that Roy would have chosen something by now.

More than once it seemed Roy had settled on a shirt, just before stuffing it back away with a grunt of displeasure. He’d gone over the entire contents of the closet multiple times already, to no avail.

Edward frowned, and then curiosity softened his features as he flopped onto the bed, snuggling deeper into the covers. “I like the dark blue one on you. Not the one with the buttons, the sweater one. It makes you look more… approachable. More like you really are. And it makes your eyes brighter.”

Roy froze at first, hearing those words, and then he moved his hand over to the correct hanger, pulling the shirt free. And unlike all those before it, it stayed in his hand to the point of being slipped from the hanger. Looking down at it in his hand, he felt warm, and the uncertainty that had been eating at him before vanished. Now he was left with the clear realization of how he’d been acting, and he smiled wryly at the shirt before abruptly turning away to find the jeans he wanted.

He couldn’t let himself even think about it… he couldn’t.

The right jeans were much easier to find, and Roy gathered everything else he’d need before retreating to the bathroom.

Edward watched him go with a faint smile, and closing his eyes happily he rolled around on the bed, taking the covers with him, imagining he could feel their warmth.

Meanwhile in the bathroom, Roy would claim that the reason he changed his boxer attire and that the aforementioned lime green ones were now in the trash bin, was because they’d developed a rip. As for the briefs, he told himself they were the next clean pair of the stack… at the bottom. The rest of the clothing was much easier to explain in his head. Edward liked this shirt, thus he was wearing it. These jeans were dark enough to go well with it all. Very simple, really.

Yet he leaned over the counter to run the faucet and begin splashing his face with icy water as he tried to ignore the nerves he could feel. Telling himself it was just remnants of his worry for Edward earlier in the day, ignoring at the same time that they felt different.

Only once he felt he had himself under control did he leave the bathroom, and every thought he’d had left him as he saw Edward laying there on the bed, tangled up in the covers and looking absolutely delighted about it. Beginning to laugh, he walked over to sit on the edge of the bed as he smiled at the ghost. “Having fun, were you?”

Edward rolled towards Roy, his head still barely managing to poke out from his cocoon. “I never get the bed to myself.”

Roy snorted and tugged on the covers that had sufficiently encased the ghost. “That’s because we share it. Now come on, it’s time to leave.”

Edward grinned, wriggling out almost to his shoulders before stopping and looking at Roy thoughtfully, a soft smile playing on his lips. “You look really good, you know.”
Roy desperately hoped he’d managed to keep himself from flushing, the shock that he had felt it coming on should have helped with that, and instead he forced a lazy, self-indulgent smile. “Of course I do. Now get out of bed, we have a theater to get to.”

Edward sprung from the rest of the covers with a cheer, and trailing happily after Roy, suddenly grinned as they started going down the stairs. “You’re wearing boxer briefs, aren’t you.”

Roy promptly fell down three stairs before he was able to catch himself to the background music of Edward snickering.
Maes was sitting in Roy’s desk chair, the envelope with his name on it since having been slit and the paper pulled free. A paper with only a singular ‘X’ drawn across it. To anyone else, it meant nothing, even if they could see that it meant something.

“Who the hell are you trusting…” Maes whispered to the empty office, as if it or the paper he held could give him the answer. As Roy’s best friend and a pretty damn good spy, it bothered him that he didn’t know who else had secretly fallen into Roy’s favor in such a matter so important.

But just as Roy trusted him unconditionally, he knew he had to trust Roy… and by extension, whoever Roy was trusting.

Even if it still bothered him.

The paper crinkled slightly in his hand as he pulled free the desk drawer he knew the map to be rolled and hidden in, beneath a dummy bottom. It was old-school trickery, but sometimes military spies could be surprisingly dumb. The paper meant nothing on its own, but with the map, it meant far more.

Taking a quick glance back towards the office door, checking for the second time that he’d indeed locked it, Maes spread the map over the desk. The facilities that had already been checked and cleared had once been crossed out as well, but now they were colored completely black to leave only one ‘X’ remaining.

A fresh one.

Maes only needed a moment to orient himself to the location Roy had indicated, and when he realized, he swore softly. If Grand was making a philosopher’s stone, it suddenly all fit, and he wondered why they hadn’t seen it before.

Laboratory Five.

It was decades abandoned by the military, but never torn down. It had been the site of previous heinous experiments. But its past wasn’t what had caused him to swear. A military laboratory was a military laboratory, few of them came with clean pasts. It was the fact that Laboratory Five was right next to a prison. That prison.

To be sent to that prison was as good as a death sentence. The number of executions was so high that prison officials barely filled out adequate reports of them, if they did at all. And a prison housed people that the State no longer wanted around.

If Grand was in cahoots with the Fuhrer, he had all the influence he needed to make those prisoners disappear without a single record of such a transfer. And being that a philosopher’s stone needed a staggering amount of sacrifices… prisoners next door were a handy choice. No one would miss them.

Maes closed his eyes briefly, looking strained, before he seemed to jolt into a new level of awareness. Deftly he rolled the map back up, putting it back in its hiding place and shredding the envelope he’d been left into the trash bin. The note, on the other hand, he grabbed a pen for.
With a bit of a sarcastic smile, Maes clicked the pen to the ready and drew a very jaunty ‘O’ right next to the ‘X’. “Love you too, enjoy your night off, you bastard.”

He propped the note up against Roy’s desk clock and replaced the pen.

Grabbing his jacket he made his way out of Roy’s office, nodding once to Hawkeye who gave him a searching look he waved off. “It’s almost time, but not yet.” And leaving it at that, knowing she’d understand, he quickly left the office. He had dinner waiting for him at home, a story to read to his Elysia, and a wife to apologize to.

Riza was left alone in the office, staring at the door leading to Roy’s private office that seemed to be hiding so many more secrets than normal. She wasn’t used to the silence, none of them were. And it appeared that even Maes wasn’t being told everything, which after knowing Maes for so long… she could tell it was wearing on the man.

Looking down at her desk, where her gun rested gleaming softly in the bright light of the office, she sighed and picked it up to twist it back and forth in her view. All they could do was wait, getting tenser day by day for the orders they knew would come suddenly and without any preparation for the team.

But it was their duty. Their duty to a man who’d saved them all.

Meanwhile, that man was standing patiently in line at the theater, a smile twisting in the corner of his mouth as he fought not to burst out grinning like an idiot in the middle of a queue. No one trusted the man grinning whilst in a queue. Queues sucked.

And Edward was quite onboard with that universal sentiment.

“Roy,” Edward whined, hopping in midair as he stared with distressed eyes at the line ahead of them that was being held up by a patron who wanted to argue with the staff about something. He was sure it was unimportant. “I thought you were a highest paying patron or something lame like that. You bought out an entire balcony for us. And you’re looking really good tonight, can’t you just go up there and charm them with your military power and your chest so we can get inside?”

Roy, unable to keep back the amused snort, was forced to quickly pretend that he’d sneezed. Charm them with his military power and his chest? He cast a twinkling look at Edward, his smile even harder to fight back now.

“You know,” Edward wheedled, a hint of whining still in his voice, “it really sucks sometimes that I have to wait for you. I could be in there by now if I’d seen it before.”

Roy rolled his eyes under the cover of being annoyed with the unmoving line he was in.

“Which means we’re coming back again.” Edward decided as he came to a rest on the sidewalk next to Roy. “And you can wait in line while I have fun.”

Roy had no doubts that Edward would… and no doubts that he’d bring Edward here again. As long as Edward enjoyed himself somewhere, he’d bring the ghost back to it again.

“Aha!” Edward suddenly crowed, waving his arm eagerly at Roy’s right. “See? Look! They spotted you.”

Roy raised a teasing eyebrow at the ghost, and would have asked if he should expose his chest if there’d been a way to ask without being seen or overheard, but as things were, he turned to the theater official who approached him with a respectful bow.
“Colonel Mustang.” The official greeted, having had the man pointed out to him by a manager who clearly knew the military even out of uniform. “Come this way, please. I’ll speed you through this line.”

Roy smiled charmingly at the official, inclining his head slightly. “It is appreciated.” And as the official held out a hand to beckon him from the line, he followed, but not before casting a smirking look at Edward.

Edward huffed, but quickly followed. “I knew if you had just said something they’d get us out of this damnable line. You should have listened to me! Instead we had to wait out here until they spotted you and probably felt guilty!”

Roy honestly couldn’t wait until he was alone with Edward again. To laugh at the very least. He really didn’t enjoy waiting in lines… but Edward had made it bearable. So it probably really had made the staff feel guilty that he’d been standing in line obediently for once, they probably believed they’d offended him somehow on his last visit here with… whoever she had been. But he couldn’t find it in himself to feel too badly, not when he’d had Edward there entertaining him. It had been worth it.

They were escorted past the line, headed by the same patron who was still arguing with the staff taking the tickets, and into the theater gallery. It was not an opulent interior, but it was filled with warm colors, elegant oil paintings, and leather ottoman benches that gleamed with polish even in the subdued lighting.

Edward glanced up, and seeing the chandeliers responsible for the muted light, tried to fight away the instantaneous keen desire to go up there and inspect them closer.

It was about at this point that a man, dressed sharply in a suit, approached Roy as the other staff member made themselves scarce with another low bow.

“Colonel Mustang!” Greeted the man, executing a bow rather lower than the other staff member before, extending his hand towards a hallway leading from the gallery. “I am the manager of the theater. Please, come this way. We’ve already verified your purchase to tonight’s production.”

Roy nodded imperiously, as if he expected this. Actually, it’d be the first time. He really had made them feel guilty! He’d never been approached by the manager before. “Very good. I expect my regular champagne and meals have been arranged?”

The manager offered a reassuring smile. “The champagne is already in your balcony. I will ensure that food arrives before the start of tonight’s production.”

Roy nodded imperiously, as if he expected this. Actually, it’d be the first time. He really had made them feel guilty! He’d never been approached by the manager before. “Very good. I expect my regular champagne and meals have been arranged?”

The manager offered a reassuring smile. “The champagne is already in your balcony. I will ensure that food arrives before the start of tonight’s production.”

Roy gave another nod, halfway turning before pausing and giving an exaggerated wave of his hand as he looked at the manager once more. “My date… when they arrive, have them shown up immediately. They’re running a bit late but shouldn’t be much longer.”

Edward rolled his eyes, but smiled. There would be no date for Roy, not tonight. Tonight, he had Roy all to himself, so let everyone believe Roy had been stood up. “Must you act all… high and mighty though?”

Roy turned away from the manager quickly, so the man might not see the amused grin and wonder. Flashing a humored look at Edward, he winked. He had his reasons, and no doubt Edward would wring them from him once they were alone.

“I’ll have my staff be on alert for your date’s arrival, sir.” The manager assured, before promptly
leading the way to the private box that Roy had reserved. Once there, the man made sure that everything was to Roy’s liking, before bowing once more and closing the heavy curtain that separated the box from the hallway.

Roy waited a moment, listening carefully to be sure they’d truly been left alone, before turning to Edward with a smile. “I must act this way to keep them worried about where in the hell they misplaced my date so that we can be left alone.”

Edward snorted before his wryly amused features softened and he looked around with growing excitement. There were many plush seats in the box, staggered in height by short flights of steps, and at the seats nearest the polished railing an ice bucket with a bottle of champagne had been placed. But beyond that, Edward began to grin, because beyond that was open air interrupted only by another chandelier and farther off, more private balconies yet to be filled.

And the stage, he knew the stage was down there.

It was really happening! He was finally going to see his first play!

Roy laughed as an excited noise made it out of Edward, and clearing his throat to get the ghost’s eager attention back on him, smiled as he slowly lowered into his own bow, motioning with a hand to the balconies edge. “Just don’t topple off.”

Edward blinked at the man, thrown off by the bow. Roy had never bowed to anyone before, and certainly not to him. The sight of it made something inside him stir and want to go to him, for what he didn’t know… but then Roy’s words caught up to him and everything else was lost as he.whirled with a squeal of delight and bounded down the short little steps to practically fall into the low railing as he leaned over it to gaze down into the theater as best he could.

Roy passed a hand over his eyes as he stifled the groan. At least Edward hadn’t gone over, but it had looked close. Ghost or not, he didn’t like the thought of Edward toppling over a railing. Shaking his head, he stuffed his hands in the pockets of his denims as he slowly walked down the short stairs and across the final, larger landing to join the ghost at the railing and look out over the crowd growing in the lower seats so that Edward could see them as well.

“I suppose I could have said something…” Roy began, not even realizing at first that he was speaking, and then unable to stop once he noticed, “I’ve never waited in that line before… but I had fun watching you.”

Edward found it surprisingly easy to tear his gaze from the curtained-off stage lined in glowing lights and the orchestra he could see huddled down below it in an alcove. Looking up at the man next to him, a man who seemed intent on staring at the chandelier, he smiled softly. “I had fun harassing you.” He admitted, and turned to hop up and sit on the railing, leaning across Roy to get the man to look down at him. “Trying to get you to crack a smile.”

Roy looked down into the shining silver eyes, smiling back teasingly. “You very nearly did. I wasn’t aware you approved of me using my chest to charm people. Have you finally taken a good look at it and found it worthy?”

Edward grinned as he burst out into easy laughter, his legs beginning to kick back and forth. “You very nearly did. I wasn’t aware you approved of me using my chest to charm people. Have you finally taken a good look at it and found it worthy?”

Roy’s gaze searched Edward’s own as silence fell over them, finding it harder by the second to keep his gaze from drifting lower. He didn’t know when Edward had moved so close to him… or had it
been the other way around? And when he finally spoke, even in a whisper it sounded too loud to him. “It’s not my looks that would charm them.”

Edward’s eyes widened slightly, but relaxed when Roy’s gaze returned to his, only to make his entire body feel on edge in unfamiliar anticipation. Even his habitual, unneeded breathing had stalled. Forgotten. “I’m not—”

The rattle of the heavy curtain being drawn back startled them both, Edward abruptly falling silent as Roy stiffened and moved away from him to turn and face the intrusion.

“Sir, we have two complimentary dinners for you.” Announced the chipper woman who came in wheeling a small cart.

“Wonderful.” Roy managed to say with enough cheer, but the look in his eyes belayed it, had the woman been looking. “Just bring it there.” He pointed to the aisle they stood in, beside the ice bucket.

Edward had slipped from the railing and now stood with his hips against it as he watched Roy. Just watched him. Watched as he tipped the woman. Watched the lines of a tension he didn’t understand fade from him at last. All the while trying to piece together why he’d felt so disappointed when Roy had turned from him.

Roy moved away from the covered dinners at last, having pulled himself back together, and looked Edward’s way as his words died on his lips. The way Edward was watching him… he felt a part of him waver inside. It was that same gaze… that same silver gaze that looked at him, through him, as if it were timeless in its serenity, and could see everything. “You never really answered me before… can you see through me?”

Edward smiled faintly, tilting his head as he silently considered the man. “Are you afraid that I can? Or do you wish it to be true?”

“There are far greater things I wish for.” Roy corrected gently, and felt the remaining tension leave him, leave him with only a strange but welcome warmth as he smiled softly at the ghost. “And how many times must I tell you that you’re beautiful before you believe me?”

Edward’s eyes shot wide, shock keeping him from fully noticing the eager warmth that was growing inside him. “W-what? I don’t – Y-you’ve never… not directly!” He stammered.

“You are.” Roy stated firmly, trying not to smile at Edward’s lackluster beginning.

Edward blinked twice at him rapidly, feeling as if he were floundering about in some desperate attempt to reach something feeling of solid ground. “You…it’s not the weekend! You can’t try and fluster me tonight.”

Roy’s smile softened, and found himself unable to look away even as he stepped forward to pluck the bottle of champagne from its ice bucket. “Forget about that for tonight.” And waving his free hand towards one of the foremost seats up against the railing, “sit with me?”

“What other idiot would I sit with?” Edward asked in an effort to pull himself back together, even as Roy’s words still pounded through him making him feel shaky to the extent he dared not try and float. He wasn’t honestly sure he could right now.

Roy couldn’t help but chuckle at the jab, and as Edward sat in the seat nearest the wall, he took the one next to it, nearest the aisle and the food. “Edward…” he began quietly, clutching the champagne bottle between both hands as he stared fixedly down towards the stage. “I was really worried about
Edward looked over, startled enough by the admission so far flung from the theatrics Roy was doing just moments before, that he felt all traces of his earlier shakiness vanish. But he didn’t say anything immediately, just worried his lower lip between his teeth as he thought it over. Both Roy’s words… and the way Roy couldn’t seem to look at him. Was this why Roy was acting strangely? Trying to fluster him? Was he so desperate to know that things were okay now?

“When…” Edward began hesitantly, before he mustered more courage, “when I was with the Fuhrer, and in so much pain… all I could think about was you. Protecting you. Wanting you there with me. I know…” he broke off again, the weight of Roy’s eyes now on him making it all the harder, but when Roy offered out a hand, he rested his own in it without question. “I know I keep acting like I can do it on my own, but the truth is… I can’t do it without you. I can push through the pain if I know you’re there and you need me… but alone, I’m not as strong.”

“Edward…” Roy murmured with feeling, but seeing the fire of defiance flare in those silver eyes, stopped.

“So let me keep winning the arguments!” Edward demanded heatedly, before turning a desperate gaze onto Roy. “But don’t you dare leave me alone or never find me! I need you.”

“I need you too.” Roy admitted quietly, not looking away from the silver eyes. “Edward… I swear that whatever happens, I will never abandon you. But it scares me to think he could take you from me.”

“I’m already a ghost.” Edward whispered, before giving himself an abrupt mental shake and reaching out to pluck the bottle of champagne from Roy’s hands. “I don’t trust you to open this. I remember what happened the last time.”

Roy hesitated a moment, still caught up in his emotions, before he forced himself to relax back into the seat with a smile. “You know, it should be me doing that, since I’m the one taking you out.”

Edward smiled down at the cork as he struggled with it, trying not to let on that it was definitely more complicated than it looked. “I’m not your date. Your date still hasn’t arrived.”

“Yes, where have they stashed her… him… them? I did buy a lot of seats.” Roy wondered aloud, smiling easier as he watched Edward struggle whilst trying to appear not to. “Need some help?”

Edward glared up at him through his silvery fringe. “No. Besides, it’s not like you know how to open it. The last time didn’t go so well and now I’m in possession of the knowledge that you’re a fine wine man.”

Roy cracked a grin, and turned to watch Edward struggle some more before taking pity on the ghost. After all, he didn’t want to lose an eye. As dashing as he’d look with an eye patch. “Here.” Roy murmured, reaching a hand out to lay it over Edward’s intangible one. “Move your hand with mine and apply pressure where your thumb is.”

Edward ducked his head so that all he could see was the bottle, unaware of the smile on his lips as he copied Roy’s movements and did as asked. Within seconds the cork and cage had been removed without incident. “Why didn’t you do that the first time? Instead you shot the cork through me.” He accused, still unable to look up at the man as he tried to understand why he felt so warm.

“The first time you accused me of not having taken my medication.” Roy smirked and lifted the bottle free. “Now before this becomes too attached to your incorporeal state, I’d like to drink it.”
Edward managed to lift his eyes to Roy’s teasing gaze when the smattering of applause sounded from around them. It took him a second to realize what it was, and when he had, he whipped around with a squeal to dive forward in his seat and brace his hands against the low railing so he could peer out over it.

Roy chuckled silently as he forced himself to look away from the ghost and lean forward similarly to be able to see everything properly. The bottle of champagne went forgotten in his hand as he switched to and from watching the curtains draw back to the excited look on Edward’s face. At the grin and laugh the ghost made when the actors and actresses paraded onto stage to the applause of the audience.

Yet it soon died away as the first actor raised his voice to the gathered audience as he faced the actress joining him.

“I’m not sure what to do, Emily!” The actor cried, staggering and falling to his knees center stage. “Hannah is sick and the doctor’s are baffled! Why is this happening to me – her!”

The actress, Emily, came forward to pat him bracingly on the back, although her manner suggested she seemed a bit nervous about comforting a grown man who was acting in such a manner. “Be patient, Patrick, they’ll find something. They will!”

“The doctors have all but given up!” Patrick wailed to the heavens. “But there must be a way!”

“Patrick, I –”

It was then that a pyrotechnic flash of red exploded from the stage floor, revealing amidst the smoke a man cloaked in black who wore a very jaunty hat and carried a circular mirror almost as big as his head. “There is always a way.” He cackled mysteriously.

Patrick and Emily had both let out yells of shock at this newcomers appearance, but Patrick was the first to settle as Emily only looked frantic with worry.

“What way?!” Patrick demanded in worry for his beloved Hannah.

“Who are you!” Emily demanded sensibly of such a man appearing in such a way.

“I am the spirit of the mountain shrine.” The jaunty-hatted stranger revealed with a slippery note to his voice. “I have heard your pleas from afar and have come to offer a solution!”

Up in the balconies, Edward snorted disbelievingly and wiggled closer to the railing. “I’m a spirit, and there’s something fishy about you.” He decided, much to the amusement of Roy.

Emily seemed to share this sentiment, for she clutched at Patrick’s sleeve. “Patrick, no! It’s a demon, or something! This, this thing can only bring misfortune!”

“Emily!” Patrick knocked her aside, “I don’t care. I can’t care if it will help Hannah!”

The cloaked, self-named spirit ignored Emily in favor of turning to Patrick solicitously. “I hold in my hands an ancient mirror of staggering powers. It can cure any illness, and banish any demon.”

“The doctors have all but given up!” Patrick was about to cry out his distress, the spirit’s voice echoed, bodiless, across the stage.
“To find the mirror you must journey to my shrine atop the highest mountain! There, my servants will test your resolve. But I warn thee… many men who have sought my treasure have perished before first light, seduced by the lies of Death.”

As the echoing words faded out, Patrick leapt to his feet, seemingly unconcerned about a perilous journey. Not when it meant the salvation of his Hannah! “I will find this mirror, and thus turn it upon my beloved to save her! And then, then nothing shall stop us from wedding one another!”

Emily stared at him in horror, “you fool! Can you not see this is trickery? You must not go!”

Patrick didn’t appear to hear her. “The highest mountain. I can easily make it there in two days. Hannah must last until then!” And he rounded on Emily, who looked rather about to slap him to his senses. “You will watch over my love, will you not, Emily? You are my greatest friend after all.”

“Patrick,” Emily sighed, but did not decline right away. “I am Hannah’s friend, unfortunately by default, yours. I will watch over her.”

Thus Emily vanished from the stage, the props on their mechanized wheels being shifted across the stage to create a new scene in which Patrick prepared, with much agonizing and crowing in turn, about the greatest journey he would ever take. A journey to save his beloved’s soul from the grips of death by unknown disease. He would be her hero, she would have to accept his proposal or marriage.

Patrick was just readying his quite live donkey for the journey when the first intermission was called, for a drastic set change during which the orchestra down in the below alcove played sinister-sounding music.

“This is fun!” Edward declared as he flopped back into his seat, looking over at Roy with a beaming smile.

Roy chuckled heartily and finally remembered the champagne in his hand. It was no longer quite as cold as he’d like, but he poured himself a glass anyway and set the bottle back into the ice bucket to hopefully chill it just a bit again. “And here I was worried that it’d be too silly for you.”

Edward shook his head frantically. “It’s silly, but I like it! I’ve never seen anything like this before… unless you count every time I’ve watched you pick up some hapless soul for your depraved addiction.”

Roy chuckled into the champagne as he sipped at it before lowering the glass. “I’ve never really watched one through to the close. Usually by the first minor curtain close I’ve got my date either on their back or on my lap.”

Edward gave him an unimpressed, deadpan look. “I’m afraid you’re watching this one all the way through.”

Roy cast an amused glance at his companion, “you won’t sit on my lap?”

Edward quickly looked away, he’d half expected such a teasing offer, but it didn’t stop him from feeling strangely flustered. And he cursed himself for it. He’d ignored worse teases from the man just fine! So he did the only thing he knew he could do to knock Roy down a peg… “what if I were to, how did you put it… want you to get me on my back?”

Roy sprayed champagne from his nose, flinching at the burn as he coughed reflexively.

Edward smirked, and in his new victory, turned to level the same smirk at Roy who was staring at
him wide-eyed. “Chance is up. Guess I’m staying right here.”

Roy cleared his throat, and setting the champagne aside, pulled one of the plates onto his lap and lifted the lid to begin poking at his food. Hoping it would distract him from what Edward had tauntingly asked. It did, marginally, but when the curtains lifted once more to renewed applause, everything else was temporarily driven away as Edward excitedly clutched at the railing again.

Now, Patrick appeared to be standing in a mountain pass with his trusted donkey, a shrine barely larger than a shed up ahead. All around him “ghosts” whirled as sheets on string with disembodied voices.

“Turn back…” one wailed.

“Rest, traveler.” Another bade, “we will warm you.”

“Is it not cold, alone in the snow?”

“Let us warm you.”

“Stay with us.”

“We will keep you warm…”

Patrick did his best to ignore them, but when one would zoom too close for his frayed nerves, he would yell and swat at it in an effort to drive it away. But still they circled him, diving ever closer, with more persistent promises of warmth and comfort.

And then he and his trusted donkey reached within several yards of the shrine.

“You’ve come for our mirror?”

“No!”

“You cannot take our mirror!”

They wailed and cried their pleas, swooping around him in ever-increasing speed.

“ Foolish traveler, leave our mirror!”

“We will laugh as you die from the cold, we will not save you!”

“Mirror!”

“Mirror!” They cried together, just as Patrick reached the doors of the shrine.

“I must save Hannah!” Patrick cried, as if it would silence them at last. And releasing the donkey, who had brayed in fright as one of the ghosts swooped up against it, he did not turn to see his faithful donkey flee from the specters of the mountain. Instead, he fell to his knees and blinked to adjust his eyes to the darkness of the small shrine.

Only to gasp.

One of the ghosts laughed in high, vindictive notes. “Foolish human!”

“It’s not there!” Another chided, as if to a small, rather stupid child.
And indeed it wasn’t.

Patrick stared wide-eyed at the emptiness of the shrine. The gold-inlaid stand he knew the mirror must have stood on was empty, and inside the snow-powdered darkness, there was nothing else. “No! This cannot be! It must be here! Somewhere!”

And then he heard the cruel laughter of the ghosts fade into something far more frantic and angry. “No!”

“The sun!”

“The accursed sun rises! Our mirror!”

Patrick turned to watch the ghosts whirl away in fear as a stage light beamed down brightly upon him to mimic the sun. Turning back to the shrine in relief of the ghosts being gone, he gasped. “The mirror!”

And it was true. Where the stand had once stood empty, bit by bit, a familiar mirror was beginning to form until it rested whole for the taking. And Patrick reached out to grasp it, finding it oddly heavy for a mirror. “Why, it’s set into stone!” He exclaimed upon further examination.

“But I cannot linger, my Hannah needs me! I must cure her sickness!” And Patrick staggered to his feet, turning with new purpose towards the opposite horizon where the sun beamed down upon him. “I will save her! With this mirror, I will save her!” He cried, and dashed across stage to vanish past its opposite end.

And then the props were quickly being wheeled around until the stage was filled with that which someone might find in a bedroom of times long past. In the bed, surrounded by haggard-looking doctors and a weary Emily, was a young woman.

Hannah.

Patrick burst onto the stage, breathing as if he’d just run his way down the mountain. “My beloved Hannah, I have returned for you!”

Emily looked up with a cry of surprise, and racing forward she embraced and slapped Patrick in turn. “You fool! You have taken the shrine spirit’s mirror! It was a trick, I tell you!”

“But I must save Hannah!” Patrick argued, as if he couldn’t believe they were still having this argument. “I will deal with the consequences once I save her and we are wed!”

Pushing past Emily, who yelled at him not to use the mirror, Patrick raced to his beloved’s bedside as the physicians made themselves small. “Oh, my love, I will save you! I swear.”

Emily had turned to face them, her hands on her hips defiantly. “And how, exactly, do you presume to use a mirror to cure her? Just point it at her?”

“Love will guide me, Emily. As it guided me up the mountain and to the shrine and past the devilish apparitions who tempt man into stopping the pursuit of love.”

Up in the balconies, Roy snorted, finding that oddly ironic to his own situation. He realized he was probably lucky that Edward was too engrossed in watching, else he feared he’d have been hit over the head with a plate lid.
“I have but one choice,” Patrick declared, “I must point it at her, and pray that it reflects the devilish disease from her!” And he turned the mirror onto Hannah.

There was tense silence from the puzzled doctors, and from Emily, but mostly from Patrick, who, after a long minute, could take it no longer and collapsed atop Hannah with anguished cries as he cradled her to him. “Oh, Hannah! You must wake up, you must! The mirror – ”

And then all went silent.

“What?!” Patrick cried out, rising away from Hannah in shock.

“What is it?” Emily demanded nervously, but dared not go nearer.

“She… she…”

And then the audience saw it. Hannah moved. Just an arm at first, and then she was struggling to sit up in bed as Patrick cried out in joy, clutching his healed beloved to him. “Hannah! My love, you’re all right!”

“Patrick!” Hannah sobbed joyfully, her arms thrown around the man in relief of seeing him again.

And then Emily was racing forward to throw her arms around the both of them, sobbing likewise her happiness. Meanwhile, the doctors stood about looking properly confused.

That is, until a familiar pyrotechnic flash exploded onto the stage again, and the since-absent cloaked stranger with his jaunty hat reappeared with a forbidding laugh.

“Hannah, I presume?” The cloaked, supposed shrine spirit asked slyly. “It is so good to see you well.”

“Who are you?” Hannah gasped in fright.

“You!” Patrick greeted angrily, whirling from the bed to stand before the girls as some form of protection. “You have no business here! Leave! The mirror is now mine.”

The shrine spirit waggled a finger at Patrick. “Now, now, do not be so hasty. I never said you could keep the mirror, or your precious Hannah, for that matter.”

“What do you mean!” Patrick raged, fists clenching at his sides.

“The mirror, and everything it soaks in, everything it cures, becomes mine. Where do you think those ghosts in the mountains came from? They were once Hannahs, every single one of them. And now I’ve come to claim another!”

Emily screamed, shoving both her and Hannah over the far side of the bed as the spirit lunged forward towards them all.

Patrick, on the other hand, had grabbed the mirror, intending to throw it down and shatter it, when something gave him pause. “Wait… you said it could banish sickness and demons! Like you! Spirits are nothing more than demons in disguise!”

And thus, Patrick turned the mirror onto the shrine spirit, who began to scream incoherently, and crumpled to the floor where he vanished with a much diminished flash of red.

There was silence for a moment, and then Hannah appeared from the other side of the bed to run to Patrick where she leapt into his arms with joy and was greeted with a tender embrace and a tender
kiss.

Up in the balconies, Edward had shifted to sit back as the curtains began to close once more, to see Roy watching avidly. Glancing back down, he saw they were still kissing, and scowled. “Will you stop being such a whore?” He accused.

Roy laughed and sat back as well, smirking at Edward. “What? You refused to sit on my lap.”

Edward rolled his eyes, “as if even that would have stopped you.”

“I think you’d be surprised how easily you command all of my attention.” Roy bantered back smoothly, but said nothing further as the curtains were drawn back so that all the actors and actresses could run out and get their applause.

Applause Edward was currently contributing to enthusiastically.

Eventually, though, the curtains remained closed, and the lower gallery began to buzz with conversation and activity as the patrons began making their way from their seats. Even the other private balconies were beginning to empty… but neither Edward nor Roy made any move to leave. Not yet.

Roy had managed to finish both plates of food, and the bottle of champagne, and now he was relaxed back into his seat as he contentedly watched Edward watching the people down below them.

Gradually, Edward became aware of the eyes on him, around the time that the last group had filed out in the lower gallery. But still, no one had come to draw back the heavy curtain to their balcony again and see if they’d left as well. When Edward turned, the curtain was still closed, and Roy’s eyes still watched him with an expression he couldn’t discern.

Lowering his gaze a moment, his lower lip pulling between his teeth, Edward didn’t look up as he slipped through the air from his seat, to sit just above Roy’s legs where he finally looked up at the man. He couldn’t explain what had driven him to it… to keep taunting him? It’s not like he… he liked being near Roy. And it wasn’t like this was the first time they’d sat so close. He’d sat through the man before. This was nothing!

But this time, something in Roy’s dark eyes made him feel oddly warmer than before.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” Roy finally asked in a lower voice than Edward remembered him having.

“Yeah… thanks.” Edward answered softly.

“We should go home.” Roy suggested as his hand raised towards Edward’s face, and he made no move to stop it.

“Yeah?” Edward asked, barely above a whisper. “So… what happens once they get on your lap?”

Roy’s eyes went wide, and he was trying to determine when Edward had gotten so good at trying to fluster him when the curtain was at last pulled back.

“Colonel Mustang, sir? I’m sorry, but your date… no one arrived asking for you.”

It was the manager from before.

Roy didn’t answer at first, couldn’t seem to look away at first from the silver eyes that hadn’t flinched when the curtain had been drawn. But finally he forced his gaze away and stood, forcing
Edward away from him in the process. “It’s fine. I’m sure something came up. I’ll be using the back exit again, I don’t feel like dealing with the crowds.”

“Yes, sir.” The manager dipped into another low bow, and held the curtain open for the man who passed through.

“You needn’t show me out. It was rather good tonight… by the way. Keep it up, I’m sure I’ll be back soon.” Roy said, having paused to cast a quick glance down towards the man before sweeping off.

Edward considered the bowing manager for a moment before darting after Roy, waiting until the reached an empty employee exit to ask, “they may as well just get on the floor bowing to you like that. You’re only a colonel though, what’s with them? You don’t make them do that, do you?”

“No.” Roy shot Edward a small smile, slipping his hands into his pockets as he continued making for the door. “But not many civilians see me as just a colonel.”

“Then why did you bow to me?” Edward asked with a frown, “you better not have been trying to flirt with me, if I find you do that to your dates I’m going to disable your hot water heater.”

“It’s because you’re one third what’s left of a dying race. I figured it was appropriate.” Roy provided quickly, not hesitating once in his rapidly fabricated lie.

“Uh-huh.” Edward deadpanned in disbelief, before pushing the matter aside. “How does it feel to finally have been stood up?”

Roy cracked a true grin at that, and slipping one hand free in order to shove the door open and walk out into chilled night air, glanced Edward’s way. “Pretty good.”

Edward could only laugh as he followed, and as they walked, he hummed one of the tunes the orchestra had played as Roy acted a conductor for him. He knew that Roy was getting some rather odd looks from passersby, but as Roy didn’t seem to care, Edward kept humming.

It was later that night, long after they’d both gotten home, when Edward curled up on the bed to watch Roy sleep. The man had finally fallen to sleep a few minutes ago… he’d watched Roy sleep enough times to know when the man was actually out.

Curling around his pillow, Edward blinked peacefully as he gazed at the man. Tonight… he didn’t know what had come over him tonight. And it had all started when Roy had – he buried his face into the pillow with a groan, curling tighter around it. He didn’t even know what Roy had done! All he knew was suddenly Roy had seemed closer to him than he ever had before.

He didn’t have any issues with that, on the contrary, he liked being close to Roy. But it had never made him feel like that before.

And then the man had gone off and called him beautiful. Straight out. None of the usual metaphors.

Edward groaned again, and rolled over with his pillow as he clenched his eyes shut. “Roy…” he sighed, muffled, into the pillow. He’d even gone and tried to fluster the man multiple times. But that wasn’t nearly so confusing as how he’d felt when Roy had looked at him like that at the end of the play, causing him to, in his own way, climb onto the man’s lap.

“I don’t understand this.” Edward whispered helplessly into the pillow. “I don’t understand these feelings. But I wonder… if you could touch me… I want you to touch me. I want it so badly sometimes.”
Beside the confused ghost, Roy shut his eyes again, turning his head away as quietly as he could. He’d heard Edward say his name on the edges of consciousness and it had woken him… but he’d never expected to hear what he had. As he lay there though, he couldn’t help but wonder if he shouldn’t have expected it. Yet he was uncharacteristically unable to think of the gravity of this… for half of him wanted to comfort the ghost, but the rest was scared at what he’d say.

So he lay there, trying to pretend he was still asleep… trying to pretend he didn’t want to pull Edward into his arms.
Chapter 41

Chapter Forty-One

Roy honestly wasn’t sure just how much sleep he’d managed to get that night, but it was certainly not enough when he felt eager paws combing through his hair and gradually became aware of insistent and excited chattering in his left ear. “Hazel…” he moaned pathetically, and attempted to pull the blankets over his head to fend the furred demon off.

Hazel, seeing the oncoming problem, quickly curled up on Roy’s face.

Roy spluttered for air, and abandoning the covers, instead snatched up the menace as he opened bleary eyes to glare at his pet. “I’m all for sleeping, but not there.”

Hazel chattered happily, curling his tail around his owner’s arm and waving his front paws towards Roy’s face in want of more attention.

“You only think you’re cute.” Roy informed his pet, “but I still see you as the ragged mess I plucked from a storm drain.”

Hazel squealed and began grooming the fine fur of his head with his paws.

Roy gave a lengthy sigh and his head flopped back down the bare inches it had risen. It was then that he realized he’d yet to hear anything out of Edward, which wasn’t normal in the least. With a startled turn of his head, he quickly sat up when his eyes met only empty bed. A quick look around the room showed the ghost was nowhere to be seen.

“Edward?” He called out, just to be sure, but when his call was met with only an inquiring chirp from Hazel, he lowered his gaze with another sigh. “Edward…”

He had a feeling he knew where the ghost had gone. He had a feeling he knew why.

Setting Hazel down onto his blanketed lap he met the inquiring chirp with a weary-looking gaze and ran his hand down his pet’s back as Hazel leaned boneless into his touch. “You should go find your friend… keep him company until I’m there.”

Extracting himself out from under his blankets and pet both at once, Roy began making his way to the bathroom, only to have Hazel leap onto his head at the last minute. It took him only a moment to recover his surprise, and with a wry smile, adjusted the squirrel so he wouldn’t tumble off and take chunks of hair with him. “Okay… I get it.”

He could only imagine the looks and teasing that Edward would give him if the ghost saw this… and with a somewhat humored shake of his head that Hazel chattered admonishingly for, he closed himself in the bathroom.

“If you must be in here,” Roy muttered as he plucked the squirrel from his head, “stay on this side of the counter, you unsanitary beast.”

Hazel promptly scrambled onto the faucet head instead to perch there smugly.

Roy glared at the squirrel balefully, but didn’t try and move him. Instead he looked up into the mirror, seeing the evidence in his eyes of a restless night. It had been hard enough to lay there pretending to be asleep after Edward had woken him with the words he doubted he’d been meant to
hear… falling asleep for real had been even harder.

He didn’t know what to do. For the first time in his life, he truly did not know what to do. Even though looking back, he could see how this would have happened.

All through the night as he’d laid awake, and even now, he tried to tell himself that Edward only felt that he’d become part of a family again. Roy’s family. And that it had been so long since the ghost had had a family to belong to, that it was only natural he’d not recognize such feelings any longer.

He tried to tell himself that Edward only cared for him as a friend. His only friend. It was possible, for sure! He knew that personally, he and Maes had a deep friendship and if pushed he would grudgingly admit he loved the man… and Maes would probably have no qualms at all, damn him, about admitting the same, but that’s what tended to happen when your best friend was truly your best friend.

…but he doubted Maes ever wanted to be held by him.

Roy made a face at the prospect and shuddered. There was no way in hell.

But Edward…

Roy slumped over the counter with a lengthy sigh, resting his weight heavily on his hands as he stared at the dull matte interior of his sink. “I’ve wanted to touch him so many times.” He whispered in a pained voice, thinking of all the times he’d reached out to Edward, only to encounter nothing. To be able to hold Edward was just as much a painful fantasy.

But this wasn’t about him.

This was about Edward… and he knew his friend needed him.

Yet he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do. He hadn’t been meant to hear Edward last night. The only thing he could think to do was try and hint to Edward that it was nice to be in a family again. That’s really all it could be, right? The ghost had never loved but for family and friends before, and it had been seven years since.

Surely some emotional amnesia was possible?

And as for himself… Roy looked up at Hazel sadly and shook his head. “It would have to be him, wouldn’t it. But I can’t let this continue… I can’t put him through it. Take good care of him tonight, Hazel, for me.”

Leaving it at that, and trying to ignore the painful stabbing in his chest that he felt at his own words, Roy began to strip for his shower and soon clambered into the scorching sauna the hot water was creating. Normally the hot water helped him feel better, but this morning he could barely feel it, and cranked the temperature up as far as it would go.

Edward was sitting on the roof, watching the last colorful rays of dawn light fracture against the thin clouds. It had always comforted him to come up here and watch the sunrise, and today was no different. There was just something calming about it… the way the sun always rose speaking to his own timeless existence. They would always be around together, and there was some comfort in that.

Last night had been confusing again for him, but he knew he’d do Roy no good by acting distracted. Just as it had been the night they’d spent visiting Daphne, by morning he’d shoved it away. It had helped that, around two in the morning, he’d thrown a miniature fit scolding himself for rolling around the bed curled around a pillow. He told himself that such actions were what conflicted girls
did. And although he may be conflicted and rather confused, he was not a girl.

He was definitely not Winry. And he snorted to imagine his old friend doing such a thing.

So a while later, when Roy clambered up onto the roof, he looked over at the man with a cheerful smile. There was no point in making Roy worry about him, the man had too much to worry about as it was. “I see that Hazel did his job.”

Roy found himself hesitating in well-concealed shock, before breathing a minor sigh of relief. It didn’t seem like Edward was any different from normal… and he tried to ignore the faint pulse of sadness he felt at that realization. Instead he forced himself to walk towards the ghost, smiling back. “You missed it. You could have come to the terror’s defense several times.”

As Roy sat down beside him, Edward chuckled softly as he leaned his head into a hand to watch the man. “You wouldn’t fear someone taking him away from you if you didn’t love him, you can admit it.” He teased with humor shining in his eyes.

Roy swallowed against the hardness that had appeared in his throat and offered a far weaker smile as he forced himself to look only at the next house over. “I wouldn’t wish that devilish beast on anyone else.”

“Even Grand?” Edward questioned with that same amused lightness.

“You’ve already laid claim, he wouldn’t survive against both of you and then what would be left for me?” Roy joked and shook his head, finding it easier now to look at Edward. “Besides, soon he’ll be gone, and Hazel hates losing toys.”

“He’ll just take yours again.” Edward muttered, still not entirely over that incident. Sometimes he still couldn’t get over the fact that he went to bed in the same room those things were kept in. Much less laid in the same bed they’d been used in. He really tried not to think about it.

Roy outright laughed at the expression on Edward’s face, and smirking, got himself to his feet before offering a hand down to Edward. “Come on. I promise they won’t come out and attack you or anything. But I really do have to get to work. Lecturing Hazel,” and himself, “took longer than I thought.”

“Can’t go to work anymore without me?” Edward teased brightly as he made a grab for the hand even as he got himself up.

“I am a man of habit.” Roy brushed the question off with a faint, saddened smile, before schooling his features back to normal and beginning to climb back down the side of the house. “Besides, you wouldn’t let me go alone anyway.”

“Someone has to keep an eye on you.” Edward agreed and floated down to the grass to wait for Roy.

Not too long later they were leaving the house, and Roy pretended not to notice the way Hazel was looking at him in what could only be termed rodent reproach. As always, they chose a new way to get there, and eventually they did arrive along with the mass flow of officers they normally were able to miss. Between them, and those who were leaving after having been the rare few to stay overnight, they were unable to talk until they got up to Roy’s office complex.

“I didn’t expect you’d be in this morning.” Riza greeted the man the moment he set foot through the door.
Roy finished getting through the door before shooting her a puzzled look as he closed it again as soon as Edward had floated inside. “Why? It’s not a day I’d normally skive off from.”

Riza raised an eyebrow, but said nothing to that, only raised up part of her morning paper to offer it to him. “It was just a hunch. I pictured you staying in bed all day with a massive hangover.”

Edward tilted his head with a frown that Roy shared, before bounding through the air to get the first look at what Riza was holding out to the Colonel. And when he saw what it was, he burst into a grin and began to laugh. “Buy me a copy, Roy!”

Roy was still frowning as he made his way over rather more elegantly than Edward, and with a suspiciously inquiring look to Riza that she merely smirked back at, he snapped the paper open more fully to his eyes.

He was promptly greeted with a rather large headline proclaiming: “Flame Alchemist Alone at Theater Production Premier”.

And based on the amount of exclamation marks he could see in the article following, it was a rather inspired piece. Quickly he scanned it, before getting to one sentence that made him roll his eyes, and he read it aloud. “This latest happening assures us that one of the most eligible bachelors of the Military is still available. We can only speculate the hidden message he is trying to send by having bought out so many seats only to have them remain empty.”

“Oh they’re onto something all right.” Roy joked sarcastically and tossed the paper back to Riza who caught it with a smirk. “They’re wrong about quite a bit though.” He finished with a mutter, trying not to think about exactly which part the journalist had been the most incorrect about.

“There’s nothing in there about you acting strange or talking to yourself, right?” Edward asked worriedly, not having even suspected anyone might have noticed them throughout the play. But if it truly had been that play’s initial opening, it made sense.

Roy shook his head, under the cover of acting still indignantly amused about the entire thing.

Edward let out a sigh of relief.

“At least this is better than the articles they usually publish about you.” Riza pointed out. “You were a main feature in one of them back in East City.”

“I can’t help it that I’m one of the few interesting people in the Military. Or that some of the women seemed to make it a game to see who could land me.” Roy smirked at her, “if you’d get out more you’d have a few journalists stalk you yourself.”

Riza’s look turned utterly deadpan and serious. “I’d shoot them first.”

Roy actually had no doubts about that, and raised a hand in parting. “Just aim for the knees, Riza. I don’t want to deal with the paperwork it’d cause if you shot dead a civilian.”

“Maes was in your office last night.” Riza spoke up quickly, just as Roy turned for that same office.

Roy stopped where he was, but did not turn, his tone oddly light as he asked, “was he?”

“Yes.”

Edward looked between them both with a frown, not quite understanding what was going on here, but knowing that if he kept quiet, he might learn something. By the look on Riza’s face, it was
important to her, and while he hadn’t spent much time around the woman, he knew she was the sort of woman who’d not bother with idle chit-chat while wearing an expression as searching as that.

“Probably hiding pictures of Elysia everywhere again.” Roy bemoaned.

Riza stood at this, causing Roy to turn at the noise, and she met his unreadable black eyes determinedly. “We both know it’s not that, so don’t play me for a fool. You’re hiding things even from Maes… I dare not wonder how much that means you’re hiding from me, from the rest of us.”

“How much do you already know?” Roy asked instead, his tone level and neutral, not revealing anything.

Riza remained silent, not about to be roped into that game.

Roy didn’t press her, merely gave a slight nod. “Good. That’s all you need to know for right now. I can’t put the burden on you just yet of how far this stretched, what I’m really up against. That’s not knowledge I’d wish on my friends before it becomes absolutely crucial.”

“But we’re here to protect you!” Riza finally snapped, eyes flashing. “How can you expect us to protect you if you won’t tell us what we’re protecting you from?”

Roy’s features softened, and slowly he turned to walk around her desk and place his hands on her shoulders. “Riza Hawkeye… you’ll understand what I mean by this one day, so please don’t take offense… but right now, you need to protect me from yourself. My end opponent isn’t like anyone else, and I dare not let him suspect that you know him for who he is. I’m trying to protect you all from him, by keeping you in the dark until it’s time. Just trust me that it will one day be time and you will know, and I know without a doubt that even on short notice, you are never off your game.”

Edward had remained where he was, but he still said softly, “but even you didn’t know about the Fuhrer until my father told you. You shouldn’t use that as an excuse for everything else.” And then, it came to him, as he watched Riza looking hard at Roy, as if determining his credibility. His silver eyes widened as he understood, “you don’t intend for them to get involved. Like me, you’re worried they’d get hurt. You’re just going to go off one day to fight Grand and not tell them.”

“Don’t be a fool, Roy.” Riza finally said, brushing his hands away from her. “No one here wants to tell your mother you got hurt because you were being stupid.”

Roy gave a faint chuckle, “I wouldn’t want to face her either. Trust me, Riza, I know what I’m doing. Haven’t I always?”

“Three parts bullshit and one part brilliance.” Riza sighed and shook her head wearily. “Go do your paperwork, sir.”

Roy smiled and giving her one last bracing look, turned to herd Edward into his office where he firmly shut the door. Ready to hear the argument he knew was coming as he began to make his way to his desk.

Edward watched him go with a masked expression, and slowly he floated up to his favored corner to stare at the man. It seemed to be a silent battle between both of them, to see who would break the silence first, and Edward finally gave in. Telling himself he was being the bigger man for it. “You lied to her.”

“I did not.” Roy argued firmly, “I told her the truth, just not the whole truth. There’s a difference.”

“You’re not going to tell them, are you, when you decide it’s time to face Grand. When you’ve
finally gotten him in your sights at that laboratory he’s working at. You’re just going to face him yourself and they’re going to be worried sick about you when they learn what you’ve done!”

Edward stated in confusion.

Roy smiled then, sufficiently shocking Edward. “You underestimate my team, but that’s reasonable, you don’t know them very well. If you think I even remotely pacified Riza, don’t. She’s good at acting to keep me from worrying, but I know her.” Taking the paper Maes had left on his desk and turning it sideways in his fingers towards Edward, he smiled wryly. “Maes is with me, after all, and he has just enough information to do exactly what I need him to do when the time comes, even if he doesn’t know I’ve planned out his role already. I already know that when he gives me the information I need, he’ll start tailing me instead.”

Edward tilted his head in confusion, but began to float down towards Roy.

“The moment I go near that laboratory, he’ll call Riza. Riza will call everyone else. And sooner than you think, my entire team will be at that laboratory as backup. But that brief time delay it will take Maes to call Riza, and for all of them to gather, will be just enough time for me to remove the main danger to them.”

Edward blinked widely at the man, his jaw having dropped just a bit as he stared. Roy had already planned for this? He’d been orchestrating this ending from the very beginning? “Roy… you –”

“I’m not nearly crazy enough to face the Fuhrer alone when he comes to survey the end result.” Roy interrupted with a faint, reassuring smile. “I know better than to think I’d be in any condition to take him on the same day I battle Grand. He may not be very happy with me and what I’ve done, what I’ll demand from him in return… but with enough witnesses, I’ll be safe for the moment. Even a homunculus wouldn’t risk annihilating so many people just because he may not be pleased I killed Grand for illegal activities.”

“You can hope…” Edward murmured, but felt far better now than he had before. “But I’ll be there, just in case. I could at least incapacitate him long enough for everyone to get away.”

“Don’t think about such things.” Roy told him firmly, feeling an uncomfortable pit in his stomach at the thought of Edward doing that to himself again. “The Fuhrer doesn’t know that your father told us who he really is. We’ll be safe… for now. And with Grand gone, and me as Brigadier General, it’ll give both of us more opportunity to try and take him down.”

Meanwhile, outside of Roy’s private office, Maes had just arrived to greet Riza tiredly but with a smile all the same as he walked in. It didn’t take a request to make him walk over to her, sensing by the look in her eyes that she wanted to speak to him again.

“Isn’t there anything you know that you can tell us yet?” Riza asked in a carefully lowered voice, as if she suspected that her Colonel was listening at the keyhole of his office door.

Maes had taken to leaning one hip on the edge of her desk, taking at least half his tired weight from his feet. And as Havoc entered, he nodded to the man in greeting before quirking a finger at him in summoning.

Havoc immediately ditched his overcoat onto his chair and walked over to the desk with a frown. “Is it about the Colonel?”

Maes nodded and glanced back to Riza. “I’ve been tailing his new target, the Brigadier General, almost since we got here. Roy’s going after him, permanently.”
Riza and Havoc both nodded, but said nothing.

“I don’t know how much he’s told either of you,” Maes sighed, expecting it wasn’t much, “but I don’t care anymore, you need to know what I know.” And he paused a moment before continuing with, “Grand’s trying to create a philosopher’s stone. Only this time you can bet Grand won’t be sharing with Mustang, unless to try and destroy him. That’s what Roy’s working up to, a final showdown.”

“Someone’s already beating him to it, you’ve heard of all the accidents the Brigadier General’s been having.” Havoc pointed out with a small frown. “If you’re tailing him you’ve probably seen some of them.”

Maes frowned at this, his foot beginning to tap in impatience against the floor. “But that’s what’s strange, I can’t find any way at all that Roy could possibly be involved. Whenever these things happen, he’s never around even remotely. You know how good he’s been about his paperwork lately.”

Riza did know, and to be honest, it still unnerved her a little. “It’s been strange, how focused he’s been. I know he says it’s all about finally being so close… but I get the feeling there’s more to it.”

“There’s more to everything with that man.” Havoc muttered wryly.

“Regardless of any of that though,” Maes redirected them somberly, “if Roy’s planning an alchemy showdown, there’s no room for any of us to help in that battle of freaks. But I worry he’s forgotten that he may need backup anyway. If he goes storming into enemy territory, there will be more than one enemy. He’ll need us, even if he hasn’t thought that far yet. Even though it’s not nearly so far away anymore, I expect.”

Riza slowly nodded, before palming a few extra clips for her gun and standing up looking determined. “I should get in some target practice then.”

Both Havoc and Maes watched her go with equally amused expressions, and aloud, Havoc wondered, “doesn’t she just tell the bullet where to go and it does it?”

Maes snorted, but did not try and absolve him of that idea. “I need to go talk to our fearless leader now. Fill in the others for me, and I’ll try and find Armstrong later. We’ll need another freak for the oncoming freak show.”

Havoc watched as Maes drug himself towards Roy’s office, noting that the man was looking rather more worn than usual. He could only begin to imagine what Maes was up to… could only begin to imagine the price that came with being Roy’s best and closest friend.

Maes let himself into Roy’s office after a short knock, and didn’t look back as he closed himself inside.

“Did you get my love letter?” Maes asked cheerily as he walked towards where Roy sat at his desk looking faintly amused.

“Yes. Although I’m not sure how Gracia will feel about this.” Roy lamented before rolling his eyes and waving Maes over to the remaining couch. “Sit. You look like you need to.”

Edward’s eyes had narrowed meanwhile, and looking between them suspiciously, asked, “love letter?”

Roy tried not to laugh at the tone of Edward’s voice… tried not to feel pleased by it. But his eyes
were shining even so as he quirked an eyebrow at Maes. “Did you find our honeymoon location yet?”

Maes had collapsed onto the couch, and looked at Roy wearily as he passed a hand over his face and back through his hair. “I can’t say for certain yet. I think I have… but if Grand doesn’t show up there, I can’t very well tell you ‘yes’ and feel honest for it, even if there is something clearly wrong about it now.”

Edward was glowering at them both, between feeling left out and not being pleased in the least that they were joking about eloping as some sort of code. He sat himself firmly on the table in front of the couch so that he could keep a good, hard eye on them both.

“What do you mean?” Roy asked as he leaned forward in his desk chair, his paperwork the farthest thing from his mind right now as he focused on his friend. As well as a certain ghost he was sure he’d have to pacify later.

Maes sighed and attempted to straighten himself a bit where he sat, but when he didn’t have much luck, gave up. His body may still be quite functional, but in a relaxed setting with his best friend, it was hopeless not to show his current exhaustion. “I mean I was out there until nearly three in the morning with no sign of Grand, no sign of anyone, but the power is on. That laboratory was supposed to have been abandoned decades ago, it’s still got condemned signs everywhere, but the power was on. Some of the lights inside were on at one point, though very briefly. The security cameras are working, and I could tell that inside the gates there were fresh tracks.” And Maes frowned to himself, “but not any tracks I’m familiar with… they were too large for humans, too large to be anything I’m familiar with.”

“Chimera?” Roy suggested thoughtfully. “Wouldn’t be the first time we’ve seen them around after supposedly being decommissioned and destroyed. And Grand seems the type to keep some around. Another broken Military law wouldn’t phase him.”

“Unless the Military somehow managed to import rhinoceros without anyone noticing, then there’s no way those tracks belong to anything I’m familiar with. Chimera or otherwise.”

“What’s a rhinoceros?” Edward asked of Roy curiously.

Roy smiled at the question, and renewed his decision to take Edward to the zoo one day. Although for rhinoceros, they just might have to travel to another country. But he could at least find a picture of one somewhere for now. “Well, if there are tracks, that means eventually we’ll see what made them. And Grand will have to show up sooner or later, based on how close it sounds he is.”

Maes somehow found the energy to sit up at that, and leaning forward he fixed Roy with a hard look. “When will you tell me who it is you’re trusting with this? If it’s not me, and it’s not any of the others… Roy, the only one left who’s close to you is your mother, and I know she’s not involved. So who the hell is it? I’m worried about you that you find someone you trust this much, but won’t tell us who it is.”

“He’d probably believe you about me.” Edward offered, but unlike with Daphne, he didn’t push harder for Roy to tell him.

Roy sighed internally, he knew that Maes would probably believe him about Edward. The man had believed in him for far less before. But still something stopped him from it as he met his friend’s searching look squarely. “I have no doubts anymore that despite my best efforts to keep you from knowing, you’ll one day learn who it is. But it won’t be today. If it puts your mind at ease any, my mother knows him and likes him very much.”
Edward tried not to feel too pleased.

Maes’s eyes widened, it was the most information on the subject that he’d ever gotten out of Roy. And all things considered… it was damn good information. “Your mother knows him?”

“Yes.” Roy rolled his eyes at the look in his friend’s eyes, he knew that look anywhere. “Even if you call her this minute and ask her about it, she wouldn’t tell you anything.”

“That’s not exactly fair, Roy.” Maes deadpanned in disappointment.

Roy smiled softly, glancing down towards his desk. “He tells me the same thing a lot.”

“Because it’s deserving.” Edward agreed stoically.

Maes considered his friend closely, his jaw dropping slightly before he quickly snapped it closed again, lest Roy notice and question him on it. He knew he had to pick his next words carefully, very carefully, else he suspected he’d have yet another couch incinerated underneath him. “He sounds like he knows you well.”

Roy gave Maes a pointedly stern look. “He likes to think so, anyway. Now you can stop fishing, I’m not about to tell you anything else.”

“You know it’s pointless to tell him something like that. Telling him even a little bit has just doomed you.” Edward pointed out in dry amusement, feeling a perverse sort of pleasure that Maes would be tormenting Roy.

Roy knew the ghost was right, but he felt he’d needed to say it anyway… just for it to be said. And he had a suspicion that he’d be hearing from his mother later. It was actually a conversation he was looking forward to.

“Well if your mother is okay with him, then I suppose I’ll have to be.” Maes said, scratching at the back of his head as if he still wasn’t entirely sure about it. Mostly, he just wasn’t satisfied.

Roy linked his fingers together to rest his chin onto them as he gazed over at his friend. “If you weren’t, I expect she’d shoot you for being ridiculous, and trust me, she hasn’t lost her aim. I don’t want to see what would happen if we put her and Riza on the same shooting range together.”

“You have a tendency to surround yourself with scary women.” Maes agreed with a half-hearted sigh and stretched tiredly before collapsing back onto the couch fully once again and closing his eyes.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Roy asked as his eyes began to narrow suspiciously.

“Sleeping. And soon I’ll be ignoring you as well.” Maes muttered as his head flopped to one side.

“Don’t worry, Grand isn’t a morning person remember, he won’t be going anywhere important until after lunch. If he goes at all.”

“You are not sleeping, get off my couch.” Roy argued, and threw a pen at the man’s head where it bounced off and rolled to the floor.

“Ignoring you!” Maes sing-songed in an effort to irritate him further.

Edward smiled as Roy began to scowl darkly, and he floated up from the table to insert himself in between them and pull Roy’s attention. “Let him sleep. He did enough last night for right now. If you push him around too hard he might get sloppy, and that won’t do any of us any good.”
Roy glared mildly at the ghost, and when Edward only quirked an eyebrow at him, gave in with a sigh and slumped back into his chair. “Fine. But just for a little while!” He warned.

Maes made a mumbling sort of half-assed answer and flipped Roy off.

Roy quickly jabbed a finger towards the man and mouthed, “did you see that?” at Edward before rolling his eyes.

Edward smiled indulgently and floated over to hop up onto Roy’s desk. “I didn’t see anything you wouldn’t do in return. Besides, I can keep an eye on Grand easily enough. Have some fun with it too.”

But Roy shook his head, and picking up another pen began to write on a spare piece of paper before turning it upside down so that Edward could read. ‘I’ll send Falman to do that. I actually need Grand more mobile for a while. If he’s close to doing what the Fuhrer wants, he’ll go to that laboratory soon. But he needs to be able to move to do that.’

Edward sighed, and briefly thought he might promise not to hurt Grand in any way… but even in his head it sounded like an empty promise. The fact of the matter was, that since the first moment Grand had stepped into this office and spoken to Roy, Edward had been overcome with a fierce desire to protect Roy from him, and that desire ran deeply. “All right.”

Roy smiled soothingly at the ghost, he knew Edward was disappointed. But he quickly wrote, ‘don’t worry. You can have at him again soon… provided I don’t kill him first.’

“If he’s dead I won’t care if I don’t get another chance to prank him.” Edward muttered, “I just care that he suffers and pays for daring to think he can hurt you.”

Roy nodded knowingly, his eyes soft as they looked up at the spirit, but eventually he turned away. He had Falman to summon and paperwork to do. Just because he was excruciatingly close to reaching his first goal did not mean he could take a moment to breathe now.

Edward watched Roy’s quick discussion with Falman before taking a book and sitting down behind the desk at Roy’s feet to read so that when Maes did awake, the man wouldn’t see a book anywhere it really shouldn’t be at that moment.

It entirely escaped their notice that one of Roy’s hands had made its way down towards the ghost, or that Edward leaned his head slightly through that hand as he read, they were too focused on what they were doing to realize.

Eventually Maes did awaken, but he didn’t give any indication of it at first. Instead he took the rare moment to take a good look at Roy while his friend had no notice of it. There was something different about him, very different. The fact of the matter was, that since the first moment Grand had stepped into this office and spoken to Roy, Edward had been overcome with a fierce desire to protect Roy from him, and that desire ran deeply. “All right.”

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And Maes couldn’t help but wonder, as he fumbled with what puzzle pieces he had, if this him Roy had mentioned was behind it.

“I can’t believe you actually let me stay.” Maes spoke up at last, shifting more upright on the couch and wincing as his muscles protested.

“Falman is covering you for today. Go home and get some rest, I told Gracia to expect you.” Roy said, sounding amused as he lifted his gaze. “Don’t let anyone ever say I don’t do anything for my best friend. Now get out of here, before your ass imprints on my couch.”
Maes blinked at Roy in surprise a moment, never having expected to be sent home to relax, but then he smiled. “You’re really going to come to the school carnival, aren’t you? I told Elysia you’d signed the paper with a ‘yes’. She was really excited.”

Roy rolled his eyes and threw another pen at his friend. “Go home. I’ll be there on Saturday, although I might change my mind if you don’t get out of here.”

Maes stood, and tossed the pen back before offering Roy his customary half salute and wave. “Yes, sir, Colonel Mustang, sir!”

Roy scowled at him until Maes had gone, before turning down to look at the source of the laughter beside him. “That’s ‘Colonel Mustang, sir’ to you as well, brat.”

“Going to send me home as well?” Edward asked cheekily up at him.

“I dare not. You and Hazel would wreck the house.” Roy decided as he swatted his hand through Edward’s silvery hair. “It takes me long enough to clean it when it’s just him.”

Edward smirked at him, “still… that was nice of you.”

“I’ll need him soon enough, and on the top of his game.” Roy replied and straightened in his chair once again only to tip it backwards as his hands folded across his stomach. “I’m not in the habit of wearing out members of my team right when it’ll really start to matter.”

“Think he knows you’ve got him on puppeteer strings?” Edward asked with mild amusement.

“If he does, he’s long learned to trust the direction.” Roy answered and tilted his head back so he could catch the barest glimpse of sky out the window.

Edward smiled up at him before closing his book with a flourish. “Aren’t you ready for me to kick your ass at chess again yet?”

Roy fell back forward with a laugh, “forgive me for not wanting to rush towards the most masochistic part of my day.”

Edward merely stuck his tongue out childishly. He knew Roy was joking with him, and stretching out on the floor by the man’s chair, he began to tap idle tunes on the book as he waited.

The day passed without further event. Things were quiet from both Falman and Maes’s end, but Roy wasn’t concerned. It was when he started getting phone calls that he usually got worried. So he finished his paperwork in silence, only taking a short break for lunch where he snuck out past everyone else to wander down to a nearby café with Edward before heading back to finish his work so that they could play chess. Chess which ended just about as Roy predicted it might.

At least he was still winning at least one game each time. Although he tried to ignore the nagging feeling brought on by so many losses that Edward was letting him win. He really needed to introduce Edward to some new games, maybe then he might stand a chance, at least at first.

Edward had picked up poker alarmingly well on the train ride back from his mother’s house.

It was on the walk back home that Roy was asked the one question he knew Edward would eventually ask… and the one he’d been dreading while trying at the same time to ignore it. It was what needed to be done, as much as it made him feel wrong.

Edward hopped over the fence without bothering to wait for Roy to open up the front gate, as usual,
but still waited at the front door for the man to join him. “What are we doing tonight? Or,” Edward paused as he thought, before quickly amending, “are you going out tonight?”

Roy knew better than to think he didn’t hear that faint bit of hope in Edward’s voice. The one that reminded him of how happy the ghost was each time he had said ‘no’. But tonight was different. Tonight had to be different. And so he put on the mask he was so proud of as he fit the key into the lock and turned. “I’m going out, it’s been too long and I can’t let all those lovely virgins think I’ve forgotten about them!”

Edward forced himself to roll his eyes, even as his face fell. But he quickly ducked inside into the darkness to hide it, taking the moment he knew he’d need to act as if he was just disapproving. “If they’re smart they’d have found better than you.”

“After that article, tonight should be busy.” Roy smirked as he followed Edward inside and locked the door before flicking on the lights. “It’ll be just what I need.” Just what he needed to try and forget how he felt about Edward. That urge to hold someone would go away, because by tonight he’d have gotten over this withdrawal he seemed to be under. And if those thoughts and words felt like ash, he only swallowed harder.

“Just spare me the details.” Edward complained, before vanishing into the living room with summoning cries of “Hazel” as if the squirrel could hear him. And he stayed in the living room, sitting with his back to the couch and the squirrel on the table in front of him as he listened to Roy go upstairs.

“I’ve become so selfish.” Edward admitted to the squirrel softly, now that they were alone. Hazel twitched his tail, cocking his head towards his invisible playmate. Something seemed off about his playmate tonight, and he chattered in concern.

“I don’t want him to go…but I can’t ask him to stay.” Edward whispered, knowing he’d said similar before to his furry confidant. “It never used to bother me that he’d go. Why have I become so selfish?”

Hazel chirruped softly, sitting back on his haunches and reaching his front paws out as he so often did to Roy.

Edward smiled lopsidedly, and reaching out attempted to stroke the squirrel’s head. “I’m no good to him like this. I have to pull myself together and call him a manwhore and smile when he leaves tonight, right? Because he always comes back to us.”

Hazel reached up towards the presence he could sense above his head, and chattered reassuringly before suddenly hopping from the table onto the back of the couch and then racing away to the upstairs whilst leaving Edward sitting on the floor with a forlorn smile.

When Roy exited the bathroom with his customary wall of steam he quickly got dressed. Whereas he’d agonized last night over what to wear, he barely noticed or cared what he pulled from the hangers and put on. He was about to leave the bedroom when he stopped, his eyes riveted on the carpet.

There, sat Hazel. Staring up at him with accusing eyes, as if he’d forgotten to feed the terror. But normally that would involve some sort of vocal reproach as well, and right now, Hazel was oddly silent. He just stared with accusation in his eyes.

“What did I do?” Roy wondered as he frowned at his pet, and reaching down, startled as Hazel
whirled and ran back down the stairs with his back arched haughtily. “Great, am I going to have to give you puppy eyes now and beg for forgiveness?” Roy wondered, a bit amused, a bit sarcastic.

When he came downstairs, Hazel had just run after a large orange ball with bells inside, and it chimed musically as it bounced and was batted into the kitchen.

“He really likes to play with me.” Edward said happily from where he stood in the hallway, looking up at Roy as the man descended the stairs.

Roy chuckled and as he stepped from the last stair, glanced towards where the furry menace had vanished to. “So he’s not acting weird with you too?”

Edward blinked at Roy owlishly. “…no?”

“Huh.” Roy gave a shrug then, “maybe he did decide to take offense to me telling him he wasn’t cute this morning.”

Edward snorted, but that snort turned to outright laughter as Hazel scampered back to him with the ball in his teeth, only to see Roy and give him a wide berth. “Roy, you may want to flatter him now and then. But later. Let him yell at you when you finally get home and then beg.”

Roy harrumphed, but did not deny that he would. If it worked, he’d try it. After all, Hazel was his alarm clock. He hated to think what an angry alarm clock would do to him to wake him up, or how early he’d be woken up. He’d rather gotten used to the paws grooming him awake at a decent hour. So shaking his head in bewilderment, he met Edward’s eyes. “You’ll be okay while I’m gone?”

Edward knelt to take the ball from Hazel and give it another toss, sending the squirrel skittering past Roy once again. “Yeah, of course. You go be a manwhore tonight. It’ll keep you from dragging those toys out any time soon and save me my sanity.”

Roy smirked at the very lovely memory, ignoring Edward’s pointed scowl. “Right. I’ll be back a few hours after midnight. You sure you don’t need anything before I leave?”

Edward shook his head, and pointed at the door in exasperation. “Either get out or stay and play with us.” He ordered, trying to ignore how badly he hoped Roy might stay.

So when the man moved to the door, he forced another smile that didn’t reach his eyes, and when Roy turned to wave goodbye, he only waved back, not trusting himself to speak. And when the door closed and locked behind him, Edward sank to the floor miserably as Hazel ran up to him again, without the ball.

“He’s such a manwhoring bastard.” Edward said sadly, not even knowing why it made him so sad. It seemed that lately he didn’t know what he felt any more. Especially not when Roy was involved.

Hazel twitched his tail as his head cocked in confusion, before he darted away again, gone only for a moment before he was dropping the ball in front of where he could sense his invisible friend. Looking up, as he would for any human, Hazel chirped loudly and tapped the ball with one paw before bouncing back and forth and snapping his tail eagerly.

Edward couldn’t help but smile as he realized that Hazel was trying to cheer him up. And picking up the ball much to Hazel’s vocal support, he felt a rush of gratitude to the squirrel. “Thanks, Hazel.” And he gave the ball another toss.

As he watched the squirrel bound after it theatrically, he kept smiling. Even if he didn’t know what had him in such a mess over Roy. And he may not understand his feelings because he had died too
young. He still had Roy, and he still had Hazel, and he didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize that. He didn’t want to become a burden to Roy… so he had to master these feelings and learn to live with them.

Because if nothing else, he still wanted Roy to always come home to him.
Chapter 42

Daphne was sitting at her desk going through order forms for wine when the phone beside her began to ring. Glancing at it briefly she checked the clock before reaching over for it. At this hour of the night, it wouldn’t be any of her customers, potential or established. Which really meant that she should answer it. Picking it up she quickly answered it with a drawled “hello?”

“You sound just like him sometimes, when you answer the phone.”

Daphne smiled, recognizing the voice instantly. “Of course I do, he is my son. How are you Maes?” She asked conversationally, before adding with a slight frown, “Roy’s okay, isn’t he?”

Plenty could go wrong with that man, but now she had Edward to worry about as well. If something happened to Roy, she feared what might happen to Edward. The two of them were, in many respects, inseparably close.

“He’s fine.” Maes’s voice reassured her, and she managed to breathe a silent sigh of relief before he added with a hint of confusion to his voice, “too fine. If that makes any sense at all.”

Daphne smiled again in amusement. “I’m glad of that.” Yes, it did make sense. She’d noticed something much the same when Roy had come to visit her, before he’d given in and told her about Edward. That ghost… he gave Roy some sort of strength and peace she’d not noticed in him before. As Roy’s best friend, nearly a brother to him, she wasn’t surprised that Maes had noticed it as well.

“How much do you know about what he’s up to?”

Daphne knew he was fishing, and expected that if he were, he’d been told as much as Roy had wanted to tell him, but not everything Maes had wanted to be told. So, with an amused look in her eyes answered honestly, “everything.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that…”

She smiled in sympathy, knowing it must be hard on him to be struggling with the knowledge that he was missing parts of the picture Roy was creating, but she knew that if her son hadn’t told him, it was not her place to. But she could at least try and settle the man’s mind a bit.

“I know you’re worried about him… by all rights you deserve to be. But he’ll be okay, trust me. He’s…” she thought back to that first day, that first hour in which her son had stood there so calmly and told her what he was doing. It had been so unlike him… just when she’d believed her son couldn’t become any stronger of a man, Edward had made him one. “He’s not the man he once was. He surprised me, having such a resolve. He’s got something he cares enough about not to do anything to fail with Grand.”

“A guy, right? The guy who’s been tipping him off and helping with intelligence. Roy said you know him, and that I shouldn’t worry about who it is anymore and whether or not they’re trustworthy.”

Daphne cracked a wry smile at the thought of Edward ever leading Roy wrong purposely. “I do know him, and my son’s right, you shouldn’t worry. He’s very loyal to Roy.” She expected to be pestered for a name immediately… so the silence on the other end of the line was puzzling to her. “Maes?”
“Roy loves him, whoever it is, doesn’t he.”

Daphne was taken aback by the resolute statement. Maes didn’t doubt at all the conclusion he’d come to. And slowly a lopsided, almost sad smile appeared on her face as she looked toward the picture of Roy that was framed on her desk. “Yes. I think Roy’s been in love with him for a long time now.”

“I thought as much. He didn’t know I was watching him… but he looked so much happier.”

“They’re good for each other. Just be patient, Roy will tell you about him when he’s ready. Even I have to admit that things are a bit complicated for them right now.”

“Can you at least tell me his name? Or where Roy met him?”

Daphne laughed softly, shaking her head at the man’s persistence. It was just like him, but she dared not engage her son’s wrath… she wanted to be told when he finally got over himself and admitted to Edward that he loved him. She got the strong feeling that if Maes didn’t know about Edward, Edward didn’t know that Roy was in love with him. “Sorry, you know that I can’t. He may be my son, but I have a healthy respect for him.”

“He has a healthy respect for you.” Maes put in dryly.

Daphne grinned a bit wider at that, “as he should. But this really is his own business to handle with you, as I’m sure he has told you. I can’t say anything about it until he does.”

“I admit I’m still having trouble wrapping my mind around the fact that he fell for someone. But with you confirming what I concluded… just who the hell is this mystery guy? Seriously. He must be one hell of a guy.”

Daphne laughed softly, the corners of her eyes crinkling in her amusement and happiness. “Yes… he is. When you finally meet him, you’ll understand the reason for all the cloak and dagger business. But yes…” she leaned back in her chair to gaze up at the ceiling thoughtfully. “He’s quite special, and I don’t think Roy ever had a chance at avoiding falling in love with him.”

“But how long until he actually does something about it.” Maes stated pointedly.

Daphne had been wondering the same thing herself. It seemed like it was taking her son an inordinately long amount of time to realize that he was in love with Edward, much less to confess to the ghost of his feelings. She had a feeling she knew all the whys as well. But she had to pacify herself with the knowledge that, in fact, Edward hadn’t been in Roy’s life for even a month yet. Considering her son’s past history, this was shockingly fast progress. “That’s why I’m glad he has you for a best friend. You can harry him about settling down when I can’t.”

“Is that permission?” Came Maes’s curiously amused voice.

Daphne smiled and glanced towards the window to look out over the vineyard cloaked in darkness. “Unofficial.”

“Roy in love… I feared I’d never see the day.”

“Don’t tell me about fear, I’m his mother.” Daphne pointed out with a wry grin. “I may not be getting grandbabies after all… but at least I’ll live to see the day he settles down.”

“Are you kidding? Now that I know he’s in love with this guy I’m not going to be satisfied until I can pay him back the favor of being his best man at the wedding.”
Daphne gave a small smile at the thought, and after a moment of considering it circumstantially, came to believe that Edward’s lack of a corporeal form wouldn’t prevent him from wearing a wedding ring if it came to that. Such a thing just wasn’t something she could see standing in their way.

For a time longer they talked back and forth on the matter, Maes never truly giving up in his wheedling to learn more about this mystery man than he already had, but Daphne fended him off with amused expertise. Only once Maes had temporarily given up did they both hang up their respective phone lines, and as Daphne took her hand away from the receiver she picked up the photo frame containing the picture of her son.

She studied it in silence for a few moments, shifting it subtly this way and that as the low lamp light caught on the glass, before setting it down again with a smile. “Your father would be proud of you…” she murmured before slumping forward over her desk propped up on her elbows with her chin in her hands as she looked across to the wall where the largest photograph she owned of her late husband hung. “He’s finally becoming the man you were.”

The order forms she’d been working on went forgotten as she lost herself in bittersweet memory, and hoped that wherever Roy was right now, that he was doing right by Edward.

Back in Central, Roy had only just managed to convince himself that he was.

It had only taken a few minutes since he’d sat himself down on a barstool with a beer in hand before a young redheaded woman who was most certainly just legal enough slipped up to him, inserting herself between the bar stools so that her skirt brushed up against Roy’s knees.

“I was sorry to hear about what happened last night. I’m sure it must be hard for someone like you to always be in the media eye.” She opened the conversation with a sympathetic smile and a sultry tone.

Roy regarded her impassively for a moment before shrugging with a carefree smirk. “It has its uses. Like helping me weed out those who can’t handle being in my life.”

“You deserve someone who can be, who wouldn’t be scared off by your popularity. Or the reality that being in a relationship with you isn’t entirely a private matter.” The girl agreed with a flirting smile and took another sip of her wine that didn’t keep her from continuing to make eye contact.

Roy rolled the bottom edge of his beer bottle against the counter a moment before giving her a pointed frown, “just how old are you.”

“Old enough to handle myself.” She answered easily with a challenging gleam in her green eyes as she clinked her wineglass to the bar counter in a subconscious effort to display herself for full view.

For Roy, the answer was good enough. Besides, she’d not have been able to get through the doors of this particular bar without being over a certain age. She met every criteria he required, and by the looks of her, he’d have a few fun-filled rounds of sex awaiting him before he’d cut her loose. “Want to go somewhere else to discuss my media fame?” He asked solicitously.

After all, he hadn’t come here to talk.

Within the minute he was escorting her out of the bar, their drinks left unfinished on the counter. In reality it wasn’t too long of a walk back to her place, but to Roy, it felt interminable. Every coy look she gave him made the fragile cage he’d shoved his guilt into grow weaker, every word she said cracked away at his resolve, and every time she smiled… it wasn’t the smile he wanted to see. All in all, it was all coalescing together to make him feel on edge and irritable.
But he had to do this. He had to.

“Are you okay?” The girl asked as they reached her studio apartment at long last.

“More than.” Roy graced her with an appreciative look, gathering his mask about him firmly as he helped her open the door by pressing her into it before shutting it behind them and spinning her around to press her up against it once more, firmly. And keeping her pinned with both body and a hand, he trailed the other seductively into her wavy hair. “Now what do you say you lock that door and we’ll discuss me.”

She smirked with satisfaction and reached over blindly to turn the deadbolt. “Don’t worry, I’ll make you forget about whoever decided not to join you last night.”

Roy wasted no time in dragging her across the small apartment and tumbling her to her bed, and with a desperation he’d not admit to he applied himself to his mission. It was as much a mission to prove to himself that he could still do this, as it was to escape the silver eyes that haunted him from behind pleasure-drugged green ones.

A long time later, after the still nameless girl had slipped into a sexually exhausted unconsciousness, Roy climbed off of her to sit on the edge of the bed with his forehead resting against the palm of one hand.

Over and over he’d taken his frustrations out on the eager girl who he doubted would awaken again any time soon, not after that last purely physical ravishing. Over and over he’d tried to see only her as he pleasured her to the peaks of ecstasy and back again. And now, sitting here at the end of it, he didn’t feel any better. He’d gone through periods of sexual distance before, always by choice… but never had it been so difficult to get back into it.

He’d never felt guilt over it.

Closing his eyes not from weariness, he let out a small sigh before dropping his hand and looking to the illuminated clock on her bedside table. It was still well before midnight and he felt exhausted. Not physically… but mentally.

He was doing the right thing… wasn’t he? What and how he felt for Edward… he couldn’t…

Roy ground his teeth together in a sudden scowl as he forced himself away from those thoughts. The longer he stayed here, the longer he risked her waking up and being forced to tumble her again, so dragging himself to his feet he pulled his clothes back on mechanically before letting himself out her front door without a second look back. He forced himself to start walking back to the busiest bar district, intending to keep going until he felt better.

The girl hadn’t at all accomplished what he’d hoped she would.

So he threw himself recklessly, not even waiting with the next person to get to a bed, much less get somewhere more private than the public restroom inside the club. He didn’t even wait for the person to recover their senses for a second round before he slipped away into the throng of closely dancing bodies, alcohol, and pulsing music. There was hardly a chance that his tryst would be able to find him again easily in this mess. Especially since he wasn’t planning on staying long.

Especially not after he caught the eye of two girls who were dancing with each other, and very closely at that. Not being a man who was at all adverse to two lovely girls all to himself, he bought them both cursory drinks which were downed while they were moving against him in their little dance. Shortly after the current song ended, Roy moved them both outside for a little air whereupon
he reapplied his skills at being able to thoroughly kiss two people at once.

After that it was a quick trip to the college district of Central to tumble the two girls who were more than a little wasted as it turned out, followed by a college boy who he just so happened to run across on his way out.

Afterwards he set out once more, aiming for yet another bar as he tried to ignore the fact that his earlier guilt had been replaced with a hollow emptiness. At least… something was different. Even if it still hurt.

At this next club he didn’t even bother to order a drink. Just leaned up against the wall to watch some of the other patrons do their best attempts at dancing with each other while clearly having had one too many. It was almost amusing enough to make him crack a real smile, almost. As it was, the one he had on now was a fake he’d perfected over many years in the Military. One altered to lure in his nightly prey.

Prey that came to him complete with a drink that was passed into his hands with a hopeful smile.

Roy took a prolonged drink of the offered margarita as his eyes closely studied the man with pale blond hair over its salted rim. Finally he took the drink away, licking his lips for the flavor of the salt, even as with an internal smugness he watched the man shiver at the sight. “Just the right amount of tequila, how did you know?”

“I’ve admired you for a while now.” The man admitted, words made bold by his own drink in his hand.

Roy chuckled, his eyes narrowing in a predatory interest. “And you’re looking to admire more of me?”

A pleasing flush crossed the man’s features, but his gaze remained steady. “There’s no one better than me for the task. I’m dedicated to learning you in a way no one else in here could ever be.”

Roy smirked, and suddenly, without even sloshing his margarita, had snagged the man by his forearm and whirled him around into the wall, pressing up against him bodily in a way that allowed him to feel every contour of the man. “Are you now?” Roy purred, slipping his free hand up under this man’s shirt to caress his side.

The man looked rather rattled by the change in position, but not displeased. “Y-yes.”

Roy smirked, and keeping his eyes firmly on the man, kept sliding his hand upward as he quickly finished off his drink in a rush of tequila that made his senses temporarily spin. “That’s ‘yes, Colonel Mustang’.” He corrected before sliding his tongue along the rim of his emptied margarita glass in order to gather all the salt, watching with superior smugness as the man under his thrall quaked at the sight.

He then shoved the empty glass into the man’s other free hand to best keep him occupied. “Try saying it. If you can’t get it right, I’m leaving here without you.”

The man flushed, ducking his head in slight embarrassment before uttering, “yes, Colonel Mustang.”

“Sir?” Roy prompted with a verging-on-evil grin.

“Yes, Colonel Mustang, sir.”

“Good.” Roy grinned wider, and stroking the man’s hair pulled away with a last pet up the man’s
The man practically ran to the nearest table to rid himself of the drinks before making his way back
to Roy who had continued to watch him with a feral look in his dark eyes. As soon as he reached the
Colonel, he was pulled from the club and out onto the dark but still somewhat busy sidewalk.

“I have a destination in mind.” Roy declared in a tone that promised all forms of depraved things,
and tugged the blond-haired man down a much quieter street. His captive having little choice but to
follow or protest, and the latter was not done.

At least… not until Roy tugged him into an eerie and ramshackle building that had condemned signs
mounted to the front door.

“Hey, what’re you –” but his words were cut off as he was flung further into the darkness and
tripped over a fallen something on the floor, causing him to topple over into a thumping heap.

Roy snapped, causing a desk that remained propped up by only one leg to ignite into flame causing a
steady pulse of light in the room that had once clearly been a waiting room of some sort. Most likely
an office. Just in enough time to see the man he’d thrown reach for something at his side…
underneath his shirt.

He smirked.

“Looking for this?” He asked, and holding his hand up to the light of the fire, he watched the blond
man’s eyes widen as he followed the rocking path of the pistol that Roy had dangling from one
finger.

Roy gave a harsh, bitter laugh as he turned his gaze briefly to the gun in question, looking at it with a
detached disdain. “If you think I don’t know all the spies Grand uses, civilian and military, you’ve
vastly overestimated your own covertness.”

And then he looked to the still-sprawled and decidedly angry man with a bright smile. “You didn’t
seriously think I actually wanted to touch you, did you? I really had you going there, didn’t I. I
admit, had I had at least two more drinks even I would have had myself going. You were so easy to
fool, so easy to play with.”

“Bastard!” The man bit out, struggling to his feet with flashing eyes.

“You didn’t even notice that I was relieving you of your weapons.” Roy added with a weighted hint
of glee. “Grand really knows how to pick them… although I’ll gladly take credit for my own charms.
It was truly flattering of you to fall so handily into my arms.”

“I said shut up!” The man shouted, fairly shaking in his anger.

Roy tilted his head in mocking confusion, “did not. You called me a bastard.”

“I swear, when I get my hands on you –”

“You won’t.” Roy interrupted smoothly, and his eyes began to narrow in a different sort of
predation. “Because you see, I just can’t forgive you for this.” And he lifted the gun, flicking the
safety off as absently as Hawkeye might have. “Not only are you a pathetic excuse for a blond –”

A scream nearly as loud as the gunshot it had followed rang out in the abandoned building, and the
man crumpled to the floor again, clutching his profusely bleeding knee with curses and pained
noises.
“– only one person is allowed to call me a bastard and tell me to shut up in the same conversation –”

Another scream from another gunshot, and the second knee had fairly exploded from the force.

“– and his hands are the only ones I want on me, not yours –”

The man was flung back from the force of another gunshot, this time to the shoulder, and the crack of the shot as it split the air was only barely louder than the snapping of the bones or the punctuated scream.

“– and since he’s not here right now,” Roy’s eyes narrowed in a deadly anger as he stalked forward, the flames casting him into devilish light and shadow as he moved, “there’s nothing keeping me from torturing you until even hell won’t accept your ugly soul.”

“Please, I – I can get you near Grand! I can –”

Roy emptied the fourth shot into the hands that were raised pleadingly up to him, not noticing, nor really caring, when most of the man’s fingers went missing in a bloody spray, or the fact that the bullet had gone on to shallowly impact in the man’s collarbone region. “I don’t need your help for that, you pitiful excuse for a human. Grand always picks the weakest humans… my own people would never blubber and beg.”

“I’ll tell you anything!” The man cried out, practically seizing from the pain lancing through his body.

“We’ll see if you know anything, don’t worry.” Roy smiled sweetly, and reached down to yank the man up while planting the gun and its remaining two shots against the man’s temple as he drug him across the floor on those crippled knees towards the fire that was still steadily consuming the desk. “Just after I make you pay for ruining my shirt.”

It was edging close to an hour later that Roy was walking away from the condemned building that now was engulfed in swirling fire and pouring clouds of thick, putrid smoke. He couldn’t even hear sirens yet in the distance, not that it would matter. The building was past saving, if that last booming collapse was anything to go on.

And as for the only occupant inside it?

It would hardly be recognizable that what was inside had ever been human.

Roy sighed as he walked along the now quite emptier streets, keeping to the shadows as he went. His clothes were absolutely ruined, and he needed a shower for more than the fact that Grand clearly knew enough about his clubbing habits to send a spy in that form.

And after that little side affair, the thought of hooking up with someone else was furthest from his mind. Besides… he needed some time to think.

So he only spared an idle thought as to how he ended up sitting in the park he’d first brought Edward to, rocking slowly back and forth on a swing as his ash-covered boots created divots in the sand. The creaking of the chains as he slowly swung back and forth was soothing to his mind, and he leaned his head against the cool chain with a labored exhale.

This was not at all how he’d pictured his night ending. In some ways, it was highly inconvenient, and only made him want to kill Grand all the more. In others… it had been resolutely affirming.

He’d spent the entire night trying to run from his feelings. Spent it trying to forget and leave behind
the desire he felt. Spent it trying to ignore his guilt, and tell himself it was okay. And then it had all been brought to an abrupt about-face… he had happened, and he had wrenched the repressed truth out of him.

Roy closed his eyes, and kicked the swing back higher into the air, enjoying the calming rush of cool wind against his face. “It’s hopeless… it just had to be Edward…” he murmured to the quiet night air, and let the swing rock back to stillness on its own.

Absently he realized that he was taking the loss of a life-held mantra rather calmly. Far more calmly than he might have ever imagined. And he had never imagined that this would happen, or that if it did, it should at least come to pass by him drinking himself into unconsciousness. But then… he’d not imagined a lot of things before Edward had come into his life.

And it wasn’t as if he hadn’t tried to stay true to what he’d believed. He had tried… he really had. And now, feeling more than exhausted in every way, and having had his evening come to a bloody end, he now only believed he wanted nothing more than to go home.

Home to Edward.

And so he hopped from the swing before it had truly come to a stop and began to make his way back home, with each step feeling a sense of lightness steal over him that there hadn’t been before. A sense of eagerness at the thought of the silvery ghost who waited for him. And a sense of urgency upon remembering how disappointed Edward had been when he’d announced his plans to go out for the evening.

“I’m such a damn fool.” Roy breathed out, and barely registered that he’d broken into a run.

All such awareness had been overcome by this relief and need to be back where he belonged. So he ran.

Yet when he reached his house, still dark as he’d left it save for the singular light on in his bedroom, he hesitated at the gate. He was barely out of breath, but he stood there a moment even so, looking up at that light as a fond smile caused his gaze to soften.

“He’s going to be so mad at me.” Roy chuckled helplessly, and let himself through the gate.

Mad, he would soon come to learn, hardly covered it.

Edward heard the front door close and lock, so he immediately abandoned the book he’d been reading onto the bed and fell down through the floor to pop out on the downstairs level before moving to the entry way. “You better not have brought anyone back with you, you’re early.”

Roy grimaced at the thought, but didn’t answer it as he braced himself for all the explaining he was about to be doing, and reached for the light switch. “No. But promise me you won’t freak out too badly? I’m okay, I swear.”

Edward stopped next to the man, barely able to see him in the darkness, and a shadow of uncertainty creeping at him. “Freak out?” He repeated, and a flicker of panic began to edge into his mind. “What happened?”

Roy turned on the light switch.

Edward actually fell back through the air several paces as his silver eyes went wide at the sight of the man. “I’m not promising that!” He screeched, panic alighting his silver eyes as he frantically looked the man over.
Roy was covered from face to boots in blood spatters and ash. His clothes had been completely ruined by the amount of blood that had soaked them, and flecks of other organic material that was decidedly not blood were stuck here and there.

“I’m not hurt, I swear!” Roy quickly appeased, holding his hands up quickly.

Edward felt he might have been ill, for the fact he couldn’t be. “Not yet you’re not!” He exclaimed with growing distress.

At this point, Hazel had raced downstairs, intent on chastising his human, before catching sight and probably smell of him. With widened rodent eyes and a spooked look he raced back up the stairs with a squeal.

Neither noticed him.

“What the fuck happened to you?” Edward demanded weakly, though with no less panic.

Roy grimaced as he looked down at himself. It looked so much worse in actual proper lighting. “I’ll tell you after I clean up. You don’t really want me to stay looking like this, do you?” He pointed out, and began to move towards the stairs.

“Oh no you don’t!” Edward darted through the air to block his path with arms outstretched. “There is no fucking way I am letting you upstairs into our bedroom covered in that! You are turning yourself right back around, Roy Mustang, going out that front door and around back where you will take those things off, incinerate them, and then shower with the garden hose!”

Roy felt he deserved any and all harassment that Edward would send his way, and he meekly nodded and moved to do as told. “Bring me a towel and some more clothes then?”

“And soap.” Edward growled as he looked the man over. “I’d bring you bleach if it wouldn’t kill you. And by the way, you’re cleaning everything you touched on your way in. You’ll do it before you go to bed tonight or I swear that you will regret not doing it.”

“Whatever you want.” Roy agreed easily and quickly, hoping to temper some of the anger he knew was building. Right before he let himself back outside to go start doing as he’d been told. Starting with burning all his offending clothes.

Edward meanwhile had gone up to the bathroom, his earlier panic still quite present as he quickly gathered the soap and shampoo into a towel and then ransacked Roy’s closet for pajamas. Once he had everything he exited the house through the outer wall to go down to where Roy was currently rinsing himself off with the garden hose, a smoking section of charred ground not too far away.

Edward set the clothes and towel on the grass far enough way so they’d not get wet before walking over to the drenched man with the shampoo and soap, not even caring that the man was utterly naked. He was too upset to even register it as he shoved the items at the man. “You will scrub every inch of you at least twice.”

Roy barely had time to feel flustered at his nakedness in front of Edward before he was forced to grab onto the items. Then he couldn’t decide whether or not he was disappointed that Edward didn’t seem inclined to look. “Mind holding this then?” He asked, waving the hose about.

Edward eyed it distastefully before grabbing onto it anyway, “you’re washing this too. Now scrub!”

Roy scrubbed. First with shampoo, then with the soap, and then twice more with the soap in respect to Edward’s pointed looks. Looks which were always kept above the neckline… much to Roy’s
hidden disappointment.

Then Edward was agreeing to turning off the water, so he did and walked off a ways into the backyard with his back turned to the man as Roy toweled off and got dressed. And he stood there in the grass, his arms wrapped around himself as he stared hard up at the moon.

It brought him no comfort right now.

Finally Roy was dressed, and slinging the towel over his shoulder looked over to where the ghost stood with his shoulders set in a hard line. Feeling understandably uneasy, he made his way over to the ghost. “Edward…” he began softly, and reached out a hand towards the spirit.

Edward whirled away, his silver eyes flashing in anger. “What the – what happened to you!” He demanded to know.

Roy didn’t even care about where they were enough to ask that they go back inside. Besides, he wasn’t planning on raising his voice, and it was too late an hour for any of his neighbors to be awake and about. Right now, all he cared about was the troubled ghost standing before him… knowing that Edward’s anger only stemmed from the panic he’d been in earlier. “I’m sorry, Edward, that you had to see that.”

“Shut up!” Edward snapped.

Roy barely kept from smiling at the irony.

“Tell me the truth, did you go after Grand alone tonight? I know that you think you’ve an idea as to where that lab is!”

Roy shook his head, his eyes never leaving Edward’s. “No, but he sent someone after me. Someone to one of the clubs. I had no choice but to take care of it and…” he trailed off there, his gaze falling at last to the side in hesitance.

“And?” Edward prompted firmly, even as his mind raced with the knowledge that Roy had been in danger tonight. Danger that he hadn’t been there to help protect him from.

“I tortured him… and not like you saw me do before. Back then I had held back because of you, because I didn’t want you to see me like that... and then I had to scare you like this.” Roy added regretfully. “I’m sorry, Edward. I’m sorry for scaring you.”

Edward glared at him a few moments longer, before his hardened posture shifted into something more helpless as Roy’s words finally got to him, and the panic and anger began to melt away leaving him with only exhausted relief. “You idiot…” he murmured, and nudged the heel of his hand against the pressure he could feel behind his eyes. A pressure he knew would never release anyway.

Roy smiled fondly then, and reaching a hand out, stroked it against the face he knew could not feel him. “I’m so sorry…”

“You’re really okay? You’re not hurt?” Edward asked in a choked voice, turning over-bright silver eyes up onto the man. And his hands reached out to the man’s shirt, as if to cling to it.

“Not a scratch, I promise.” Roy soothed, lowering his hand to cover one of the incorporeal ones. “You could check me over, if you like?”

Edward gave a watery-sounding chuckle that was supposed to have come out as something outraged. “Idiot.” He repeated quietly and gave a halting breath of air he didn’t need. “If you ever
scare me like that again you will need to be checked over.”

Roy smiled happily, ignoring Edward’s weak scowl as he did. “I knew you’d be mad at me, but I also knew you’d be worried.”

“Go clean everything you touched, you bastard!” Edward flared up, jabbing a finger towards the house. “And then I want you in bed, no arguments!”

Roy grinned at the orders, and tried to ignore the way his body wanted to react to the last one. For fuck’s sake, he’d spent his entire night sleeping around, he’d have thought even his libido had limits. But that didn’t prevent him from answering with a smug: “I would never argue you wanting me in bed.”

Edward knew that if he were capable of it, he’d have turned several shades of red. But all he could really do was squeak a “now!” and point towards the house again.

Edward kept a close eye on Roy’s cleaning activities. Even going so far as to order Roy to scrub something again, and this time to put some more effort into it. He didn’t care that the man must be tired, and probably under the effects of more alcohol than was healthy. He wanted their house clean.

Only once he was satisfied at the spotless and sanitary state of the house and anything Roy might have touched did he allow the man to get up off his knees and go upstairs to bed. When the man went without complaint, Edward went into the kitchen where he began to mix up some more hot chocolate.

He knew it helped the man after a long night like he’d had… and he knew it would help Roy sleep. Something that he worried the man might not be able to do restfully after having killed someone just hours ago.

He knew how death sometimes weighed on the man, even if it didn’t seem that Roy particularly cared about the death of those involved with Basque Grand.

He mixed the hot chocolate slowly, not rushing the process as some nights he’d done. Tonight he found his own sense of comfort in the act of what he was doing, each measured sweep of the whisk through the creamy mixture helping him put some order to his frenzied thoughts.

By the time he had a steaming mug full of hot chocolate, Edward felt a bit better, and he made his way --upstairs to Roy.

Just as he’d ordered, the man was abed.

Edward paused a moment as Roy’s unreadable gaze found his, but when the man lifted up the covers in invitation, he hesitated no longer. Floating over he climbed into the bed and passed the man the mug as the blankets fell back over them both.

“Thanks.” Roy murmured in pleasant surprise, and began to drink.

Looking over at Roy as the man happily drank, he smiled sadly before twisting his hands in the covers and staring down at them. “When I saw you covered in all that blood… I thought it was yours.” He began softly. “I thought the worst. And I know how stubborn you are, you’d haul yourself in acting fine just because that’s you.”

Roy lifted the mug of hot chocolate away, his dark eyes resting on the silvery apparition at his side. “I know.”
“I’m so damn scared of losing you, Roy. And I…” Edward trailed off, as if reliving a bitter memory, and in truth, he was. “There are things worse than death, Roy. I should know… and I know I’d do anything to keep you alive.”

Roy felt himself soften at the words, felt his fondness for the ghost at his side only grow… just when he thought he couldn’t care any more than he already did for Edward, he was always proven wrong. “Tonight I realized something I should have a long time ago… and you should know that the entire time I was subduing that spy, all I could think of was you… and how wrong it was that the spy should tell me to shut up and call me a bastard when that’s solely your privilege.”

Edward looked at him in puzzlement for a moment, before a shy expression crossed his face. “Shut up.” He murmured, and flopped down onto his back as he turned towards Roy.

Roy smiled tenderly, and reached out to brush his hand through the silvery hair next to his leg, his attentions going unnoticed by Edward. After a moment of hesitation where his heart seemed to race too fast, he opened his mouth again, ready to confess the rest of what he’d hidden behind that sentence, only to close it again with a brief flicker of regret in his eyes.

Edward had been through enough tonight because of him.

Slowly he released the sigh that had built inside him, and he resumed drinking his hot chocolate once more, trying to tell himself that it wasn’t because he was scared to know what Edward would say.

That it wasn’t because he was scared to know what Edward would do.

Lowering his mug of hot chocolate, nearly gone now, he smiled down gently at the head of silvery hair that his fingers still passed through in stroking motions, feeling the truth of what he finally had accepted somewhere along the way tonight glowing warmly inside of him despite his fears.

He had fallen in love with Edward.
“Morning!”

Edward screeched in alarm, flailing to one side before catching himself with a sidelong glower over to where Roy had just flopped himself next to him. “One of these days, Roy…” he grumbled in promise.

Roy chuckled, smirking over at the ghost before planting his feet on the roof and leaning forward against his propped up legs. “Of course,” he agreed amiably. “Where’s the sun?”

“It’s not risen yet, you moron.” Edward pointed out balefully, before turning to look towards the pale, but still sunless horizon for a moment, then turning back to the man still watching him. “You’re up early, why?”

Roy merely smiled, and then a deep sigh came out of him as he turned to watch the sky. “I once promised myself I’d watch the sunrise with you. Today felt like a good day for it.”

Edward gave a small frown, his head tilting oddly as he studied the man. “Honestly I’m surprised you’re awake after the night you had.” And then on sudden inspiration, asked, “you’re not sleepwalking, are you?”

Roy snorted at the idea, shaking his head. He certainly was not, and by all rights, he should still be asleep… but after last night’s revelation he felt surprisingly revitalized. It was the exact opposite of what he’d always believed he would feel if this happened. Not that he ever had believed it would. But there were no bouts of depression, manly tears, or anger at his apparent weakness to be drowned in copious amounts of alcohol. There was just this strange calm, this relief, and a sensation of lightness that he’d never before felt.

Studying Edward fondly, and that doubtful look the ghost was looking at him with, he could only smile.

He truly did love him.

Apparently that made all the difference. Then again, Edward always had.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Edward pressed, unnerved by the lack of verbal reassurance and the unwavering attention that Roy was smiling at him with.

Roy laughed, and then as he thought about the question and just what situation he now found himself in, laughed harder. It was a long moment of pure laughter before he was able to somewhat control himself enough to say “yes” in between a smile and another laugh. “Edward, you really are something, you know that?”

Edward blinked at Roy owlishly, completely baffled by his behavior. “I am?”

“Yeah…” Roy smiled, softer this time as he began to lose himself in watching the ghost beside him. “Yeah, you are.” And reaching out as if to stroke through the silvery fringe of hair blocking some of Edward’s face, his smile turned lopsided. “I’m okay, I promise.”

Edward leaned towards the touch without conscious thought, “good. Although you’re still up far
earlier than you should be, and you’re laughing.”

“I had a good night last night.” And at the repulsed look Edward rapidly gained, Roy quickly backpedalled with a hasty wave of his hand. “Not because of that!”

“The manwhoring or the killing people?” Edward deadpanned, unimpressed.

Roy smiled easily, “neither. It was something completely different,” and his expression sobered thoughtfully just enough to notice, “so in advance… I’m sorry about leaving you here last night to go out for that. I know you wanted me to stay, I should have.”

Edward stared at him wide-eyed, before frantically jumping in. “No! I didn’t –”

“I wanted to stay.” Roy interrupted quickly, not wanting to hear Edward lie to him. He knew it would be a lie, one meant to protect him from feeling guilt. But the thought that Edward would do that for him hurt. He never wanted Edward to lie about what he was feeling, what he wanted, just to spare him.

Edward was left speechless a moment, his mind having gone blank of what he’d been trying to say. Then slowly, Roy’s words sank in.

He’d wanted to stay.

Roy had wanted to stay… and he’d wanted him to stay, so badly it had hurt. But still, he’d not said anything because he’d thought he had no right to ask it. Suddenly unable to look at the man who was studying him so closely, Edward turned away hastily and at last managed to find his words. “You did?”

“Yeah.” Roy smiled softly, his voice quiet as he reached a hand over to rest it over Edward’s knee. “I’d say that next time you should tell me… but there won’t be a next time, Edward.”

Edward jolted in shock and confusion at that statement, and that shock overrode whatever had overcome him earlier as his head whipped back around towards the man.

Roy smiled at the surprised spirit, not sure that Edward even realized the hope that had begun to shine in his silver eyes. Gate help him, how he loved those eyes, and raising his hand from over Edward’s knee he signaled him to be quiet just a moment longer. “Even so, I want you to promise me that you’ll never try to lie to me again to spare me from whatever guilt you think I might gain. Promise me that if there’s ever something you want from me, you’ll not try and hide it from me again, because I know you wanted me to stay… and I’m sorry that I was so much of a bastard, and a fool, that I didn’t.”

Edward knew that Roy was waiting for him to say something, and there were so many things he wanted to say… slowly he shifted on the roof until he sat facing Roy, and one of his hands had risen to toy with a lock of his hair as he tried to puzzle this whole thing out. “Why are you saying these things?” He finally asked, and with that one question, the rest tumbled out in a flood.

“How am I wrong?” Roy asked gently, knowing he had to take this one step at a time.

“How didn’t you stay, if you knew? Wouldn’t you have gone anyway, even if I had said something? If you wanted to stay, why did you leave me last night? And why the sudden change of heart about it? I never wanted to take over your life! I didn’t! Just because I –” Edward hesitated, his silver eyes torn with the sudden onslaught of emotions before he shut them hard, continuing a bit more softly in his embarrassment, but unable and unwilling to stop himself even so. “Just because I hate it, just because you’re wrong about me. You don’t have to do these things because of me.”

“How am I wrong?” Roy asked gently, knowing he had to take this one step at a time.
Edward looked down at his legs morosely, “you once told me that I couldn’t be selfish if I tried. That’s not true… it didn’t use to be this way… but I’ve become selfish over you. You don’t like sharing me with anyone, is it so hard to believe that I feel the same?”

Roy didn’t even try to hide the delight he felt at Edward’s words, nor the sparkle of happiness that appeared in his eyes. Not that the embarrassed ghost could see it anyway. “Did you really hate it when I’d go out?”

“Yes.” Edward muttered almost petulantly. “Not at first, but yes.”

“You wanted to know why I left last night…” Roy murmured, though he knew Edward had heard him by the slight shift in the ghost’s posture. “Aside from being the bastard and idiot that you always accuse me of being, I was trying to deny that I’ve gotten accustomed to a life with you. That being with you was enough for me, and everything I never knew I wanted. I’ve been alone for a long time, Edward… and life-shaking changes and I don’t always mix sanely.”

Edward managed a small smile at that, he couldn’t help it. He knew how true it was. Whenever Roy encountered something that truly shook him to his core, he didn’t always react sensibly. But looking up at Roy, still smiling, his silver eyes had lit up with a flicker of humor. “I’m your next life-shaking change?”

“Yes.” Roy affirmed in a tone that welcomed no argument. “I know what you’ve said in the past; that I need a life outside you, that I shouldn’t ignore the outside world, and I understand that. I won’t. I’m not about to abandon my friends, my ambitions, my mother, my team, but I’m not abandoning you either. Not again. Do you understand? I want to keep what matters to me.”

Edward nodded, shoving aside those last fragments of an argument, the only one he knew he’d never have won, for his resolve in them had already broken long ago.

“Besides,” Roy grinned easily, leaning back on his hands as he looked out towards where the horizon was beginning to quickly brighten with the coming sunrise. “The manwhoring is getting dangerous. I can appreciate kinky and rough sex, but I have to draw the line at gunplay.”

“Gunplay?” Edward echoed weakly, then decided he really did not want to know. Any other day, Roy might have launched into an explanation sure to give him the most priceless reaction from the ghost, but today was not any other day. Instead, he merely smiled. “So I do believe I’m going to be all yours, that is, as long as you want me home?” He asked in a slightly teasing voice.

Edward couldn’t have hid his happiness if he tried, and he nodded eagerly. “Yes! Of course I do.”

Roy smiled wider, “good.” And then nudging his shoulder towards Edward, nodded out to where the sun was now rising. “Here it comes.”

Both of them were quickly distracted by watching the sunrise. Edward to a far greater extent than Roy, who could not stare at it for too long. But if Roy spent more time watching him than watching the horizon, Edward didn’t notice. He was too entranced, too caught up in soaking in the steadiness and the strength that the sun seemed to give him. It was something he needed after everything Roy had said.

They sat there together until the sun had fully risen past the horizon, only then did Roy stretch and move to get to his feet. “Come on, I have to get ready for work.”

Edward stirred as well, and as Roy offered down a hand, he took it in his own way and took to
hovering just above the roof tiles. “Think Grand will have realized by now what you did?”

“I’d be insulted if he hasn’t.” Roy replied, matter of fact, “I certainly hope he doesn’t believe that the reason his little mercenary didn’t report back was because I bedded him thoroughly.”

“I don’t even want to know what you did to him.” Edward muttered, remembering the blood that had covered Roy. “I was really scared…”

Roy’s face softened. He knew, Edward had told him as much last night, and even if he hadn’t… he knew. He could only imagine what his own thoughts would have been if their positions had been reversed and Edward had come inside covered in blood. “I’m sorry, Ed.”

Edward shook his head, brushing off the apology. “You’d have to apologize to me if you’d gotten yourself killed.”

Roy smiled as he began making his way towards where he could start climbing back down the side of the house. “I sincerely hope that doesn’t happen any time soon. Especially not by Grand’s hands. That would just be depressing.”

Edward snorted, but followed after Roy. “You’d best get on with it and kill him before I do, because if this is what his interference in your life does to you… I’ve never heard you say so many shocking things before.”

Roy had already begun scaling his way back down the house, and smiled thinly though he did not take his eyes from the wall in front of him. “It isn’t him who’s been changing me, Ed. You give yourself too little credit… because I’m not fool enough any longer to realize I was changing since the day I met you.”

“I’d have been sad, if you’d stayed the same… because for that to happen, you’d have ignored me from the start.” Edward murmured as he descended down towards the grass, and didn’t need to wait long at all before Roy had scaled his way back down the wall.

“Not even Grand can ignore you, and he doesn’t even realize you exist.” Roy pointed out, dropping the last bit of distance to the ground and smirking at Edward. “You’re probably his greatest enemy. The one he can’t identify. I admit to being a bit envious.”

Edward scowled somewhat at the notion. “Before I met you I had no enemies. You’re a bad influence, Roy Mustang.”

Roy laughed openly and winked at the ghost before turning to make his way inside through the back door. “I’d feel offended if you believed I was a good one.”

Together they entered the house, and Edward trailed Roy back upstairs to the bedroom. Yet when Roy entered the room, he stopped just short of actually making it through the doorway with an “oh.”

There, sitting in the middle of the bed, was Hazel.

Hazel had arrived into the bedroom some time ago, hoping to find his frustrating owner still abed and open to a rude awakening that would befit him after the previous evening. Instead, he’d found the bed empty. The mere fact of his revengeful fun being taken from him was causing his tail to twitch in sharp, irritated snaps as he sat on his haunches, staring down his owner.

“Hazel…” Roy began uncertainly, seeing the look he was being pinned mercilessly with.

Hazel immediately raised onto his hind legs, beginning a shrill chattering reprimand. Covering
everything from how his owner had made his invisible friend sad last night, to the state of how he’d come home, to the fact he’d gotten up early. And when he’d covered it all, he began again just to be sure that Roy hadn’t missed anything. His owner, after all, could be very dimwitted.

Roy stood meekly through the entire tirade, and the next, feeling properly chastised.

Edward had scooted around to Roy’s side to watch the entire affair, a wicked grin on his lips. And although Hazel couldn’t hear him interrupt, he still felt a bit nervous about it as he glanced towards Roy. “I’m afraid this is partially my fault.”

“What?” Roy hissed out of the corner of his mouth, hoping he wouldn’t be heard by his incensed pet.

Hazel immediately began screeching at him, waving front paws to emphasize important chatters.

Edward giggled, then quickly sobered. “He only started avoiding you last night when he sensed I was sad. He spent last night trying to cheer me up.”

Roy sobered too, something far different from the effect Hazel’s reprimands were having. He should have stayed, and while he’d already apologized to Edward for leaving, it didn’t help soothe his regret about it. But he hadn’t yet apologized to Hazel. So steeling himself, he walked over to the bed where Hazel remained enthroned with indignation.

Edward didn’t say anything, but his eyebrows rose in curiosity as he watched Roy kneel down at the side of the bed.

“Hazel.” Roy interrupted firmly, holding up one hand.

Hazel quieted quickly, and with narrowed eyes he scampered to the side of the bed to peer imperiously down at his kneeling owner.

Roy smiled with a flicker of humor and then bowed his head in apology. “I’m truly sorry that I made Edward sad last night. If I hadn’t been such an idiot I’d have stayed with him, like he wanted.”

Edward studied the man, trying not to feel embarrassed at the turn this apology was taking.

“I know he’s your friend, and he’s –” Roy halted a moment, his eyes softening as a defeated smile took its place, “he’s very special to me. I never should have hurt him like that.”

Hazel mumbled to himself, as if debating the words, when really he was mulling over Roy’s tone.

Edward smiled then, and on a sudden decision, went to Roy’s side to fold his legs under him and sit. He didn’t even realize he was leaning towards Roy as he reached out a hand for Hazel to lock in on.

Hazel immediately perked up in a far different manner, and squealed in delight as he reached out towards the presence he could feel. And his tail began to fluff and twitch happily as he sensed only peace from his friend. There were no more traces of sadness.

Roy didn’t even realize Edward’s presence until he was hit in the chest with a launching ball of rust-brown fur, and sitting back on his legs as well he held a cuddling Hazel to him with a fond smile as he rubbed his fingers into the tiny body.

“I’m very special to you?” Edward asked with a soft, unassuming smile as he watched the pair make up.
Roy gave a throaty chuckle and a lopsided smile as he watched the ghost through fond eyes. “It’s hardly justice for what you mean to me.” And he wanted to tell Edward just how much. He wanted to tell him so badly it was tearing at him, but opening his mouth again all he got out was a barely audible sound before a flustering wave of nerves hit him and he staggered back to his feet in a barely coordinated way. “I’m never going to get to work on time like this.” He managed to splutter before he fled.

Edward barely had time to process the man moving before Roy was suddenly behind the bathroom door, and he blinked owlishly several times before floating up to sit on the bed. He wasn’t sure what had gotten into the man, but it certainly was giving him pause.

He’d never believed that *anything* would cause Roy to take a break from his manwhoring. Especially not anything that Grand had a hand in, however slight. If anything, Edward believed that it would have only made Roy frequent the bars more often, just to spite the Brigadier General. The fact that Roy was acting the opposite, however smart it was, was baffling.

Not that he wanted to complain…

The knowledge that Roy would be home with him now, instead of sleeping around, gave him a feeling of relief and peace that he hadn’t realized it would. He hadn’t been looking forward to more repeats of last night, and how he’d felt when Roy had walked out that door. He was happiest when Roy was with him… and even though he knew it was selfish of him, Roy hadn’t seemed to mind when he’d admitted as much.

With a flicker of humor that startled a small laugh from him, Edward wondered what Maes would say, if he knew. Or what Daphne would. It was almost a shame that he had no way of easily telling them without clueing Roy in on what he was doing, he would love to see their reactions. And he suspected that Roy wouldn’t be telling them on his own.

Resolving that he’d need a miracle to occur, Edward turned his attention to what he *could* do.

He could do something to Grand.

The knowledge that Grand had been behind the events of last night, and the scare he’d had over Roy showing up covered in blood did nothing to sate his vengeance against the man. Grand had taken this covert battle of wits onto personal terrain, and Edward didn’t like it.

He knew that Grand couldn’t escape unscathed from this transgression, as he knew Roy was going to allow for the good of the greater picture. Luckily, he answered to no greater picture. He supported it, but when it went too far, he was glad to be free of this maddening political game. So he would do what he could to strike back on Roy’s behalf.

He couldn’t allow Grand to think that interfering in Roy’s personal life was an act to go unpunished.

He was mulling over possible plans of attack when Roy finally emerged from the bathroom.

“Don’t try and stop me.”

Roy abruptly halted just out of the doorway of the bathroom, the towel he’d been drying his hair with falling quiet as his eyes landed quickly on the ghost. A small frown began as he shooed Hazel from his other arm up onto his shoulder. “Stop you?”

Edward nodded resolutely, looking over at him now. “I don’t know what I’ll end up doing, but I have to do something to get back at Grand. I can’t allow him to think he can try and win this thing through your personal life.”
The frown didn’t go away, but Roy slowly took the towel from his hair only to fling it up on top of Hazel who squeaked in offense and clambered onto his head instead to dangle his tail between Roy’s eyes. “I won’t try and stop you, if this is what you want. Just be certain the Fuhrer is nowhere nearby. I’d have a hard time getting to you in Grand’s office.”

“Now you just sound lazy.” Edward grinned, but knew how serious the matter was.

“Not impossible,” Roy made an effort to smile, “just hard.” And he walked over to sit down next to the ghost on their bed, staring down at his knees. “I’d get to you if I had to.”

Edward looked at him for a long moment, not saying anything. Finally he pulled his legs up under him, settling onto the bed a bit further. “I don’t have any desire to repeat the experience of being around the Fuhrer any sooner than I have to.”

“Good, else I’d have to wonder if the last experience addled your brain.” Roy smirked then and gave a slight frown upwards as Hazel rearranged himself on top of his head. He had no clue what the squirrel was up to, but if the sudden paws in his hair were any clue, he was getting a grooming. “Anyway,” he reached up to pluck the rodent off his head and smirk further at the reproachful look Hazel gave him, “I need to finish getting ready, and then we can go.”

“Yes… I can’t do anything to Grand if I’m here.” Edward said firmly.

Roy’s expression was one of reluctance, yet the humored agreement that came from resigning himself to the knowledge that he couldn’t stop Edward anyway. All he could do was tell the ghost to be careful, as he always did. He’d never been able to stomach the thought of anything happening to Edward before, and now that he realized just how deeply he cared for Edward, how desperately he loved the fiery spirit who’d dropped into his life, the thought of Edward coming to harm was practically unbearable.

Edward cocked his head, seeing the torn expression on Roy’s face, and frowned in concern as he twisted around the man to peer up at him, balancing his hands on either side of Roy. “Yes, mother, I’ll be careful. I know that look, you know I do.”

Roy shook himself out of his thoughts, managing a faint mocking scowl. “If you’re not I won’t even wait for an exorcist to get there, I’ll find their silly little spells and banish you myself.”

Edward grinned, it had been a while since Roy had mentioned exorcists.

“It’s going to be a miracle, isn’t it.” Roy realized as he reached a hand up to stroke at Edward’s shoulder, “if I manage to get to work on time.” And honestly, right now, he was having serious considerations of not going into work at all today. Calling the entire affair off if Edward continued to remain so close to him, fairly sprawled over his lap and staring up at him with those silvery eyes.

But he knew Edward would pout over not being able to harm Grand today, followed by demanding an explanation. An explanation…

Was wanting to spend the day with Edward away from the workplace, away from a weekend, an explanation that would soothe Edward’s pout? Was wanting not to need to focus on his work, so that he could just focus on Edward an explanation? Was wanting to spend an entire day making Edward laugh and smile an explanation?

Never before had he a stronger desire to take anyone into his arms, and he let himself imagine that Edward would come willingly… if he could.

“Roy?”
The sound of his name made Roy blink, and suddenly Edward was in focus again. His hand was still resting just above Edward’s shoulder, and he gave a fond smile as he slid it down the ethereal glow of Edward’s arm until his hand rested through the ghost’s on their bed.

“Sorry.” Roy murmured, and allowed himself a few moments longer to gaze into those silvery eyes before he forced himself up.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Edward turned with a frown, still not getting up from the bed as he watched Roy move to the closet to search for the uniform jacket. “You’re acting…” he tilted his head with a deepening frown, “distracted. Different.”

Roy’s hands froze on the jacket he had been working free of its hanger, his gaze dipping down towards the floor as his mind wandered to a place that made his heart pound fiercely. Then with shaking hands he barely managed to conceal and then quiet before Edward noticed, he pulled on the military jacket. “It’s not an act.”

Edward blinked after him in surprise and confusion as Roy was suddenly gone from their bedroom. He didn’t even manage to get in a token vocal protest before he was scrambling from the bed and dropping down through the floor to intercept Roy at the bottom of the stairs.

Roy couldn’t even manage to feel proud that he startled only a little as suddenly Edward was there blocking his path. He was too invested in attempting to bring his racing heart and emotions to heel.

“You can’t just walk away from me like that.” Edward scolded him firmly, his silver eyes flashing as he jabbed a finger ineffectually at Roy’s chest. “What sort of idiocy are you mulling over this time? And don’t you dare try to deny it, you’re my personal idiot for a reason and you’re more of an idiot than I thought if you think I don’t know the signs.”

Roy wavered where he stood on the last stair before he slowly stepped down from it, and when Edward didn’t move back to put distance between them again, he reached out to encircle Edward’s ethereal forearm in his hand. “Edward…”

He was an idiot. He knew it well. And he’d never felt it so clearly as he did now when faced with the perfect opportunity to tell the ghost in no uncertain terms just how he felt. Just how crazy it had made him to try and deny his feelings. Feelings that the more he thought about it, the more he began to wonder if he hadn’t been falling in love with Edward since the moment he’d brought the ghost into his home.

Perhaps later Edward would call him an idiot for not confessing in this perfect opportunity, but Roy knew that he couldn’t. He wouldn’t.

He’d put Edward through so much because of his selfish desires; blind and even more recently, blatant disregard for Edward’s own feelings. He’d said so many things he was coming to regret saying, and last night he’d realized he could never feel as if he deserved Edward if he won Edward’s love through a simple confession.

He dared to hope that Edward loved him in return, even if the ghost didn’t yet recognize the feelings for what they were. He had enough evidence to give him that hope, though it felt fragile in his current vulnerable state. Yet with that hope, fragile though it may feel, Roy knew what he had to do.

“You have my word that I’m okay.” Roy said at last, not looking from Edward’s searching eyes. “I am distracted, but you’ll know why soon enough. I feel it’d be an injustice to you to tell you now.”

“And you don’t feel it’s an injustice to aggravate me like this?” Edward asked, even though he was
partially mollified by the promise that he’d know what was up with Roy without having to find some way to beat that ludicrous nobility out of him again.

“It’s my personal privilege.” Roy grinned at him unrepentantly.

Edward scowled, much to Roy’s growing amusement, and he shook his head as he at last stepped back from the man. “At this rate you’re going to have to take the motorcycle to get to work on time.”

Roy smirked a bit as he stepped around Edward and made his way to the front door. “It’s not quite time for me to pull it out. Besides, until I’m sure that I have it set up so I won’t fall through it and you can’t hijack it, I don’t mind walking.”

Edward didn’t even debate the assumption that he’d attempt to make off with the motorcycle. Both of them knew very well how much he desired to take it for a ride. And all things considered, he’d enjoy running off with it just to see Roy’s reaction. He didn’t even need a real reason to qualify Roy’s fears.

And so the motorcycle stayed where it was, hidden beside the small shed in the backyard.

When they arrived neither of them had been expecting to be the first there. So they weren’t surprised when Hawkeye looked up at Roy’s entrance. They were surprised, however, when she threw herself from her chair with an immense look of relief and came to a stumbling stop before her colonel.

Roy stared at her with a mixture of confusion and outright concern. “…Riza?”

Edward too was thrown by this new side of the fiery woman he’d come to believe of her. “You aren’t that late… are you?”

Riza barely took a moment to try to compose herself before she gave up and seized him by the arm in haste. “The Brigadier General is searching your office right now!” She hissed in as high a voice as she dared. “Why’d you show up late today of all days?”

“It couldn’t be helped.” Roy murmured back, keeping his voice low, a frown quickly gathering between his brows. “What reason did he give for searching my office?”

“Does it matter?” Edward demanded icily, suddenly bolting into the air and headlong through the wall into the office.

It took every ounce of control that Roy had not to follow after him in that moment. He had to trust that Edward would be all right on his own for a little while. But it still clenched his chest in worry.

Riza gave a fracturing sigh that spoke of the stress she’d been under now quickly leaving her. “With the game you’re playing, what do you think? He claimed he believed you to be dead and wants to hunt for clues as to where you might have managed it.”

“I see you didn’t believe that.” Roy observed gratefully, not wanting to have had to deal with a spooked staff as well as a prowling Brigadier General. “Although where he got the notion that I was injured I’ll never know. Maybe he’s gotten one too many knocks on the head. No matter… I’ll deal with it. Just stay out here and keep anyone else from entering.”

“Yes, sir.” Riza answered perfunctorily, although her eyes were still a bit haunted. Her colonel could say whatever he liked, but there was one thing they all feared, and that was ever getting news that Roy had been killed. Most of them still owed him too much to allow him to die now.

Roy gave a short nod and quickly started after the ghost, not at all comfortable with the idea of
leaving Edward alone in there for too long. If he didn’t hurry, he may not get any straight answers out of the General before Edward’s pranks incapacitated him. “Oh, and Riza, it’s good to know you worry about me sometimes.” He called back to the woman. Stopping in front of his office door he shot her a cheeky grin before it fell away as he let himself inside his office.

Riza stared as the office door closed behind him, and hesitated a moment at the idea of trying to eavesdrop before she gave a shake of her head. If things got out of hand, she wouldn’t be of any use standing at keyholes. So she quickly went back to her desk and sat down, her gun in hand and the safety off beyond the concealing shelter of her desk.

Roy didn’t even have to search for Edward, but he was confused for a moment on what the ghost was doing. He’d fully expected Edward to have loosed the ceiling tiles by now, but the ghost sat instead on the back of the black couch, kicking his legs with a smug expression.

It took only one look at the surprised Brigadier General to see why.

“Colonel Mustang! How fortunate it is that you’re okay! I’d believed the worst.”

The Brigadier General said all this hunched over, with his hand caught firmly in one of the desk drawers.

Edward was smirking steadily, “my mother always said something about getting hands caught in cookie jars. Do you think this counts? He can’t perform alchemy like that. You’re safe.”

It took a great deal of Roy’s composure not to laugh at Grand’s predicament. Instead, he drew himself up, a familiar calm steel filling his veins as instead of moving to aid the General who was snared like a rabbit, he walked in a slow, almost prowling arc towards the far corner of his desk.

“Dare I ask how that happened to you, sir?”

Grand’s eyes narrowed, as if daring the Colonel to laugh. “The drawer suddenly slammed closed and I can’t get it open.”

“Try putting a bit more strength into it. The locks surely aren’t that firm when it’s not even properly closed.” Roy suggested helpfully, all the while wondering what ingenious thing Edward had stuck in the tracks of the drawer to keep it that way against Grand’s attempts to free himself.

The Brigadier General sneered inelegantly at him, “what do you think I’ve been trying to do?”

Roy tilted his head in consideration of that, his eyes resting thoughtfully on Grand. “Ransacking my desk, no doubt. But I wonder if you have a writ from the Fuhrer permitting it. I’m under his command, not yours, so you really have no true right to go through my office without his or my permission, Brigadier General or not.”

“It’s nothing he needed to get involved in!” Grand snapped. “I was hoping to resolve the matter so as not to bog him down with unneeded concerns.”

“It seems you thought I was dead.” Roy offered idly as he pushed aside the matter of the Fuhrer, his eyes never leaving the Brigadier General. “As grateful as I am for your concern as to my health, I must wonder why you believed me dead.”

Edward leaned forward with a dangerous gleam in his eyes, wondering just how Grand was going to wriggle out of this one.

“Surely you don’t mean to say that Ishval did not leave its mark on you.” Grand said in a voice filled
with accusatory disbelief, and a certain amount of disdain. “That you never got hunches that one of your team was dead.”

Roy kept his expression carefully neutral as he came up directly beside the hulking man, “I have not, and never will be, one of yours. Perhaps you should try a head count of your team. I’m not going anywhere, I can assure you of that.” And with one brutal yank, he ripped open the drawer that had held Grand caught.

Grand had barely kept from wincing, and his wrist throbbed viciously as he forced himself to keep it at his side as if it wasn’t the least bit uncomfortable. Drawing himself up to full height, he met Roy’s gaze levelly. “For which we’re all very glad.”

Roy allowed a small smile to slip onto his face. “I learned a different sort of skills in Ishval.” He said in a grimly promising tone then added, “next time you believe me dead and want to try launching a search for me, don’t go digging through my desk. I hardly leave my schedule in there. You might try asking my team, they’d lead you in the right direction.”

“Right down a dark alley.” Edward put in helpfully.

“But,” Roy continued and extended his right hand with a growing smile, “I must thank you for your concern, old comrade.”

Grand stared at the hand a moment, and then back into Roy’s eyes that had gone from utterly unreadable to challenging in the flash of a second. A growl nesting in his chest, he took the offered hand, and made every effort not to wince when Roy shook it firmly as if in gratitude. “It would be tragic if anything happened to you. Be careful, Colonel.”

Roy released Grand’s hand, curling his fingers unobtrusively against his palm. “I didn’t get to be a hero by being anything less.”

Grand fought back a derisive snort, the effort making the ends of his moustache twitch. Turning quickly, he began to stride from the office, knowing he’d get no further today. “Colonel.” He called back in a farewell.

Edward, however, was not at all ready for goodbyes. “Oh no you don’t.” He snarled, and shoving off from the couch, he launched himself past the General and out through the door.

Roy could only stand there and wait as the Brigadier General vanished, and his fingers curled tighter around the paper in his hand that he had palmed back from the unsuspecting Grand. It was so fortunate that Edward had most likely made the General’s hand go a bit numb, and that after the talk they’d just had, the General wouldn’t be realizing he’d been duped until much later.

“Sir?” Riza poked her head in after a light knock.

“Not right now. It was exactly what you probably thought it was anyway.” Roy told her absently, and as she vanished, he forced himself not to pace as he waited in worry for Edward’s return. After all, depending on what Edward got up to, it could be a while yet until he returned.

And after their conversation this morning, and then Grand having been prowling through his office, he could only imagine that Edward was not in any sort of a forgiving mood.

With a melancholy sigh that didn’t suit him in the least, Roy rested his elbows on his desk and his head in one hand as the other toyed with the phone cord. There was still another conversation he needed to have with Edward… and he allowed himself a brief moment to wryly reflect on the situation he now found himself in.
All his life he’d sworn he’d never fall in love. All his life he’d lived on the very brink of utter depravity because of such promises. And now all he wanted was to spend the rest of his life loving the one soul he can’t ever touch.

The universe had a peculiar way of getting the last laugh.

A self-mocking smile slipped onto his face and he shook his head to break off that melancholy. Even if he would be leaving some things behind, he couldn’t imagine keeping them now. It was worth it to keep Edward by his side, to be able to tell the ghost that he loved him.

“When did I get to be so lame…” he murmured to himself in faint amusement.

“Is that what has you acting strange?”

Roy jerked back, startled, as his eyes landed on Edward who stood with an amused smile on the other side of his desk.

“You’re a man filled with faults, but I don’t really mind.” Edward finished rather firmly and leaned forward across the desk on his forearms. “It keeps you from being boring.”

“It’s not so much a fault, as it is a sudden realization that several of my faults have kept me blind for some time now.” Roy answered quietly, glancing towards the office door and surprised to find it shut. He certainly hadn’t, and nor had Riza.

Edward followed his gaze then turned back, “she didn’t notice. She was too busy finding paperwork for you to do. I think the idea that you were dead really threw her off her routine.”

“It would.” Roy agreed solemnly. “She’s spent too many years invested in doing her job to guard me to take my death easily.”

“Roy,” Edward began after a moment in which he seriously debated what exactly it was he wanted to say, and how to say it. “Whatever it is that’s distracting you like this, don’t let it turn into another fault. This isn’t the best of times to be distracted by anything… and it worries me when you’re not yourself.”

“In that case,” Roy came to a sudden decision, “my night out last night was rather spoiled. Would you like to get out of here early today and go somewhere together? I’ll take tomorrow off work, and we’ll be back in time for the carnival…” and his eyes rested on Edward as if somewhere along the way they’d gotten lost once more in that silvery gaze. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to do for you, and now feels like the right time to do it.”

Edward was about to argue that Roy needed to be at work when he made himself think about it. This wasn’t exactly something the man had ever requested, and right now… it seemed that maybe this was whatever Roy needed to sort himself out again. Besides, to be honest, he much preferred going and doing things with Roy as opposed to sitting in this office all day. He’d spent enough of his afterlife here as it was. So he smiled, “don’t you want to know what I did to Grand?”

Roy chuckled, smiling back rather wickedly. “I’ll ask if it’ll make you agree.”

“Roy Mustang,” Edward began firmly, “no force on this planet could make me do anything.” And at Roy’s laugh, his own smile grew. “I’ll go with you. If only because I’m curious what it is you’ve wanted to do for me and if we don’t go now we’ll have to wait until next weekend,” then added with a bit of a perplexed look, “and I didn’t exactly know that I needed anything.”

“You may not understand at first,” Roy forewarned him gently, “but I know it’ll come to you in time.
We just have a quick stop to make after I’m done here so that I can outfit your first surprise and then we’ll leave town.”
“This is supposed to be part of my surprise?” Edward asked, amusement coloring his tone as he cast a doubtful look in Roy’s direction.

Roy gave him a secretive smirk as he rubbed his hands together and started off businesslike down the endless-seeming aisles of one of the larger Headquarter warehouses. “Now if you were able to guess it, it wouldn’t be a surprise, now would it?”

Edward shot a mocking look after him before bounding into higher air and following after him. This was a place he didn’t particularly fancy getting lost in, and the few distracted glances he took assured him of that.

If the massive iron shelving units weren’t floor to ceiling, they were brushing the standards of it. In this aisle a single row of incandescent industrial light bulbs cast an orangey glow onto the shelves and their contents, barely illuminating down to the floor, and throwing everything else into dark relief.

“What could you possibly have been meaning to do with me that involves the Military’s version of a haunted house?” Edward asked as he continued to flit through the air just above Roy’s head.

Roy smiled, “well, it’s haunted now. I did bring you in here, after all.”

“Not answering the question.” Edward scowled.

Roy continued smiling, and soon he did cast a quick look up to spot where Edward was before saying, “we’re just getting a few supplies. This isn’t usually my line of expertise, so a little bit of shopping is in order.”

It was then that it clicked, and Edward suddenly looked around him with a newfound fascination. This was it. This was one of the warehouses that stored the endless State Alchemist supplies. Seven years ago, this would have been paradise for him! Even so, Edward began to look around a bit more eagerly. Just because he couldn’t accomplish alchemy any longer didn’t precisely mean that he’d lost any of his enthusiasm for it.

Roy glanced Edward’s way briefly once again, grinning to himself as he saw the fascination glowing on Edward’s face. It seemed he’d figured it out after all. Good. He wanted Edward to be slightly distracted for the moment. At least long enough to gather some materials that might slip by Edward’s notice. He didn’t want to take the chance that the genius beside him would somehow manage to figure out his plans. He wanted Edward’s surprise to be, in fact, a surprise.

It didn’t take long for Roy to pocket everything he suspected he would need, so when the time came for them to leave it took more than a small bit of wheedling and promises to return to convince Edward away from his vicarious imaginings of everything he could do with access to so many alchemy ingredients. Yet as soon as they had left, Edward settled into another matter that suddenly seemed quite pressing.

“How is it that you’re planning to explain to Hawkeye that you’re not coming into the office tomorrow?” Edward asked with reasonable concern as they made their way back home. “Or that you won’t be coming back from your apparent lunch today?”
Truthfully, he rather felt bad for the lieutenant today. Her morning had already begun with a rough start thanks to Grand, and while he’d gotten sufficient revenge for all parties involved, he doubted she’d feel comforted by it. And now her Colonel was about to duck out for what equated to almost two full work days without so much as a hint of a warning.

“A phone call.” Roy explained promptly, adding just as promptly: “the very moment before we run out of the house and flee the city.”

Edward rolled his eyes, and really, did he expect anything more of the man? “You’re cruel, Roy Mustang.” He informed him quite certainly, shooting a baleful glance at his far-from-chastised friend. “So I hope you can think up a miracle for Monday.”

Roy didn’t even bother with that one, merely giving a sardonic huff.

Edward bit down on a faint sigh, but didn’t contain the roll of his eyes. Honestly, sometimes he truly wondered by what miracle it was that Roy had continued to survive so long acting the way he did around certain people. The man truly must have as many lives as a cat.

Perhaps Hazel was the universe’s way of extracting karma on the man, since nothing else seemed capable of it.

Shaking his head, Edward was not entirely contented to let the matter lie, but in this, he got the strong suspicion he’d not pester anything acceptable out of the man right now. He’d have to wait until Monday.

As it was, he was about to soon be distracted.

They shortly reached the house, yet no sooner had Roy closed the front gate behind them did he call after Edward who was still continuing up to the door.

“Wait for me out in the back yard, would you?”

Edward pivoted in midair, a frown etching his features as he quirked his head at the man walking up to him. “And why would I need to do that?” He asked, puzzled. “I know you can pack on your own,” and then he hesitated as he was abruptly reminded of something which caused him to scowl suspiciously, “unless you’re planning on packing those damned toys of yours, which I assure you that if you do I—”

“Will take them away from me?” Roy offered in sly interjection, before allowing what fraction of control he had slip in the guise of trying to fluster the ghost as normal, “to protest me being selfish and not using them on you, perhaps?”

Edward’s mouth dropped open in horrified shock, before he uttered a spluttering, avid, “no!”

Roy smiled wide, not taking it to heart. He did, after all, love getting Edward flustered like that. It wasn’t a complete loss in his mind. “Well then, what would you do with them? I know you dare not touch them.”

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Edward gaped at him open-mouthed a moment, frantically wracking his brain to try and rediscover just where he’d been headed with that sentence before Roy so thoroughly derailed him. Yet as hard as he tried to recall, he was coming up blank of answers, so he did the only thing he could think of. “Then why do I need to wait in the yard? Much less the back yard?”

Roy allowed the obvious redirect with an indulgent smile and a slight chuckle. “Because, that’s where I’ll be unveiling your first surprise. Best we hurry though, before Riza starts getting twitchy
about where I am and foils my brilliant plan.”

“It’s hardly brilliant if you’ll need a miracle to keep you alive when we come back.” Edward scowled.

“I have you.” Roy corrected in an offhanded manner, although it was meant as anything but, and Edward knew it if Roy judged the slight widening of the ghost’s eyes correctly. “I’m good with that. Now then, off you go. We’re letting valuable time slip by.”

Edward opened his mouth to reply, already half-turning to do as Roy had said, before he hesitated in both, finally telling the man quite seriously, “the surprise had better be worth all your ghastly flirting.”

Roy couldn’t help but smirk smugly at the accusation. “Is that better or worse than atrocious?”

Edward shot him a nasty glare, which only served to make Roy laugh, frustratingly enough. The man sure had gall, that was for certain. So not bothering with a response, for all the good it seemed it might do, he gave a hop upwards and shot off around the side of the house to wait in the back yard where, for at least a few minutes, he’d be idiot-free.

It took longer than Edward had actually been expecting for Roy to make a reappearance. Perhaps it was because he was accustomed to being a part of the process, not a bystander, but at long last Roy did appear with the customary suitcase in hand and Edward suddenly knew why it felt as if it had taken longer.

It clearly had. He had never seen Roy dressed like that before.

Gone were the slacks, or even denim, gone were the casual shirts or sweaters.

Edward felt himself do a double take at the Roy who walked towards him now. Full of the usual confident swagger, but enhanced now by being clad in black leather pants leather laced and studded down the hems, only loosening on his legs nearer the calves where they flared out slightly over combat boots. There was a normal white collared shirt there somewhere that had one too many buttons undone, but it was mostly covered up by the black leather jacket which also bore its fair share of steel embellishments.

Around the entirety of the thing was a belt that Edward was certain could not only be used to hold up the most slippery leather pants ever worn, but also used as a tourniquet. There was nothing fancy or studded about this belt. It was by far, the most practical piece Roy wore…

…if one overlooked the monstrous belt buckle which was emblazoned with a ‘FA’.

Edward gulped and slid his eyes back up to Roy’s face, trying not to think about several things this sight provoked in him. Including how long it had taken Roy to paint those leather pants onto himself. Which only led his mind astray to a place he wasn’t certain he wanted to think about.

Roy barely managed to conceal his chuckle and smirk as he caught Edward’s somewhat wide-eyed look. Good. Granted, this was what he would normally wear for something like this, but it was nice to know that the ulterior motive of getting Edward’s attention had succeeded. While he knew that Edward had lived with him long enough not to be swayed entirely by his looks, he knew it also didn’t hurt.

And it gave him a bit of pride that he was sure Edward would claim he didn’t need, to know that Edward had looked him up and down twice. Whether the ghost had realized it or not.
Roy smiled just a bit smugly as he drew nearer, and set down both suitcase and a rather large box that closely resembled a tool chest that had lost its lid in an unfortunate mauling as he stopped before the now fidgeting ghost.

“What is that?” Edward asked, forcing his eyes to look straight down at the chest and fighting back the sudden flustered feeling he was now inwardly panicking about. It was all Roy’s fault! He didn’t know why Roy standing so close to him dressed like *that* affected him so… but it was Roy’s fault!

“You don’t know? Ed, what am I?”

“An idiot.” Edward answered promptly, deadpan. Despite the situation he now found himself in.

“Besides that.” Roy gave an eye roll, before deciding that he really didn’t want to hear what else Edward might consider him in the attempt to get one single adjective or noun correct. “An alchemist.”

Immediately it clicked for him, and Edward suddenly dropped to his knees to look at the chest in an instant flare of excitement. Every experience he’d had with Roy’s alchemy, fire or otherwise, had been fascinating to him, and he was eager to see what the man had in waiting for him this time.

All that appeared to be in the chest was a variety of common enough implements. Steel bars of various weights, leather, small blocks of copper and equally small bundles of copper wire, a thick sheet of glass, several yards of folded and bound white rubber, and several other machinery odds and ends scattered throughout.

“You’re making me a prison cell to stick Grand into?” Edward guessed hopefully, looking up at Roy. Curiosity having, for now, pushed Roy’s attire from his mind.

Roy chuckled at the idea, it did have merit. But at the end of all this not-entirely-clandestine feud with Brigadier General Grand, he didn’t want it to conclude with Grand in a prison cell. Either way, a pinewood box would be the container in order, and he was determined that it wouldn’t be on order for himself.

“Not even close.”

Edward hummed to himself, drifting down more in order to sit on the grass as he considered the chest and its contents again.

“Where I want to take you, there is no train.” Roy explained as he began to walk around the ghost. “And although I could have taken the easy way out and borrowed a car from Headquarters, I knew you’d appreciate this more.”

Edward jerked himself away from his perusing of the chest in order to look after the man in mild confusion and interest, before he slowly began to smile wide as he saw what Roy was now rolling from the shadows of the tool shed. “Seriously?” He demanded in excitement, shooting to his feet.

“Yes.” Roy agreed with an answering smile, before adding as an afterthought. “In a manner. You’ll soon see. No way am I letting you drive yet.”

Edward could only maintain a pout for a few seconds before excitement took over again. “You’re really taking me out on it? I thought it’d be years before you would!” He exclaimed, fairly bouncing over to it as Roy kept wheeling it out further into the yard.

“After a few additions, I do believe it will be safe to take you out on.” Roy agreed, unable to help feeling so pleased at Edward’s joy. “A few stops will be in order, just to make sure the composition
of the bike isn’t compromised, but –”

“This isn’t a bike,” Edward interrupted with a hint of awe to his voice, “I ride a bike. This is a motorcycle.”

Roy chuckled and rested the motorcycle down onto its kickstand which he messed with briefly until the motorcycle sat level. “So it is. Now give me a few minutes to set this all up and we’ll be on our way. And temporarily safe from my crazy lieutenant.”

Edward ignored the comment about Riza in favor of avidly watching Roy begin to empty out that chest of its contents and lay them in what seemed to be a certain order on the grass near the motorcycle. He wasn’t entirely sure if there was an order to this or not, he had no clue what Roy was attempting to do, mostly because he truly hadn’t much of a clue about motorcycles. At least Roy appeared to know what he was doing, and without so much as a pause to look everything over, Roy activated the circle he’d initially sketched out on the grass.

Edward cursed the brilliant flash of resulting light and showers of sparks that obscured his view from what was happening. He could only vaguely see the dark shifting of the materials within the alchemy light as the transmutation wrestled its way into existence.

And then the light was abruptly gone, leaving in its place a sleek black one-wheeled contraption that looked rather like a shortened torpedo that had lost track of part of its hull exposing a rather crude but comfortable looking inner seat.

Edward was just about to open his mouth, still a bit puzzled, when the entire thing began to tip over. Roy started forward immediately to catch it on a sturdy bar protruding from the opposite side, his mouth still quirked in a bit of successful pride. “Not bad for the first try.”

“What is that?” Edward asked as he hovered his way nearer to the thing to watch as Roy drug it bodily closer up to the bike and began to fiddle with the thick, short, bracketed steel bar and the motorcycle itself.

“A sidecar.” Roy explained with only a bit of distraction as he considered the options, and then dug into the pocket of his jacket to pull out one of his gloves. “Here, hold it a moment, will you?”

Edward landed on the grass and took hold of this sidecar contraption as he watched Roy pull on his glove. “What is it for?”

Roy smiled, chuckling a bit as he glanced up at Edward through the hair that had fallen further forward over his face. “For you, my clever ghost.” And taking possession of the sidecar again he brought the steel support bar and its brackets back into place once more, then snapped.

Edward retreated around behind Roy in order to get a clear view, and when the flames cleared the brackets of the support bar had been fused to a part of the motorcycle that he could swear hadn’t been there before. “For me…” he murmured, and as Roy stood up he didn’t move away to give the man room.

Instead he peered around Roy’s side as the man turned towards him, considering the sight in front of him. And then he began to grin, and he looked up quickly into Roy’s waiting gaze.

“Figured it out?” Roy smiled and reached his gloved hand up as if to ruffle Edward’s hair, before his smile softened and he merely slipped his hand down the intangible length before retreating to pull off the transmutation glove. “I dare not let you ride in front or behind me directly on it. I’m not sure how long the motorcycle would remain solid if I did. But this, this should work nicely.”
Edward was fairly sure he was about to do something highly undignified in his excitement, and he began to bounce from one foot to the other eagerly and in an effort to mostly control himself. “You had best hope,” he grinned, “because if you fall through, I can’t promise I’ll come back right away to rescue you from the ground.”

Roy chuckled lightly, although there was a wary edge to it. He almost believed that. “That’s why I wear leather. Just in case I get ejected.”

Edward felt the flustered feelings return in a rush, and he wondered how many times now it was he had been grateful he couldn’t blush as he hastily backed a step away from Roy. “Oh is that why.” He said in what barely missed being a squeak as he waved his hands uncertainly before pointing down to the thick leather belt. “And is that to help stop the blood loss?” He asked before he could stop himself, before he realized just where he was pointing, and he quickly yanked his hand to his side where he felt it hang awkwardly as he shook his head in aggravation.

Roy might have laughed, had he not had himself in such good control. As it was, he grinned at Edward’s clear embarrassed distress. Ducking his head a little, his grin morphed into a soft smile when Edward stubbornly refused to look at him and stood rock still staring over at the fence. “Yes… if I were losing a lot of blood, you’d need to take off my belt and tighten it around the area. Would you like to give it a try so you know how?”

Edward suddenly snapped out of his rigor and shot a glare at the smiling bastard. “I’ll tighten it around your neck.”

“Sorry.” Roy grinned, not feeling at all apologetic. “Edward…” he began, his face softening as he bore the brunt of the glare he was still being pinned with. “I’m glad.”

Confusion rattled him from his brooding, and Edward raised an eyebrow at the man. “Of?”

“That you’re so affected by me sometimes. That I can make you feel this way.” Roy explained gently, his smile becoming lopsided. “That even though I know you want to hit me sometimes… you just want to be able to touch me too.”

Edward startled at the words, and finding himself becoming oddly quiescent, he looked up into Roy’s eyes again. “I used to believe I was well adjusted, until I met you.” Frowning slightly he cast his gaze aside a moment, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth before looking back at Roy curiously. “Why does it say “FA” on the buckle? Is that for “Fat Ass”?”

“Looked that closely, did you?” Roy couldn’t help but tease.

“Roy!”

Roy raised his hands in surrender and with a grin. “I’d ask you again, what I am, but I dread your answer sometimes. It stands for Flame Alchemist, my clever ghost.”

Edward shook his head mildly. Leave it to Roy Mustang to embellish a belt buckle with his State Alchemist pride.

“Now then, unless you’d like to finally admit to me how attractive you find my fat ass, we’d best get going. Else our chances of getting out of here without running into Riza ‘The Terrible’ doubles.” Roy announced with a bit of a smirk, and turned to make his way over to his motorcycle while digging in one of the pockets of his leather jacket for the keys.

Edward stayed stationary where he was, considering the man closely and with a strange lightness in his un-beating heart as he watched Roy strap the suitcase onto the rear panel of the motorcycle which
covered the rear tire, and then move to mount the motorcycle with a casual straddle. His thoughts were oddly quiet for the moment, as he met Roy’s questioning gaze. Then, he smiled, and started forward with a near-silent, “it’s not that fat,” before bounding his way through the rest of the air to situate himself in his own private sidecar with a growing grin.

“Ready?” Roy asked as he fit the key into the ignition and pulled from one of the handles his helmet.

Edward looked up at him with a beaming smile, setting aside everything else for the moment in the excitement of finally going out on the motorcycle, in a fashion. “Yes!”

Roy chuckled and set the helmet over his head, strapping it on before digging black leather gloves stitched with his alchemy circles on their backs out of his pocket. “Then hold on tightly.” Strapping on the riding gloves, he turned the key in the ignition.

Edward was only momentarily startled at the roar of the engine as it came to life with a fierce energy. He could feel his sidecar vibrating around him from the intensity of it, and immediately his grin split his face. It was loud, too loud to be able to talk to Roy, but he was beginning to believe that wouldn’t matter.

Roy glanced over at Edward once and laughed to himself. It seemed that this trip was a good idea indeed. They hadn’t even begun moving and already Edward was beaming. So nudging his kickstand up out of the way he began to straddle-walk the motorcycle over to the back gate which he leaned forward to flip up the lock and shove open.

Not long later he was closing it behind them, and with one last look to Edward before they got started, he brought his feet up and shifted the motorcycle into gear.

Edward screamed in delighted laughter, clutching onto the sidecar for all he was worth.

Roy was laughing to himself as they roared out of the alleyway and out onto the side road. Glancing down at Edward again, he checked ahead of them for both traffic and where he’d need to turn before really engaging the engine.

It had been far too long since he’d been on this thing, and now he had an excuse to ride it more often if it meant he could take Edward with him each time. So relaxing into the rumble of the motorcycle, Roy focused on where he was going, and Edward’s shrieking laughter.

They made it out of Central without incident. And if Roy remembered as they reached the outskirts that he’d forgotten to call Riza, he wasn’t too concerned. They’d be stopping to get some food shortly in one of the smaller outskirt towns. He could make a phone call there, and now that he thought about it, it was probably safer to do so from a location farther away than his own house.

It was several hundred kilometers before Edward stopped his shrieking laughter, but by then Roy had also settled on a speed and a less turn-riddled driving pattern. Now the ghost merely set in his sidecar grinning around at the scenery as it sped by in rapid flashes of color. In a way, it was as relaxing as it was fun, and for the moment, he forgot about wondering where Roy was taking him.

Some hours later though they did pull in at a roadside diner in what seemed to be the middle of a barren road located Gate-only-knew where. It was there that Roy left Edward briefly to order some food before coming back out to the pay phone on the wall outside.

Here Edward came up to him to lean against the wall as Roy dialed. “I hope you didn’t shock any poor old ladies in there needlessly.”

“Not with anything they weren’t happy to see.” Roy countered, shooting the ghost a smirk. It seemed
that Edward had recovered just a bit.

Edward looked away with a smile he was only marginally successful at suppressing, a pensive look in his eyes. “Roy, I –”

“Hey there, Riza!” Roy suddenly spoke, and tilted a questioning and slightly apologetic look at Edward.

“What do you mean, “hey there, Riza”? Where the hell are you?”

Roy glanced around with pursed lips. “Actually? I’ve not a clue. Somewhere between there and where I’m headed.”

“And just where do you think you’re headed, Roy Mustang?”

“Nowhere that you’d be able to find.” Roy informed her cheerfully enough. “But don’t you worry, I’ll be back from this little State Alchemist field trip by Monday. You won’t even know I’m gone!”

“I’m noticing your lack of presence now!”

“Well, then I suppose you will notice I’m gone.” Roy grinned.

Edward rolled his eyes, shaking his head as he lifted away from the wall. “Idiot.”

“I noticed that an hour ago!”

Roy smiled at Edward’s side profile, “you know you love me.”

“I most certainly do not!”

Edward looked back at Roy, and despite how Roy tried, he couldn’t discern the look in Edward’s eyes. “I need to go now, Riza. You all know what to do while I’m gone.” And before she could finish telling him not to hang up the phone, he did.

“Where are we headed, Roy?” Edward asked at last.

Roy pulled out his pocket watch and flipped it open to glance at the time before shoving it back into a coat pocket. “You’ll see by tomorrow morning. I’m not sure you’d be able to recognize it when we get there tonight.” And he glanced back towards the doors of the diner to see whether or not his food had been left at the counter yet before turning back to Edward. “What is it you were saying, before she picked up?”

Edward blinked, and then smiled faintly, shaking his head as he reflected back onto it. “It’s nothing. It can wait.”

Roy frowned, wanting to pursue it, when he caught sight of one of the diner waitresses waving for him through the glass. So ducking away to grab his food, he rejoined Edward by the motorcycle so he could eat and still be able to talk to the apparition.

“Will Riza try and find us?” Edward asked as he settled onto the motorcycle seat next to Roy who had scooted over to make room for him.

“Naturally. But she won’t be able to find us.” Roy shrugged and ate another greasy potato wedge. “Where we’re going, no one goes. Not anymore. And she’d have no reason to believe I’d go there. Once we leave the main road, no one will be able to tell anyone sent looking for me where I went. We’re about to disappear.”
Edward smiled a bit at that, “you can try. I’m the only one who can truly vanish.”

“Not from me you can’t.” Roy pointed out, waggling another potato wedge at the ghost.

“So I’ve led you to think.” Edward smiled craftily, but laughed at the suddenly worried expression on Roy’s face. “I’m only kidding. It’s not like I’ve \textit{tried} to disappear from you, and I’ve never had to worry about it before being invisible to everyone else.”

“Somehow I doubt that even if they \textit{could} see you, it would deter you from terrorizing the population at large.” Roy sighed.

“Hardly.” Edward snorted. “And if your theories are correct, and we would have eventually found each other regardless, you’d still be worrying over me and looking out for me.”

“If you were still an alchemist, my fearsome ghost,” Roy began thoughtfully, “Grand would have even more reason to fear you.”

“I don’t want him to fear me,” Edward scowled, his fingers clenching against the seat of the motorcycle. “I want him to pay for what he’s tried to do to you. No one tries to kill you and gets away with it.”

“He’ll be dealt with in time.” Roy soothed and started in on his burger. “And you and I will have some peace for a while.”

“I was at peace until you sauntered in and messed it up.” Edward felt the need to point out teasingly.

“Ah, yes,” Roy smiled smugly, “but it has been worth it, hasn’t it.”

When at last Roy had finished his lunch in between bites of his burger and chatting with Edward, they finally started back out on the road again. Heading ever eastward.

Edward wasn’t sure what could be in the east that he needed to see, but he trusted Roy. And to be honest, he was enjoying just going on the trip itself. He recalled that they’d intended to stay in Central this weekend, but so far, he wasn’t regretting breaking those plans. They could spend a weekend at home together another time. So he leaned back in his seat in the sidecar, imagining he could feel the wind and enjoying the sights around him as they sped ever further away from civilization.

It was at last beginning to grow dark out, and it was several random-seeming road changes in the middle of nowhere, before Roy began to slow the motorcycle as he headed out onto a dirt road connected to the smaller paved one they’d been on for the past several kilometers or so.

Edward clutched momentarily to the sides of his sidecar until he got accustomed to the jostling vibrations that were trying to eject him from his seat. It seemed as if they were finally getting closer to where Roy wanted to go.

Looking up at the man, Edward scooted down in his seat in order to rest back and still have a fair peripheral of him. Roy was entirely focused on the road right now, and the landmarks around it. So his gaze went unnoticed.

Roy had been acting so strange today. First the incident this morning, where Roy had admitted he was hiding something from him. Then Roy had wanted so intensely to go somewhere with him, that the man hadn’t even asked what he’d done to Grand. And then there was Roy dressed in what Edward could only assume \textit{must} be normal motorcycle wear… but it hadn’t been Roy who was acting strangely in that moment.
No. Roy had been his usual, if overconfident self with an expected few flirtations thrown in.

No… instead Edward couldn’t understand why he’d acted so strangely. Why seeing Roy like that had affected him so. It wasn’t like he’d never noticed the man’s body, he’d seen him in nothing but boxer briefs before. And while he’d never given that a second thought, now suddenly thinking about it… he forced his gaze away from Roy’s leather-clad thigh as he fought down another rush of this strange anxiety.

This… this wasn’t the only thing though. It was only the most recent.

Even at the end of their outing to the theater, even at the beginning of it, Roy had made him feel things he couldn’t understand. For all of being eighteen, in a lot of ways he knew he wasn’t. He didn’t feel like a kid… he doubted that Roy could make a kid feel as if his long-dead heart might still be able to beat one last beat with one single, penetrating gaze. But he knew there were feelings Roy was introducing to him, he just wished that the man had a less aggravating way of going about it.

Sighing he shifted around properly again and looked out towards where the moon was beginning to become visible. It had been a strange day, for all it was a Thursday.

The sun had been set for several hours, and they had gone up and down quite a few rises that Edward was certain were not road-safe, when Roy began to slow the motorcycle from its bouncing course. Not long later, Roy was pulling the motorcycle within the cover of what appeared to be an outcropping of a rather steep hill.

The engine idled for a few moments before Roy cut it and removed his helmet which he plopped down over Edward’s head instead as he sat back with a groan and a stretch, followed by a relieved sigh.

Edward flipped up the visor of the helmet and tilted his head back to look up at Roy. “Is this what I needed to see? A hill in the middle of the night?”

“Yes, if it makes you feel better.” Roy grinned and then stretched again with a yawn. “Took a lot less time than the first time I did this. Though, granted I was in a slow-ass caravan and not on my own that time.”

“Where exactly are we?” Edward asked then, floating up out of the sidecar and depositing the helmet on his seat.

Roy stretched his legs down after flipping down the kickstand, straddling the motorcycle with a slight swaying side-to-side as he began to take off his gloves and rub some feeling back into his jostle-numbed hands. It didn’t help that it was a fraction chilly out. “Not in Amestris anymore. I just sped through half the country in less than a day. I’m beat. Although it was nice to have an excuse to go that fast.”

“I pity you.” Edward deadpanned and looked around, though he could not see much despite his own soft glow illuminating parts of what looked to be merely a sand-swept area. “But there’s nothing to the east of Amestris. Nothing habitable at least.”

“That’s what you think, Elric.” Roy grinned and swung off the motorcycle where he staggered only a moment to find his balance again. “There’s Amestris. Then there’s Ishval. Then there’s Xing. But we’re in none of those right now. We’re in the middle of the little strip of land nobody wants. Except maybe Drachma, and Amestrians will be damned if they will have Drachmans on two sides of them.”
“I know all that!” Edward glared at him, ignoring Roy’s smirk. “What I don’t understand is why you brought me to the in between.”

Roy shoved the motorcycle keys in a coat pocket and offered his hand out to Edward. “I’ll show you. Although you won’t be able to see it properly until the morning. We’re just lucky that it’s here, and not in Ishval. I may have had trouble getting us in and out of there without being noticed. The Ishvallans have a tendency to pop out of the ground.”

Edward gave him a disbelieving look. “How drunk were you during Ishval?”

“Not drunk enough.” Roy sighed, before grimacing a bit. “Sorry.”

Edward shook his head and slipped his hand into Roy’s easily. Not being able to touch the man hadn’t stopped him from unconsciously learning where Roy was. “Let’s go then, my fearless leader.”

“I’d hardly say that of me.” Roy muttered but started forward anyway.

It took a moment to navigate the rocky incline to where the ground leveled once again, but Roy made it without incident. The glow emanating from both Edward and the night sky was just enough illumination to work by. And once on top he immediately spotted the dark form arching towards the sky and began to walk towards it.

“This is what I want you to see, tomorrow morning.” Roy said as they reached it, and he lay a hand against the smooth, cool surface with a faraway look. “You might find it interesting to know that out of everything that survived, this was part of it.”

“I don’t understand.” Edward frowned, and he drew nearer to what he now knew to be a structure. Manmade it appeared. And pressing his own hand against it, he could see by the light he gave off that it was merely stone. Nothing fancy about it in the least.

“You’ll begin to in the morning. You need proper light to see the entire thing by.” Roy looked around a moment and then back towards where they’d left the motorcycle. “We should go back and set up camp for the night. I for one need to have some dinner.”

Edward took his hand away, looking around as well before looking back to Roy with a nod. “I’ll keep watch tonight. If we’re in a no-man’s land, I’m guessing there are no laws, and perhaps some individuals who like it that way.”

“Not anywhere near here. This place… it freaks most people out. I hate to sound like a tape on repeat, but you’ll understand in the morning. Perhaps more than I do.” Roy began to lead the way back down towards the motorcycle as he glanced around them, “it’s not exactly sacred ground. But plenty of weird things have happened in this area. Not many know about this place, but not many would come here either.”

“So why is it that you do?” Edward frowned, suddenly looking around in suspicion. “What sort of weird things have happened here?”

“Nothing harmful, but plenty of people are superstitious.” Roy shrugged, “as to why I don’t mind coming here again… I’ve never had a problem with this place. And I’m with you. As I said, I don’t need a miracle when I have you with me.”

“That’s awfully high-handed of you.” Edward scowled, though it didn’t last long as he smiled.

“Hush and help me find some firewood.” Roy chided him with a grin, and as soon as they made it back down to the motorcycle, they searched for wood with will-o-wisps of flames snapping to life to
light their way and Edward’s own glow to aid the search.

Between them both they were able to find enough random pieces of driftwood from the scraggly trees that managed to survive out here. So Roy lit a fire away from the outcropping that they had settled under on a blanket that Roy had brought.

Edward was curled up in Roy’s leather jacket, although he didn’t need it, leaning against the solid dirt wall behind them as he watched Roy roast skewers of an unfortunate snake that had slithered across Edward’s path earlier during their firewood search. His eyes half closed in relaxation he was watching the strong lines of Roy’s back through the white shirt as he listened to the crackling of the fire.

“I could almost fall asleep, I think.” Edward murmured at last.

Roy looked over his shoulder, and he felt something inside him soften at the sight of Edward curled up so peacefully in his leather jacket. Turning back to his roasting meal only long enough to finish cooking it he rested the skewers on a paper plate and went over to join the spirit against the wall.

Settling down next to Edward he sighed in contentment and felt his body lean in towards the ghost.

“You don’t do that very often anymore.”

Edward laughed quietly, his gaze having fallen to rest on Roy’s hands, bare of gloves. “No… do you need your jacket back yet? Are you cold?”

Roy gave a grunt of a noise, and finished chewing his mouthful before answering. “The fire is warm enough right now. Besides –”

“I look good in it, right?” Edward smiled to himself, remembering the last night he’d been curled up in something of Roy’s.

“You’ve no idea…” Roy agreed quietly, and it was silent for a time as Roy finished eating his dinner. Only once he’d flung the paper plate into the fire where it blazed in a moment of incinerating glory, did he speak again.

Or rather, he tried to.

“Why don’t you let anyone else get this close to you, Roy? You never had to let me stay.” Edward asked quietly.

“I never had to do a lot of things.” Roy answered back as he looked down at Edward’s silver-haired head. “I almost hope you don’t remember, and I assure you that I was only doing manly crying because someone was chopping a shit ton of onions somewhere… but the one afternoon, in Risembool… I thought you had decided not to stay with me.”

Edward smiled softly, his eyes dancing in humor. “I don’t remember any crying.”

“Good.” Roy approved firmly. “And I don’t let anyone else get this close to me because they’re not you. Besides, I don’t think anyone else could implant themselves into my life with such ease, and anyone who can do that with me, isn’t someone I want to let go of.”

“Because you’re filled with faults and I still stay?” Edward half-joked, looking up at Roy with eyes shining in amusement.

“Because you broke through all my barriers, and I didn’t even notice until they were long gone.” Roy corrected as he looked away, back towards the fire. “And I don’t even care. When I realized how much I… I was relieved. And all I could think about was going back home to you and hoping
that you might find it in yourself one last time to forgive me for being an idiot.”

“You’re my idiot.” Edward murmured happily as he closed his eyes with a smile, “I’ll forgive you.”

Roy turned back to look at him with a soft smile, and reaching up he ran his fingers against the glow of the top of Edward’s hair. “You sure you might just go to sleep and not try and hijack my motorcycle tonight?”

Edward chuckled and tilted his head to smile up at Roy in a calm, but a little bit coy manner. “Depends, are the keys in this jacket still?”

“I’m afraid I took them out before I gave that to you.” Roy informed him.

“Pity.” Edward hummed, and burrowed his face deeper into the collar of the jacket. “I’ll try and be good.”

Roy rolled his eyes, but smiled gently down on a very relaxed Edward. “Then goodnight, my ghost.” He whispered over Edward’s head before getting up again. He had a campfire to douse and his bed to make ready so he could get some sleep. He knew that Edward would most likely be beating him awake at sunrise, he needed to sleep while he could.
Edward was alert once more well before sunrise. He predicted it wasn’t that far off, the sky had recently gone a shade darker as it did right before the graying of predawn. Yet he didn’t stir from where he sat curled under Roy’s leather jacket, Roy’s head next to his thigh as the man slept on inside the sleeping roll pulled from his suitcase. Briefly he scanned the horizon, watching for any discrepancies that might merit him waking Roy up sooner than he intended.

He’d been watching throughout the night, knowing that while this was relatively safe ground for them – according to Roy – they also weren’t safely at home.

Not seeing anything he brought his gaze back around to Roy. The man had barely stirred throughout the night, Edward could only imagine how tired he must be. The previous few nights hadn’t exactly been generous with hours of sleep, and while he didn’t know the specifics of what had occurred the previous evening with that spy, he imagined such things to be emotionally draining.

Roy had been so distracted since it had happened.

Edward tilted his head as he considered the man, it was not a good time for Roy to still be distracted by anything. He only hoped that by the time everything came to a head, that Roy would have shed all remaining preoccupations. Until then, however, Edward was determined to be even more dedicated in his ambition to protect Roy.

It was all he really could do.

Edward leaned his head back against the solid earth behind him and went back to watching the horizon. The sky was beginning to gain flecks of color through a dove gray that had begun overtaking the darkness. Soon it would be dawn, and he’d be allowed to wake Roy up. The excitement began to rekindle inside him with the knowledge that soon he would be able to learn why Roy had brought him here. Why Roy had been so cryptic.

So he waited with waning patience until the sunlight had thrust up over the horizon, spreading pale fingers of light across the waking desert.

Edward’s face broke into a grin, and flinging the leather jacket around so he could tug it on properly he shifted to kneel at Roy’s side. Although he knew neither of them would be able to feel it, he still rested a hand at Roy’s side as he leant down a bit more.

“Roy!” He insisted firmly, not knowing what else to do. He’d never really had to wake the man up before.

“Roy!” He intoned again, when no response was forthcoming.

Edward smiled when he got a faint twitch of movement. He was being heard now, but it didn’t appear as if it was fully breaking through Roy’s deep sleep. Thinking briefly back to how Hazel always managed it, a small laugh escaped him. He couldn’t exactly run his hands through Roy’s hair or nuzzle him with a wet nose, but it was about time Roy learned to wake up to a different voice than a squirrel’s chatter.

“Roy, I know I’m not cute and fluffy, but you really should wake up.” Edward whispered with amusement before raising his voice to normal again. “Roy!”
Roy groaned as he stirred further awake, pulled up out of sleep by the familiar voice. Slowly he turned his head and blinked blearily up at Edward, iridescent in the growing dawn light. “Good morning,” he yawned and smiled a sleepy smile up at the spirit. “And you don’t need to be cute and fluffy to get me to wake up.”

Edward spluttered silently a moment as Roy smirked sleepily before he fixed the man with a solicitous look and sat back, crossing his arms over his chest. “Then how do you propose I wake you up when I need to?”

A rumbling hum of consideration came from Roy’s chest as he worked on sitting up inside his sleeping roll. Once he’d managed it, and oriented himself to sitting, he ran a hand back through his hair to muss it thoroughly before glancing over at Edward with a smile. “Just call my name, I like hearing your voice.”

Edward’s arms slowly fell back away from his chest to land his hands in his lap as he studied Roy with an unreadable expression before slowly a smile began to slip onto his face. “I don’t think you’ve had enough sleep. You want five more minutes?”

Roy chuckled faintly and gave a small shiver as he began to rub his hands along his arms. “I can sleep this weekend.” He reassured Edward before taking a quick but thorough look around them, assessing their surroundings with the cautious eye of a trained soldier.

“It’s all okay. I’ve been keeping an eye out all night.” Edward offered, catching on to what Roy must be looking for. “Nothing’s moved out there.” And he looked off as well, scanning it again quickly.

“This place is barren, and I don’t mind.” Roy murmured and began to extract himself out of his sleeping roll.

Edward shifted aside to give Roy room, and catching Roy giving another shiver he lifted his hands to the jacket he wore in concern. “Do you want your jacket back? If I take it off now it shouldn’t take too long for you to be able to touch it again.”

Roy had just finished standing up and he shook his head with a smile as he leaned down to grab up his sleeping roll so he could pack it away before catching Edward’s eye again. “Only for the trip back to Central. I’ll warm up soon enough, so keep it.”

Edward tugged it tighter around him in smiling response. He couldn’t feel it aside from the slight pressure he always felt from the inanimate world, he couldn’t feel any of the warmth it must provide, he couldn’t even smell what he was sure was genuine leather with a hint of Roy’s aftershave, but even so… he was unexplainably content to wear the jacket that dwarfed his slighter frame.

So he waited, leaning against the earthen wall they had camped beside for a windbreaker. It appeared he wouldn’t have to wait long. Roy clearly was not rusty in a soldiers skill of breaking down a camp within the shortest time frame possible.

Deciding to leave the man to it, Edward at last turned away and began to walk out around the desert as he saw that it was now much better lit. He wanted to take a better look at where they had ended up. It was as he had suspected. A sea of sand and scrub brush, skinny trees armed with needlelike thorns, weathered rocks, and not much evidence at all of any animal life. It was most assuredly a land where only the hardiest and best prepared survived if they were to live here in this barren strip of land.

No wonder no one wanted to lay claim to it.
And he said as much when he heard the faint crunch of Roy’s boots on the sand come up behind him.

“It’s not just the condition of the land. Large parts of Ishval are like this, and yet the Ishvallans covet their country as much as we do ours.” Roy said frankly as he stepped up beside Edward and took a look around as well. “And now I understand this place a lot better than I did before I met you.”

“What exactly is it that you want me to see here?” Edward asked, turning towards the man with a suddenly firm desire to know. Not excitement. Not confusion. Just the strange, gripping feeling that he needed to know.

Roy smiled faintly and nodded. “Come on then. It should be all lit up by now, and if not, we’ll just place some mirrors around you like your own private illumination funhouse.” He said lightly as he offered out his arm to the apparition at his side.

“I am not a lamp.” Edward deadpanned before linking his arm in with Roy’s at the same moment he took to hovering at a better height for it.

“No. Lamps stay in one place. You don’t do that any longer.” Roy agreed fondly, weeks later still glad that Edward had been freed to stay with him. And he led them back towards the rocky rise of earth and the spot where it began to incline towards the plateau they’d been on last night. It didn’t take long to reach the top, and when they had he didn’t look ahead, he looked at Edward.

Edward had stopped dead in midair, his arm slowly falling through Roy’s as it came back to his side. He knew Roy was looking at him, but he couldn’t seem to tear his eyes away from the massive structure rising from the depths of the sand.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what it was for… but it’s all that’s left.”

Edward heard him, but couldn’t seem to drag his attention away long enough to respond. Instead he found himself floating towards the imposing structure that had snared his focus.

It didn’t appear to be anything more than a lost relic of time. Nothing more than a simple, stretching curved wall with a strange amount of healthy green ivy encasing it, holding it up against ravaging sandstorms that had sheared it to a bare shadow of what it must have been.

But the moment Edward laid eyes on it, he knew it was hardly anything simple.

Now underneath the remaining dome that tapered off into jagged points where sections had fallen off, Edward spun carefully as he looked around at the wall and then upwards towards the remaining dome. After a certain point, alchemy symbols had begun to serpentine their way up towards the dome, and he found himself following their progression, his mind rapidly putting them together until he reached as far as he could go on the dome’s apex where he could see the outer circle of what must have been a massive alchemy array.

It was at that point he let out a soft exhale of sound and a slight, almost nervous smile that vanished almost instantaneously. “This is…” he flung his gaze upwards again past all the symbols dashed with vines of ivy back to the dome.

Roy had followed after him at a somewhat more sedate pace, casting a careful look around them as he went. But still seeing nothing amiss he soon came to stand beside the ghost who had rested one incorporeal hand against the ivy-covered stone. “When I first stumbled onto this place, I didn’t think for a moment that I might be standing here again with you.”

“If I think I am?” Edward asked, turning a wide-eyed look on Roy.
Roy smiled then, “I believe it’s been a very long time since Xerxes has had one of its own inside its borders.”

A hitching breath expelled from Edward as he looked at the stone underneath his hand before giving a wry laugh. “And to think I thought my father had destroyed it entirely. It seems he failed.”

“He destroyed it, for certain. But I believe this desert has been taking care of the evidence he left behind.” Roy considered what remained of the wall with a thoughtful expression. “I truly believe that the only people Xerxes has seen have been lost passerby’s and soldiers. And what people believe to be only a rumor of how it was destroyed in only a single moment of time is all the basis needed for superstition.”

Edward tilted his head at Roy questioningly, “that explains to me how you came upon it then. You were in the Ishval war the first time you came here, weren’t you?”

Roy smiled wryly and turned his shoulder against the wall to lean against it as he focused his attention on Edward. “I was. I overheard some other officers describing this wall, and how bad luck seemed to come to those who went into its shadow.” He finished a bit overdramatically, though to Edward’s smile. “Then one day, in the midst of a sandstorm and an all out shooting barrage between our forces and the Ishvallans, I was ordered to cover the retreat of some of the generals back to one of the stronghold camps. On my way back I must have taken a wrong direction, for I found myself here. I didn’t know where I was, and since the sandstorm was only getting worse, I decided to wait it out in relative shelter.”

“And then you realize you’re in the realm of bad luck?” Edward smiled. “Well, you did get landed with a troublesome half-Xerxian ghost. Some might consider that bad luck.”

“Only if that person is Grand.” Roy smiled back fondly. “Anyway, when I realized where I was, I was alchemist enough to see past the uneasiness of a simple soldier in unfamiliar territory, or that of a lost traveler, and see the truth of where I was. That I was in a place that is no more than a last standing testament to a country that was fading into a myth told in primary school. I’ve never been afraid to be here, it sheltered me when I needed it. And I’ve come back a few times since, although I can’t explain why…” he trailed off a moment, something clearly still on his mind before he focused back on Edward with a spark in his dark eyes. “And if so-called bad luck helped to bring me you as well, I’ll take that too. With gratitude.”

Edward felt a lightness creep into his chest that had nothing to do with his incorporeal state, and his smile reflected that happiness. “It’s just a wall, Roy. I can assure you of that. But as for my staying with you, you’re welcome. I’ll take full credit.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” Roy chuckled softly and heaved out a long breath as he glanced towards the cold stone against his shoulder than back at the spirit as he let his head fall against the stone wall as well. “But just a wall or not… I thought you should see what remains of Xerxes, before the sandstorms erase it entirely.”

Edward let his head fall back as he gazed upwards along the wall. “Yes… this place surely taught alchemy correctly. They just taught it to the wrong person. It’s a shame… I would have loved to have come to such a place one day, had everything not gone wrong after father left.”

“You wouldn’t have been able to. Had he not destroyed this place and become a philosopher’s stone, you’d never have been born.” Roy said with a hint of displeasure in his voice. “And as cruel as it sounds, I’d rather have you, than one less massacre in the historical documents.”

“But you wouldn’t have known me. You can’t miss what you don’t know.” Edward pointed out, just
for the sake of the theory.

Roy lifted his head suddenly to stare at Edward with penetrating black eyes. “No. I’d know something was missing. I may not have ever discovered what, but you think too little of how you’ve affected me.”

Edward found theoretical argument disappearing from his mind as he locked gazes with the man, feeling a strange urge to shiver under the intensity of the look he was being pinned with.

Roy’s expression softened in an instant, a lopsided smile beginning to slip onto his face as he caught the expression in Edward’s eyes. That stunned, uncertain, and just a little bit awed light that made Roy fall in love a little bit more. But now was not the time… as much as he wanted, and needed to tell Edward everything, and as much as he wanted it to feel natural… he wasn’t confessing on top of the ruined remains of Xerxes. There was, however, something else he could do, and he held out his hand with that same smile. “That doesn’t matter right now, though. Shall we?”

Edward’s head tilted in confusion, not having noticed the distraction for what it was. “Shall we what?” He echoed, even as he reached out to Roy and floated nearer to him.

“Explore.” Roy suddenly grinned with an almost childish enthusiasm.

Edward suddenly understood, and instantly he found himself mirroring the enthusiastic grin as he darted into the air in his eagerness. “As the only Xerxian here, I hereby give us full permission to do one of the things alchemists, present and former, do best… discover!”

Roy laughed and began to turn, making immediately to where he felt they might find more ruins buried under the upheaval of sand brought here to rest by the many sandstorms. “Being that you are who you are, I feel slightly less apprehensive that I’ll be cursed for it.”

“It’d have to get through me, first.” Edward said in a moment of forced seriousness before bounding through the air after Roy. “Where shall we start looking? I know we don’t have shovels or anything, but you’re better than dynamite.”

Roy chuckled and motioned around to the rise of earth and sand that they walked on at present. “I’ve always believed this hill was made by the sand packing in around structures related to that wall back there. I’ve never really thought to explore it before now… I suppose that now it doesn’t feel so much like desecration.”

“I give you permission to help me desecrate Xerxes.” Edward allowed, before rolling his eyes. “Apparently it’s what the Elric family does. So I’ll be the genius and tell you where to blast, and you blast for me.”

“That’s so very technical of you, my ghost.” Roy commented dryly, still trying not to shake his head at Edward’s interpretation of his familial duty.

Edward smirked in self-satisfaction and with a glance back towards the wall to determine the scope of it, quickly figured out the parameter it might have once been. If he was right about the alchemy symbols on the wall and the remaining portion of the dome, he was fairly certain that the entire wall, whatever it may have encompassed, had been circular the entire way around. It was as easy as breathing once was to decide where and how deeply Roy might want to blast away the earth in order to potentially gain access to more of the ruins.

So with his measurements in mind, Edward hastened after Roy who was nearly almost over the edge of the rise to where they had left their things. Ignoring the narrow trail that Roy took down back to
the desert floor, Edward quickly floated his way down to meet the man at the bottom. “Admittedly,” he began with some regret as he looked over to meet Roy’s eyes, “I don’t know how exact you are at controlling the flames.”

Roy’s lips pulled into an almost devilish smirk, black eyes glinting with a trace of amusement. “Don’t be concerned about that. Just give me an approximate distance you think I should blast inwards, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Edward stared at him a long moment, eyes slightly narrowed, torn only for a moment on whether to believe it was the truth, or just arrogance. It only took him a moment to remember that this was Roy he was considering before he concluded that it was a large part of both. Shaking his head, he smiled before bounding a few paces to his left and pointing towards the wall. “Try six meters.”

Roy didn’t react, save for adjusting his gloves as he carefully looked over the packed earth and sand. While this wasn’t exactly mining he was about to do, nor any form of allowable archeology, he still needed to be cautious about the integrity of the rest of the hilly structure and what it might contain. He might, legally, be answerable to no one in this venture, but he knew he was damn well answerable to Edward if he put himself in danger because of shoddy blasting. “Just do me a favor and go completely incorporeal.”

Edward tilted his head in confusion at first as he stared up at the man’s profile, and then darting a look towards what Roy was about to explode into, and then back to Roy, he quickly nodded as he understood. With a laughing smile he reassured the man as a questioning look was turned on him, “don’t worry. I’m not about to be knocked into by a flying boulder or anything.” But he quickly began to frown as a thought struck him. “However that does cause me to worry about you.”

Roy chuckled faintly as he faced forward again, taking a few steps back before setting his stance as he faced off against the inanimate, innocent wall of earth and sand they were about to explore. “Edward, my ghost, I am quite capable of defending myself from return fire. Even from dirt.”

Edward scowled at him before shuffling just a bit behind him. “Cocky bastard.” He muttered. Roy allowed himself a brief laugh before he raised his hand, giving Edward a quick backwards glance, “yours.” He reminded the apparition, before abruptly facing forward with what could only be termed a cocky smirk, and snapped.

Edward’s hands flew hard over his ears as the resulting fiery explosion sent shockwaves out over the desert floor, rattling the very ground and thrumming through his body despite his being completely incorporeal at the moment. Idly he supposed he’d never been around shockwaves of that magnitude before, and could only wonder how Roy could look so unaffected by them.

Then again, Roy was looking highly unaffected as he snapped his fingers again and again to blast aside with upsurges of scorching fire the chunks of earth and rock that were sent flying their way. Edward returned his eyes towards the rise of earth, which at present was still shadowed in billowing waves of flying sand and smoke that flickered with embers and thin streams of remaining fire. “If we ever install a fireplace into our house, you’re not allowed to light it.”

Roy broke into a laugh, causing him to need to duck an errant ember as it whizzed past his head. Yet the upheaval he’d caused was beginning to settle as he looked back towards Edward in fond amusement. “You’re the one who wanted me to blast that deeply. I have finite control, and you know it.”

“No wonder you scare the shit out of people.” Edward murmured under the look that if anything,
grew even fonder.

“So if we were to install a fireplace you wouldn’t object?” Roy asked solicitously.

Edward laughed quietly, directing his gaze up to Roy at last when he realized that no other debris was about to fly at the man and catch him unaware. “If you can handle sooty little squirrel tracks all over the house when Hazel gets irritated with you.”

“Not far from what I handle normally. Especially with the addition of you.” Roy remarked dryly, then grinned under the annoyed look Edward gave him. “Now then, shall we go inspect the damage I did?”

That was all it took to shift Edward’s focus, and without pause, the ghost was eagerly darting over towards the massive crater that had been blasted into the earthen rise. The smoke and sand were finally clearing or had settled enough to begin seeing it properly, and without wasting time to investigate, Edward was quickly looking around at the new surfaces that had been revealed in order to find something that would give him a clue as to where they should blast next, or even if they should.

Roy followed at a much more sedate pace after a cursory look around. However the sprawling desert of what was once Xerxes remained empty of other signs of life, much to Roy’s satisfaction. He didn’t want to attract any attention with all this exploring. Satisfied for the moment, though, that they were still quite alone, he met up with Edward so they could confer on how they should proceed.

Several scowls from Edward later, and several laughing smirks from Roy, they had succeeded in artfully removing a large portion of the built-up sand that had accumulated around what Roy had suspected. Ruins. Roy had been correct in his assumptions. No wall that large, and that thick, which still partially stood even after hundreds of years of war and violent weather, could vanish entirely from erosion. Sometimes, erosion wasn’t always able to get to everything before the sand had concealed it.

Which was how, somewhere around mid-morning, they had created what was a decent sized clearing cut out of the sand-swept hill. It wasn’t entirely level, some parts of it still dangerously steep, but neither of them cared for that. It was what had caused a cease fire in Roy’s operations that they cared for at present. For Edward had gotten his approximations correct, and they had found blocks upon blocks of fallen stones, and large spires that had once been part of support pillars for a wall that Edward was only now beginning to realize the extent of. They were only to the closest part they could have blasted to, and Edward was beginning to believe that with the presence of support pillars, it had at one time, been a multilevel structure.

Yet it was not the shattered columns that Edward cared for at the moment. At present he was gleefully trying to wriggle a very dented and rusted box out from under a rather large and jagged section of fallen column. Nearby all of this were the gilt fastenings that Edward recognized as having once been on book bindings to secure them, but as the leather covers and the paper inside were long gone, he was hoping that something inside this box might have survived for a better fate.

Roy was chuckling to himself as he watched Edward struggle, and to be quite honest with himself, as much as he wanted to help, he was having too much fun watching Edward try on his own. The view was hardly a poor one as he caught himself, without as much as a flicker of guilt, tilting his head a bit to get a better perspective on Edward’s wriggling around on his knees as his hands clamped tightly to the box he was attempting so valiantly and actively to free.

Edward knew Roy was behind him somewhere, he could sense the man. And as the desert was completely quiet save for his scuffling around in the sand, he knew that Roy was just standing there.
With a huff he let his head fall forward as his movements stilled, “so help me, Roy Mustang, if you don’t help me –!”

“Helping!” Roy quickly interjected with a grin, and after a parting, appreciative look to the wonderful sight Edward presented like this, he inwardly sighed at the loss and moved to help his ghost. Crouching down beside the pillar he looked back over at Edward, “I’ll lift and you pull.”

Edward shot him a deadpan look from underneath the cascade of his silver hair over his eyes. “Next you’ll be telling me how to do addition.”

Roy smirked at Edward’s attitude, and stamped down on the urge to laugh. “That would be suicide, and I doubt you’d be too fond of me attempting that again.”

Edward sent him a stony look that made Roy’s lips twitch in a smile. “Just lift, you idiot.”

Roy smiled wider before turning back to the task at hand, literally. As his gloves found purchase on the chipped stone column section, he lifted it up gradually until Edward had successfully pulled the box free with a noise of pure delight in his success.

Edward eagerly sat back on the sand and pulled the worn box onto his lap with an eager look on his face. Brushing his hands over the surface to remove most of the sand and dirt he cautiously checked for anything on it that might indicate what had been, or hopefully, was inside. When Roy sat down beside him, their legs nearly passing together and one of the man’s hands reaching over, Edward quickly jerked the box away with a laugh and a smirk towards the man. “My box.” He claimed playfully.

Roy laughed, and letting go a sigh he would claim was brought on by lack of sleep, he wondered if it was healthy to feel jealous of a box. Yet obedient to Edward’s claim, he instead settled his chin in one hand as he gazed over at the ghost. “Then why don’t you open it so we can see if all that lifting on my part was worth it.”

“You should work out more, you lifted it rather slowly.” Edward felt the need to point out with a smirk.

“Next time, you lift the big rock. Then we’ll see what you say.” Roy bantered back cheerfully enough before turning his attention back to the box. “Are you going to open it, then?”

Edward laughed faintly and turned back to the box curiously. “I expect I am.” And tilting it back so that he could get at the latches, he flipped them open much to the agony of the box which creaked sharply in protest. Pushing up the lid, Edward angled it back down so that he could see inside. Only to have his eyes widen substantially as the harsh desert sunlight illuminated what was inside.

Roy only had to take one look inside the box, and with a frown look at Edward’s face, to know that the ghost knew exactly what was inside. His frown more pronounced at this, he looked back inside to the crystalline object inside. For the battered state of the box it had been in, the clear crystal cylinder that came to narrowed, almost deadly points on both ends, was only covered in a slight film of sand. It didn’t appear at all as if it had ever been damaged in the gradually falling ruins. Yet try as he might to search his memory of alchemy for a remembrance as to what this might be, he couldn’t come up with an answer. At least, not one that would explain Edward looking at it with such wide eyes. It clearly wasn’t just a pretty stone memento.

“Edward?”

Edward startled from his staring, looking up into Roy’s eyes as a smile slowly began to overtake his
“I didn’t think one of these would actually still exist, since my father never had any.” He said with a bit of a laugh to his voice, it was a laugh of amazed happiness. “I only ever read about them in one of father’s old books. One of the ones I suppose came from here. He always did have some astonishingly old ones... naturally he forbade us from touching them, but that hardly stopped us.”

Roy snorted at that, he would have expected nothing less from the ghost he knew.

Edward turned from Roy then, reaching carefully down into the box to grasp the crystal and withdraw it into the sunlight with care. “These are storage devices, for alchemy recipes.” He said in a distracted voice as he turned it this way and that, watching the sunlight reflect off the faceted surfaces. “Honestly I’m not sure how it’s done, but in one of father’s books they were mentioned. I’m sure my father knows how to make them...” he mused before shaking himself out of his distraction and facing Roy. “They stored information on certain alchemic processes. The same as an alchemy recipe in a book, but these,” Edward waggled the crystal, “were used by only the master alchemists. A show of wealth, I’d expect. These do kind of look fancier than dusty books.”

Roy frowned in interested consideration, and reaching out, took the crystal from Edward’s willing grasp. “How do you make it work? Or does it even have anything inside of it? Can you tell?”

Edward smiled and set the box aside, out of his lap. “I’m assuming it does. As for how to make it work, I’m not sure. You’d have to ask my father about that. The book I found them referenced in was very brief in mentioning them.”

Roy nodded, giving the crystal a spin with nimble fingers before offering it back to Edward. “Then should we run into him again, we’ll ask him, right after I practice a left hook against him.”

Edward chuckled softly, silver eyes glinting in amusement as he gazed at the man beside him. “Forever my hero.” He murmured, and held his hand up to wave aside the crystal. “Keep it on you. You have more pockets than I do, but you’d better not lose it!”

“I would never lose your discovery from our desecration of your half-homeland.” Roy informed him gravely, before letting slip a brief, amused grin. “Shall we do some more digging about? See what else we can find?”

Edward nodded eagerly at the suggestion, and soon enough, they were back to it with enthusiasm. They continued to explore until Roy announced that they needed to be heading back soon. Edward only had to quickly check the position of the sun to realize that he was right. They did need to start going back to Central soon if they were to make it back home before it was too late for Roy to get any amount of decent sleep before the carnival the next morning.

So with some reluctance on both their parts, for all that it had been a long morning, and a dirty one as far as Roy’s clothing went, they had had fun despite coming away with only having discovered mostly more of the wall in its fallen state. Yet the crystalline storage device that Edward claimed to have found was carefully packed away, cushioned among Roy’s dirty clothes for the moment.

“We’ll leave as soon as I change.” Roy said, beginning to pull free a change of clothes. He wasn’t about to ride back to Central looking like he’d just been rolling about in a smoky, sandy field.

Edward looked over at Roy quickly, about to make some form of protest that Roy was dressed just fine for a drive back home, when his eyes caught on Roy shaking out another pair of leather pants that made him falter such that he abruptly connected with the ground.

“Yes?” Roy asked with a decidedly sultry smirk over to the ghost who was staring at him with wide eyes. If he’d known sooner that wearing leather pants would have affected Edward like this, he’d
have worn them before now.

Edward nearly fell over the rocky dirt in flustered haste to turn himself around, feeling a strange wave of apprehensive panic wash over him and the sensation that he’d be ten shades of red right now, were it possible. And yet, through all that, he couldn’t help but feel the shaky warmth that pooled inside his chest. “N-nothing.” He stammered out, and stared wide-eyed at the ground.

Roy smiled fondly, feeling an outpour of love to the flustered ghost. Feeling a determination like none he’d ever felt before, to make Edward his own. In whatever capacity he could. To say it didn’t weigh on his heart that he couldn’t touch Edward would be a lie, for in varying degrees, it always had. But he was willing to go through with an absence of touch in order to have Edward’s love. It wouldn’t be easy… but Edward was worth it.

Edward had always been worth it.

Quickly Roy changed out of the shirt and jeans he’d put on for their exploratory adventures today, and changed into another pair of leather pants and a clean shirt for the road. After quickly fastening his belt he called over to Edward. “Time to get going. Go ahead and put my jacket inside my suitcase, I’m thinking I should be able to wear it again by the time we get back to the main road.”

Edward turned, having for the most part managed to smother down his flighty emotions. As soon as he caught sight of Roy, however, he was forced to battle them once more as his fingers fumbled with the jacket. Quickly casting his gaze down, he fought to get a hold of himself before continuing forward.

“Next time we go out somewhere together, I’ll wear that shirt you like and some leather pants.” Roy entreated as Edward finally managed to cross back over to the motorcycle.

Edward spluttered, feeling suddenly, shockingly shy. “Just as long as you don’t wear them to the carnival tomorrow. I’m not sure Maes would approve.” He finally managed to get out, and promptly did as he’d been told with the leather jacket before quickly clambering into his sidecar.

“You’d not approve of anyone else admiring me.” Roy corrected as he straddled the motorcycle and fished the key from wherever on his person he’d been concealing them.

Edward remained stubbornly silent, even as he had to wonder at the part of him that was agreeing.

Roy smiled down at the silent ghost, and deciding to stop while he was ahead for the moment, he turned on the motorcycle. He needed to get them back to Central. He could use a long, hot shower and some sleep before the carnival in the morning.

So with a roar of the engine, Roy guided the motorcycle back the way they had come. For now they’d leave behind this place. Xerxes. And while he knew that it was long-removed to be a part of Edward’s home, he knew they’d be coming back soon enough. The matter of Xerxes, and the protection of what remained of that ruined country, was giving him something else to consider for when he eventually took control of Amestris.

Yet such matters were useless to consider now. He had more pressing, immediate concerns on his horizon. And one that was very dear to his heart.

Edward stared straight ahead as they drove away, willing himself with each needless breath to calm down. When had he lost control of this again? This game that they had begun playing with one another. When he thought of it as a game, though, it felt as if something leaden had taken up residence in his chest. Didn’t he want it to be a game? This back and forth attempt to fluster each
other until one of them caved? He let out a weighted sigh.

Turning his head just enough, he caught Roy in his peripheral vision and found himself wondering the question that thus far, he’d been successful in ignoring: if he didn’t want it to be a game… what did he want it to be?

He wasn’t honestly sure that he could come out on top of this again, and fluster Roy so thoroughly it shut the man up for days. Honestly… he wasn’t sure he wanted to try.

Closing his eyes, Edward turned away again.

It wasn’t until the motorcycle suddenly came to a rather more abrupt stop than he was accustomed to that Edward opened his eyes again in confusion.

“I was hoping we wouldn’t run into this, but it seems I was wrong.” Roy sighed, but quickly swung off the motorcycle with purpose. “So much for a change of clothes.”

Edward floated up out of his sidecar uncertainly. “What’s wrong?”

Roy looked up from his digging through his suitcase long enough to smile reassuringly at Edward. “We’re almost to the road again, but we’re about to go head-on with a sandstorm.” He said, pointing westward. “I can’t outrace odds like those.”

Edward quickly looked towards the horizon, a slight frown coming over his face as he saw the subtle brown hazing growing closer towards them. “That doesn’t look so bad, are you sure it’s enough to force us off the road?”

Roy pulled free a rather extensive tarp and gave it a rough shake to begin unfolding it. “Don’t worry, we won’t lose much time. I’ll just get a bit of rest while it blows over us. Trust me, a sandstorm is not something you want to drive through if you can help it.”

Edward briefly forced himself to consider Roy’s background in desert conditions like this, and then had to decide that the man probably knew best. “Okay then. What can I do?”

Roy smiled and pulled free the steel stakes which he quickly attached to each corner of the tarp. “You can help me drape it over the motorcycle. It’ll give us enough of a tent. And enough protection from the sand.”

Edward started forward immediately, and began helping Roy create their temporary shelter. Something that he was shocked to see they were managing barely in time. When he’d first looked at the horizon, it seemed as if the sandstorm might take hours to reach them, but already he could see wind whipping at the tarp and tugging at Roy’s hair and jacket. Not more than minutes from them, was a wall of brown that was completely negating the sunlight. “That’s amazing…” Edward whispered, not entirely concerned for his safety facing such a thing. It couldn’t touch him if he didn’t let it.

Roy, on the other hand, was already slipping underneath the tarp. “Amazing, yes. But also very dangerous. Get in here so I don’t worry about you getting swept away.”

Edward smiled after him, and taking one last admiring look at the sandstorm that was moments from being upon them, he darted through the top of the makeshift tent as it flapped wildly. Settling on the sand just in front of Roy he shifted around until he was settled in beside the man, leaning up against the man’s suitcase with him which was propped against one of the motorcycle tires. “I won’t get swept away.”
“It’s not so much logic, as it is my peace of mind.” Roy replied quietly despite the howling around them and the battering sand against the tarp. He knew Edward could hear him, and he slung his arm over the back of the suitcase to allow Edward nearer. Something the ghost took advantage of instantly, though he wasn’t certain Edward was cognizant of it. It made him smile tenderly even so.

“It’s nice…” Edward murmured after a moment, his head dipping towards Roy’s chest. “Having someone to worry about me. I thought it would be more of a burden… but you don’t seem incapable of not worrying over me. I’m… glad of that.”

“I’ve rescued you a few times because of it.” Roy replied with a reminiscing smile, before looking down at the silver hair of the only true source of light here in their makeshift shelter. Edward was so close to him… so very close, and closing his eyes briefly, Roy let himself believe once again that were it possible to take Edward into his arms, the ghost would come willingly. “You’re not a burden to me, far from. I’m actually not sure what I’d do without you, anymore.”

Edward couldn’t help but smile as he continued to look down at their legs. One of his was nudging through Roy’s, it was an odd contrast to look at. “Think this sandstorm will start covering up what we did today?”

“I’m not sure that Xerxes was ever meant to remain, except for people like you.” Roy theorized, “I’ve never been a superstitious man… ironically enough,” he gave a brief laugh, which Edward echoed, “but I do believe that there are some who are meant to go places where others are not.”

“Are you still not a superstitious man, Roy Mustang?” Edward asked with a bit of a laugh still in his voice as he tipped his head back to meet the man’s eyes.

Roy felt as if his heart was about to fail him, with only mere inches separating them and Edward looking up at him with those soulful silver eyes. “I believe in you… and that we were meant to find each other. That’s enough for me.”
It was late when they’d finally arrived back to Central that night. The sandstorm that had delayed them hadn’t taken a considerable amount of time in blowing past them, but the condition in which it had left the roads leading back towards civilization had left much to be desired.

And such was the state of their house upon their arrival, that when Roy finally made it upstairs to the bedroom he was considering drastic methods for a solution to a certain continuous problem.

“I’m going to stuff him into a box.” Roy grumbled, his voice rough from exhaustion.

Edward followed him into their bedroom, shutting the door behind them to be sure Hazel didn’t disturb Roy in the morning. “He’d just chew his way out, he is a squirrel.” He pointed out with a sympathetic smile.

“A cement box.” Roy clarified as he started towards the bathroom. “If I’m not out in ten minutes, assume I’ve fallen asleep in the shower.”

“I’ll just switch it to cold water then, shall I?” Edward enquired evily.

Roy didn’t have the energy to scowl at the ghost, merely grumbled something unintelligible under his breath and closed himself in the bathroom. He had several pounds worth of dust and sand to wash away before he could finally climb into bed. And it had been several years since he’d wanted so badly to climb into bed and collapse in sleep.

Edward watched him go with a faint smile, they had just been through a long day, and Roy was showing it. Turning from the bathroom door, he floated over to gather up Roy’s suitcase and bring it to the bed. He opened it only long enough to locate the storage crystal that they’d purloined from the ruins, and leaving the remainder of the suitcase for Roy to deal with, he floated up and over the bed to settle down on top of the blankets and continue examining the crystal.

The more he thought about it, and considered the level of alchemy that his father, and he himself for a time had practiced, the more he was considering the idea that if this crystal contained any alchemic information, it would have to be accessed through alchemy.

He just wasn’t sure how to go about discovering what circle was needed when he had no real reference material and was unable to execute alchemy any longer.

With a last, musing frown directed to it, Edward reached over to Roy’s nightstand and carefully tucked it inside the drawer. Knowing that it was now secure from being broken until he could investigate it further at a better time, he picked up his latest book from beside the lamp and buried himself underneath the blankets to read and wait for Roy.

Roy was out of the bathroom within the allotted ten minutes, a towel hitched around his waist and his hair still dripping water. “I never realized I was this pale until I washed my tan off.” He commented in amused sleepiness as he hunted for a pair of sweatpants.

Edward looked up from his book, his mouth going somewhat slack as he found himself staring at the taut muscles of Roy’s back and the way stray water from Roy’s hair was – he quickly looked down again with a flash of hot annoyance with himself. What was wrong with him lately? He’d seen Roy’s back before, and it was hardly anything worth seeing. Giving himself a rough, mental shake that he
thoroughly deserved, he replied perhaps a bit more unsteadily than he’d have liked. “You’ll always be a pale, narcissistic pyromaniac.”

“Probably.” Roy agreed a tad morosely, and pulled the sweatpants on underneath his towel before casting it aside. “Now I, for one, need some sleep before tomorrow. Else I’ll just be riding the carousel all day, and not on one of the ponies, mind, on one of the bench seats. And I’ll be sleeping.”

Edward chuckled, his uncertainties fading from his mind again as he turned to Roy who was busy sliding in underneath the blankets with him. “Then sleep. If you fall asleep at the carnival tomorrow, I dread to think of what pranks Maes would play on you.”

“And you’d let him.” Roy stated, completely non-accusatory.

“I would.” Edward agreed firmly, and with a rather smug grin. “I might even unknowingly help him.”

“Xerxian gods save me from half-Xerxian ghosts.” Roy muttered as he burrowed into the blankets and turned his head into the pillow. “Just don’t let me sleep past nine a.m.”

Edward found his smile softening as he watched Roy begin to quickly sink into the unconsciousness of sleep. He could tell by the man’s relaxing expression and the way his breathing steadied out, and how his shoulders slumped down out of the perfectly correct soldier posture he carried himself with. “Somehow I don’t think your enemies would fear you if they saw you this way. It’d hard even for me to reconcile the man I know with the one they must.”

Settling further into the covers, Edward piled another pillow underneath his head so that he could continue reading more easily. He should be able to finish his book by then, he expected. And then – he smiled excitedly to himself – then he would beat Roy awake if needed in order to go to the carnival.

As such, the night passed too slowly at first, for a ghost who was excited for the coming day, but before too long he became absorbed in his book, and he didn’t notice the passing of time any longer.

Only when he came to the last page and laid aside the book did he look past Roy’s head and to the clock. After a moment of reflection on their late night, and on the time remaining until he needed to wake Roy lest Maes pound down the front door, Edward decided that he would brew coffee. If Roy would need anything this morning, it would be coffee.

And it would give him something to occupy himself with, instead of risking that he’d forego letting Roy sleep any longer in his enthusiasm to go to the carnival.

Only once the coffee was well into brewing did Edward venture back upstairs, finding that in his absence, Roy had stolen all the pillows on the bed and had wrapped himself around them greedily.

“At least you don’t try and steal all the blankets.” Edward muttered with a bit of a smirk at the sight, before making his way around the bed to crawl back onto it happily enough. Without any pillows now, he propped his head up on his arm as he reached over to tug repetitively on one of the pillows that Roy had an arm wrapped around. “Roy, you’re doing absolutely nothing right now for your fearsome reputation.”

His answer was Roy’s arm clenching tighter about the pillow in the circle of his arm and the man’s head burrowing deeper underneath the blankets.

Edward smirked faintly, and with no hesitation whatsoever, he released the pillow in order to tug the
blankets down to the man’s chest. “Roy!” He whispered loudly, insistently. “Carnival. You, me, and the happy Hughes family. But mostly for me. So you’d best start looking more alert.”

Roy stirred restlessly, his face scrunching up a bit at the absence of the covers that had been keeping his neck warm.

“Roy…” Edward called again softly as he settled in closer to the man so that he could partially rest his head on the pillow the man’s arm had stolen from him. “Are you certain that a cute, fluffy thing wouldn’t help you wake up?”

Roy stirred again, his arm flexing around the pillow as he was drug from sleep slowly.

“Because I can go get the cute, fluffy thing if you like.” Edward offered in amusement, although he distantly realized that he had no inclination at all to leave the bed. Which was odd enough considering that he should be beyond control in his excitement to go to the carnival. Yet he felt as if he was under some sort of peaceful spell that kept him completely at ease to just be here taunting Roy until he woke. “Roy…” he entreated again, “I made coffee.”

A rough grumble met that statement, and Roy stirred further this time and finally blearily opened his eyes to look at Edward in confusion dulled with the vestiges of sleep. “I have your pillows.” He murmured sleepily.

Edward smiled brightly at him, “and if you don’t return them by tonight, I’ll steal all the blankets.”

Roy chuckled into the pillows he’d snagged for himself, gradually feeling more coherent under that beaming smile. “How did I manage to get them from you?”

“I made coffee, you repaid me by thievery.” Edward informed him solemnly, but with mirthful light in his eyes.

“Then I must make proper reparations for my grave misdeeds.” Roy decided, although he made no move to relinquish the pillows in question. “What do you suggest?”

Edward met the teasing look in Roy’s eyes with one of equal amusement, and after a moment of consideration, sat up. “I’ll think of something, thief. For now though you can finally get out of this bed so we can go have some fun! I’ve never been to a carnival before… you’ll have to show me how it’s done!”

Roy chuckled at the excitement beginning to color Edward’s voice. “Then I had best get dressed and have some of your coffee. I have this suspicion that I’ll need the caffeine.”

Edward’s face split into a wide grin. “Why, Roy Mustang, it’s almost as if you know me.”

Roy huffed in amusement as he worked on sitting up with a groan, and lazily flipped the purloined pillows in Edward’s direction. “I take offense to you believing you’re worth knowing.”

Edward gasped in mock indignation, his silver eyes tracking Roy’s somewhat stiff movements as the smirking man eased up off the bed and made in the direction of his closet. “I take offense to your offense!”

Roy laughed freely this time, his laughter soon accompanied by Edward’s own as he hunted for a shirt. “Give me about five minutes… will you check on Hazel’s food supply for me while I get ready?”

“Fine.” Edward moaned, still exuding mock indignation. “Treat me like your slave why don’t you.”
And in as perfect an imitation of Roy’s tone he could manage began to float his way towards the door whilst parroting: “wake me up at nine a.m.; by the way, I’m a tired and crotchety old man so subliminally I’m sending you the message that I want you to make coffee; feed the family pet.”

Roy threw a clothes hanger in Edward’s direction, the object clattering against the door as Edward darted out of the room just in time with a peal of laughter. A few more laughs made it out of himself before he trailed off with a fond smile and a shake of his head. “Family pet, huh?” He repeated with the same fond smile, before resuming his endeavors to make ready for their day.

When all preparations were said and done, nearly half an hour had elapsed before Roy and Edward were well on their way to Elysia’s school.

And Roy was beginning to be grateful that Edward was unable to consume coffee.

“Come on, Roy!” Edward whined loudly as he continued to jog in place in midair as he hovered several paces down the sidewalk from Roy. “If you continue taking so long you’re going to grow moss!”

Roy hid his grin from behind the rim of his travel mug, taking a leisurely sip of his coffee and not at all increasing his pace. Instead, he stopped in order to look up at the morning sky and release a breathy exhale of dramatic wonderment. “Would you look at that sky, it’s so blue!”

“Oh for the love of –” Edward planted himself on the sidewalk and sent an exasperated roll of his eyes to the apparently distracting sky. “Roy! You’re impeding my childhood with your sudden descent into being an octogenarian!”

Roy cracked a grin at that, and began strolling towards the ghost again. “It’s such a lovely morning.”

“Finally!” Edward exclaimed in relief as Roy started moving again, and once the man reached him rebuked, “I thought you were the Flame Alchemist, not the Dying Ember Alchemist?”

Roy sent Edward a withering look.

Edward smirked back at him before darting off further down the sidewalk with a squeal that seemed to encompass all the excitement and happiness in the world in that single, shrill and drawn-out note.

By the time they had just spotted Elysia’s school ahead of them, Roy was finally feeling entirely awake and alert, and Edward was bouncing down the sidewalk with energy the ghost wasn’t even trying to contain as his wide silver eyes glittered in excitement as he continued to wheedle Roy to move faster.

It was in this moment, that Roy decided there was nothing for it, and he lobbed his travel mug away into some bushes. He’d buy a new one.

“Race you.”

Edward was left staring open-mouthed in shock as Roy suddenly pelted ahead of him down the sidewalk as if loosed from a cannon. “Foolish mortal.” He declared with a devilish smile, and promptly darted after him.

Roy didn’t need to glance over his shoulder to see where Edward was, the devilish cackling growing closer to him was evidence enough. It only made a wider grin split his face, and caused him to ease into a swifter run as he allowed the exhilaration of the run to take him.

“You can’t beat me, Roy!” Edward crowed in delight as he continued to gain on the man, “I have no
Roy fought down a laugh, and instead focused on the gates of the school that were growing ever closer. It might be true, and that Edward would overtake him, but he wasn’t one to back down from a challenge he’d posed.

Edward pelted after him, keeping just in range to overtake him when it came time. He would allow Roy the idea that he was winning… for now. He wouldn’t have to wait much longer to win this race anyway, the crowd of parents and children that were gathered together chatting amongst themselves as they slowly filed in through the gates of the school were growing quite near.

He knew that Roy would have to slow down soon.

So it was only when Roy was about to reach the main gates of the school that he darted ahead of him with a whoop of victory before turning to smirk imperiously at the man who had come to a stop not far from him. “Loser buys the winner an extra carnival ride.” He declared.

Roy huffed out a short laugh through catching his breath once more, and with an amused shake of his head at Edward that had nothing to do with negating that demand, he straightened his shirt and began to look around for Maes, Gracia, or Elysia through the crowd of other parents and children. Some of whom were eyeing him a bit warily thanks to his sudden descent into their midst.

Edward thought nothing of Roy’s silence, he knew what it was for, and he too began to look around through the milling parents and children as they made their way… somewhere. “Maybe if we follow these people? I’m guessing that’s where the rides are, and I want to go on some carnival rides!”

Roy smiled at that, and meeting Edward’s eyes, nodded. He didn’t see them anywhere, so they must be out on the school playground around the back of the building. So together they began to make their way in that direction, noticing as they went that the schoolyard was becoming increasingly, alarmingly more festive and chaotically cluttered with brightly colored banners and balloons.

Yet when they reached the school playground, Edward and Roy became witness to the sort of chaos that only children with access to cotton candy and endorphin-producing rides could create.

Children of all ages were rushing from ride to ride, screaming their delight to one another as they caused parents and ride operators alike to engage in spontaneous ballet to avoid trampling on them. Food vendors were hawking their sugary treats to any and all, swooping around with a practiced grace that never once threatened to upset their wares. Teachers who were supervising the event looked rather as if they needed something more than coffee to get them through the coming hours; and the parents who weren’t running about like children themselves seemed to be of the same mind as the teachers.

Maes and Gracia Hughes were one of the parental exceptions.

Roy and Edward had finally spotted them among the chaos. They were seated on a metal, enclosed bench with a safety bar, and were whirling around a fixed pole at the center of this multi-bench ride with Elysia sandwiched between them – and they were all screaming at the top of their lungs.

“We’re riding that.” Edward decided immediately.

“I think you have to be over a certain height to ride that.” Roy muttered to him with a smirk as he watched his best friend clutch at the safety bar with a death grip as he was whirled around in circles. “Why don’t we go take you over to the little floating ducks. If you get one with the right color dot on the bottom you get a prize.”
Edward kicked a convenient rock at Roy’s shin. “Elysia is riding it!”

“Precisely my point.” Roy’s smirk turned evil.

“I’ll start letting Hazel in the bedroom on weekend mornings.” Edward crossed his arms over his chest while glowering at the man.

“You’re sitting on the outside.” Roy replied immediately, starting forward towards the thankfully short queue and fishing out several bills from his wallet.

“That’s what I thought.” Edward agreed and trotted after him.

Roy had just purchased a ticket for himself and was joining the queue when a blur of dirty-blond pigtails and a delighted squeal launched into his legs, causing him to momentarily almost lose his balance.

“Maybe Grand should take notes,” Edward observed dryly, “his assassins need to be about knee-height and exude innocence.”

Roy ignored that, and instead swept the young girl who’d accosted him into his arms. “Well what have we here, a rampaging criminal!” He declared with a grin, before tossing her into the air much to her squealing delight.

“Uncle Roy!” Elysia declared enthusiastically, and as said uncle whirled her around in a circle quickly, she shrieked through her giggles.

“Roy!” Maes grinned heartily, stepping over on somewhat wobbly legs to give him a sturdy smack to the shoulder. “I knew you’d show.”

Roy regarded his best friend with a raised eyebrow as he settled Elysia on his hip. “No you didn’t. Admit it, you were worried I’d stand you up.” And without waiting for a response, cast a teasing eye over Maes’s posture. “Are you drunk? Or just that unsteady after going around in a few circles?”

Maes snorted and waved a flippant hand. “You always think I’m drunk.”

“True.” Roy admitted with a grin.

“Of course Uncle Roy would come!” Elysia finally piped up from her perch, tired of listening to the adults talk about things she didn’t understand. She understood that her Uncle Roy had come to the carnival for her, that was all that was important right now. “He promised me.” She told her dad in a fair approximation of a reprimand.

Roy grinned as Maes gaped at her, before hurriedly grabbing for his camera much to Roy’s annoyance. Yet it was Gracia’s appearance at her husband’s side that had him smiling pleasantly again, and ignoring the sudden rapid-fire clicking of Mae’s camera. “She’s becoming her mother’s daughter.”

Gracia returned the smile, and lowered her voice as if to impart a dire secret, “of course she is. It teaches her how to better persuade things from her father.”

Maes stopped taking pictures in order to give her a pout.

Gracia promptly reached up to prod her husband’s glasses askew.

Roy grinned at them both, shaking his head at the picture they made. If he were completely honest,
there was no woman better than Gracia for dealing with his absolutely insane best friend. And he’d nearly told her as much on their wedding day.

“I amend my earlier statement,” Edward spoke up at Roy’s side as he watched them as well, “I really like her.”

Roy tried to convince himself that he hadn’t felt a hot coil of jealousy at the words, telling himself that it was ridiculous. Besides, he reminded himself gruffly, he had no right to consider Edward as his yet. But it didn’t stop him from feeling that way. Not truly. So he took the opportunity the moving queue presented as a chance to clear his mind and deposited Elysia back onto the grass. “I do believe it’s my turn to get dizzy. How about I meet up with you afterwards?”

“Carousel, Uncle Roy!” Elysia insisted, tugging at the hem of his shirt.

Roy grinned down at her, “the carousel it is.”

“My baby girl will look so cute on one of those horses.” Maes gushed at the idea, and promptly began ushering his daughter that direction. “Don’t you take too long, Roy!”

Roy smirked after them, before winking at Gracia as he moved towards the ride along with his queue. “I hope you forgot his extra film.”

“I can’t guarantee he didn’t stuff some in his socks before we left the house. Just in case.” Gracia laughed, and began to follow after her husband and daughter with a wave. “See you there, Roy! And I’m really glad you came, by the way.”

“He had no choice in the matter.” Edward assured her, before bouncing forward in pace with Roy. “Is there any way to make the ride go faster?” He enquired, casting it a thoughtful look as children and parents began to file into their respective little enclosures for the experience.

“Some of us don’t want to be ghosts yet.” Roy informed him quite matter-of-factly as he stepped into his own enclosed bench area and pulled the safety bar down. “Now get in here and hold onto this bar.”

“Yes, Colonel.” Edward gave a mock suffering sigh as he settled in and gripped onto the bar as well. “At least there’s the risk of danger in that we don’t know how substantial this safety bar will stay for you, now that I’m holding it.”

“Fantastic.” Roy muttered in the face of Edward’s pleased cheerfulness. Clearly there must not be too much of a risk if Edward was cheerful about it, but even so…

“What is this thing, anyway?” Edward asked as the last of the passengers filed onto the ride and the ride operator made for the control box.

“A tilt-a-whirl.” Roy murmured with a slight smile. “Great to use on dates, it flings them right into your side.”

Edward snorted and gave a roll of his eyes. “I’ll be doing no such thing.”

Roy didn’t feel the need to argue the point, not when he was fighting down the giddy, stupid smile that was threatening to appear. It hadn’t slipped his notice that Edward hadn’t denied being his date, even if he knew it was a coward’s delight he felt.

But then there was no time left to ponder it, as the ride accelerated rather quickly.
And then the screaming began.

Edward couldn’t feel the rush of the wind against him, nor the force of their rotational speed that pushed everyone else furthest from the center point. But he could feel the pressure of the safety bar in his hands whipping him around in circles, and it was wonderful.

In fact, just as wonderful as listening to Roy shriek in his ever-manly way was.

Edward gave a wholehearted effort to trying to mimic Roy’s shrieks.

Something the man could only glare at him for after the ride had come to a stop and Roy was left to try and wobble his way back out to the masses.

“I assume you’re generally steadier on your feet than this if you have someone to impress?” Edward teased mercilessly as he hovered over Roy as the man did what was barely passable as walking.

“You mean you’re not going to nurse me back to health?” Roy enquired under his breath as he turned his steps in the vague direction of the carousel.

“Oh, hardly.” Edward grinned mercilessly. “I’m going to enjoy every second of you wobbling about.”

Yet by the time they reached the carousel, and the waiting Hughes family, Roy’s steps had become quite steady and sure once again. Much to Edward’s disappointment.

Elysia immediately ran up to Roy as he approached, demanding to be picked up, and once she was, immediately started chattering away to him excitedly. “You’ll ride the carousel with me and mommy, right? Daddy is gonna take pictures!”

“Sounds just like him.” Roy observed as he bounced her slightly in his arms and turning his attention to his friends. “How early did she drag you out of bed for this?”

“We got here about an hour ago.” Gracia smiled easily as she watched them. “I’m guessing that was around the time you rolled out of bed, though.”

“Naturally.” Roy smiled back. “I needed some sleep after the past few days.”

“Which reminds me,” Maes began with a narrowing gaze as he considered his best friend and colonel. “Just where did you run off to Thursday and Friday? Riza was livid. I went over to your house Thursday night but you weren’t there.”

“I took a spontaneous vacation.” Roy shrugged, unconcerned. “It’s something I’ve been realizing I have needed to do for a while now. I’ll handle Riza come Monday morning.”

“You and your need for excitement.” Maes muttered, but wasn’t quite ready to let the matter drop. “I’m an investigator for a reason, Roy. But I couldn’t find a trace of you, anywhere. Where the” he paused to glance down at his daughter before amending, “where were you?”

“If you ever become good enough to track me when I don’t want to be, you let me know.” Roy smiled at him, adjusting Elysia in his arms to be able to clap a hand to his friend’s shoulder. “When that happens, I’ll know I need to step up my skills.”

Maes rolled his eyes and sighed. “I’m not going to get it out of you, am I.” He mumbled in a reluctant, nearly defeated, tone.
“No.” Roy agreed and gave Gracia a somewhat apologetic look. “It’s rather a private matter for me.”

“Were you with him?” Gracia asked with a sudden burst of intuition, her eyes beginning to sparkle in amusement. “Maes told me you have a secret informant.”

Edward felt a flutter of appreciation at the title. Yet it was nothing on the strange tugging sensation he felt in his chest when he saw Roy crack a shy smile.

“You were!” She delighted.

“Carousel!” Elysia finally demanded, tired of this conversation she couldn’t understand.

Roy, exceedingly grateful for the distraction, boosted her fully into his arms with a beaming smile. “Quite right! Shall we go get in line?”

“Yay!” Elysia cheered exuberantly.

Edward could only laugh at them, and as Roy moved off with her still in his arms to go purchase some tickets to the carousel for them, he followed along beside them with his own eagerness. While it was hardly bound to be an adrenaline-inducing ride, he wanted the full experience of the carnival.

As Roy moved off with their daughter securely in his arms, Gracia turned to her husband with a knowing smile on her lips as she watched Maes’s expression. Waiting a moment longer to be sure that Roy could not overhear her, she finally asked, “would I be correct in guessing he’s in love with this informant?”

Maes chuckled faintly, his eyes dancing in amusement as he watched his best friend purchase carousel tickets with one hand while with the other he gripped firmly to Elysia’s hand as the girl spun this way and that with excitement. “Yes… and if that little display right now tells this investigator anything,” he smiled over at his wife in a mixture of relief and happiness, “he’s finally realized it for himself.”

Several minutes had elapsed and Roy had just turned to find out where Gracia and Maes had run off to, abandoning their daughter on him, when Gracia came up beside him.

“Ah, there you are.” He smiled, passing her the ticket he’d purchased for her. “I thought you two had abandoned me.”

Gracia laughed at the idea. “Not at all. I was just informing my husband the limit on how many carousel photos he could take.”

“None?” Roy guessed hopefully.

And then they were being ushered through the portable gate that fenced off the carousel.

Gracia ended up taking Elysia at that point, whisking her daughter up onto a jeweled pony while she herself sat sidesaddle a prancing tiger.

Which left Edward and Roy to their own devices.

Edward couldn’t help the laughter that slipped out of him, and while he didn’t know why he was laughing, he didn’t wonder to it as he allowed Roy to pursue him towards the far side of the carousel where fewer parents and children had gathered. Everyone had naturally tried to take the spots closest the entrance, leaving the further side somewhat less occupied.
More available for them to talk.

And as Edward leaped up atop his mighty rearing steed, grasping the center rod in one hand as he stood atop the fiberglass saddle, he swung his free arm regally to gesture to the rather large white rooster next to his impressive stallion. “Look, Roy. I found you you!”

Roy eyed the rooster balefully, and then eyed the smirking Edward now swinging to and fro as he stood there on the carousel stallion he’d chosen. It didn’t take him long at all to decide.

“Hey!” Edward declared indignantly, “this is my horse! Get off it!”

Roy laughed openly as he settled astride the stallion, Edward’s feet just in front of him on the saddle. “Not anymore!” He declared and shifted back and forth with a satisfied smile in a parody of making himself comfortable.

Edward scowled down at him, and spinning to stand now atop the head of the stallion, he squatted down to be more at eye-level with the man. “Go ride on the rooster. Birds of a feather should flock together.”

Roy burst out into a peal of laughter that he didn’t deign to control, despite whatever looks he might get for it. Shoulders shaking in mirth, he could only laugh harder under the unimpressed look being leveled at him. A look filled with amusement that he could see Edward was trying not to show.

“Go on then,” Edward began with amusement coloring his tone despite his best efforts, “fl –” and with a yelp of surprise he was cut off as the carousel stirred to life, and he was flung off balance around the rod he’d been leaning into and back around into the saddle, just in front of Roy.

Roy continued to chuckle, though it was quieted as he wrapped an arm around Edward’s middle on the pretext of holding onto the center bar himself as the carousel stallion moved in soothing up and down rotations as the platform circled them about. “Easy.” He whispered as he bent his head towards Edward’s ear. “You’re supposed to stay seated once the ride is in motion.”

Edward couldn’t stop the unknown shiver that flitted through him at the words, spoken so closely to him. And turning his head to catch Roy’s eyes he felt his hands unconsciously grip harder onto the center rod as he found Roy barely inches from him, and those dark eyes watching him with a glint of some emotion that made him swallow reflexively. “You and your arrogant male posturing. I got here first.”

Roy chuckled deeply, noting with a flash of heat the shiver that raced through Edward’s softly glowing form at the sound. “I can’t ride an inside carousel animal, Maes would think it odd.”

Edward replied matter-of-factly, turning away as he heaved a sigh and leaned further back into Roy, not caring that he was probably passing through the man a bit. It was Roy’s own fault.

Roy gave a soft smile and raised his head to look over the crowd of parents watching their children from outside the gate, and Maes among the throng of those happily taking photographs. “Besides… would you really rather I sit over there?”

Edward was studying Roy’s gloved hand grasping the center bar with his own, and slowly letting his hand slip down until it melded with Roy’s he smiled faintly, and answered just as quietly. “Don’t ask me idiotic questions.”

Roy spent the entire remainder of the carousel ride trying to quash the urge to smile stupidly.
Only once the carousel had creaked to a hat in order to let everyone off, did Edward slip off and placing his hands on the fiberglass horse and on each side of Roy’s leg he looked up at the man with an amused smile.

“Next time, I’ll just have to force you to ride the rooster.” He predicted firmly, and with a mischievous glint in his silver eyes.

Roy looked down at him with a smile pulling at his lips and an answering gleam in his eyes as he hopped down as well to fold his arms across the fiberglass saddle and lean forward in engaged interest. “Oh? And how do you propose to manage that?”

“By riding it myself.” Edward laughed and pushed away to go track down the Hughes family.

Roy followed after him with a faint smile, and shoving his hands into his pockets he chuckled to himself. How well Edward knew him. Even so, it made a warm contentment spread through him to know that Edward wouldn’t mind him doing so again.

They reached the Hughes family in the middle of Maes happily chatting with his daughter about the carousel. And after a few more moments of excited laughter and minor debating between the adults, they moved on to the next ride.

Teacups.

Elysia immediately commandeered her mother to be with her on the ride, firmly telling her father to “just ride with Uncle Roy”. A statement that left Maes gawping unattractively and everyone else laughing at his dismissal.

So it was that Elysia and Gracia got into one teacup, leaving the men to themselves for the moment.

Roy finally rolled his eyes at his shell shocked best friend and grabbing him by the arm, hauled him towards a garishly painted teacup.

Edward followed them up until the point they were about to sit down before pausing, a grin suddenly blooming on his face. “I’ll catch up with you after. I’m gonna ride with the girls.”

Roy barely had time to register that before he was left gawping himself at Edward’s swiftly retreating back and ominous laughter. “Oh dear…” he groaned, only wondering what mischief the ghost had planned.

“I know!” Maes agreed morosely from where his head was between his hands. “My little girl…”

Roy looked down at him with a certain measure of friendly disdain before shaking his head and sitting down himself. “Oh don’t take it so hard. She just wants to be with her mom for the moment. And honestly, I can’t blame her. You and the teacup rides never have really meshed. Just try and avoid my shoes.”

Maes rolled his eyes and looked up from his hands. “I’ll have you know that was years ago, and I’d just had food poisoning two nights ago. My stomach wasn’t so hot that day.”

Roy smirked and gripped the center wheel of the teacup, giving it an experimental jerk and was satisfied when the teacup rocked and shook against the locks not yet released on it. “Oh yes…. This will be fun!”

Maes glared at him.
“Take her into the fun house next. You can bond over distortion mirrors. She’d get a laugh out of seeing her daddy shaped as an ostrich.” Roy suggested innocently.

“So I heard you paid off all lingering tabs at the bars.” Maes suddenly queried, his tone making the change in subject rather obvious. “It wouldn’t have anything to do with your secret informant, would it?”

Roy narrowed his eyes at him. “You and I both know I have never had a tab anywhere. If you want to say something just say it.”

“Who is he? He’s more than just an informant to you.” Maes gripped onto the center wheel as well as he felt the motorized hum bring the teacups to life. “And a better friend than I must be; you’ve never taken me on a spontaneous weekend vacation to someplace unknown.”

Roy gave a sharp yank on the center wheel, causing the teacup to spin wildly. He waited until the spinning had abated a bit and Maes didn’t look quite so cross-eyed before answering quite calmly, “he’s reckless, troublesome, difficult, and entirely too damn brilliant.”

“So I should pull my tux out to iron?”

Roy sent the teacup into a violent spin.

Meanwhile, Elysia was sitting in another teacup, her hands thrust high into the air as she shrieked her giggling enthusiasm as the teacup whirled around fiendishly fast.

Gracia, on the other hand, had given up trying to stop the careening speed of the teacup and the center controlling wheel that was now a blur of corrugated steel. Instead she found more interest in clinging to the seat with shrieks far less enthusiastic than Elysia’s.

Edward was laughing maniacally as he operated the ride for the girls. Neither of them were in danger of slipping out or hurting themselves otherwise, but he continued to keep a close eye on them even so as he helped them with the teacup operation.

When the ride was over, both Hughes parents collapsed outside the gate to the ride looking faintly green around the edges. Elysia the only still-enthusiastic one between them.

“What happened to yours?” Edward asked with a chuckle as he joined Roy in looking at them with amusement.

“He was being my best friend.” Roy said idly in his observation, one gloved hand fisted against his chin. “Yours?”

“The ride isn’t allowed to go nearly fast enough.” Edward noted with some disappointment in his voice.

Roy huffed a laugh out into his glove, casting a somewhat rebuking look at the ghost. “Want to go find something else to amuse us?”

“Yes!” Edward grinned enthusiastically.

Roy smiled as he took his hand down and stepped towards his downed friends with bright cheer. “Well I’m off to go earn some stuffed animals. You two catch up after you’ve had a bit of lunch. I think I saw a pizza vendor hawking not far from here.”

The answering groans he got caused him to beam the brighter.
“See you in a bit!”

Edward hurried after Roy with a shake of his head and a humored roll of his eyes. “That was mean.”

“That, my dear ghost,” Roy corrected fondly, “is what friends are for.”

Not long later, and with the Hughes family from their mind for the moment, Roy and Edward stepped up to the shooting gallery area.

“I know you’ve used guns, and we’ve one in the house. But are you sure you can operate a most likely rigged children’s weapon?” Edward queried smugly as he leaned in beside Roy as the man took up a pistol cache-loaded with pellets.

Roy’s only answer was to address the game operator. “How many points to get the big one?” He asked, pointing with a free hand towards the giant purple rabbit hanging suspended from the tent with its other plush companions.

“Two hundred, sir.” The game operator smiled easily, crossing his arms across his chest and looking towards where the moving targets jolted and flipped up and down at random on their trajectory around the platform. “It’s a mighty big task in thirty seconds.”

Roy snorted and raised the pistol. “I’ll hardly need that many.”

What followed was a cacophony of minor bangs, clangs, and rattles.

When Roy’s thirty seconds had elapsed he had nearly emptied the attached cache of pellets, and laying the pistol aside with his smug smile returning, he addressed the game operator again. This time, the man didn’t look so certain of himself. “I’ll take the big one.”

The game operator looked wide-eyed and slack-jawed from Roy, to the targets which had all been felled, and then back again as he turned a bit pasty. “R-r-right!” He stuttered out, and stumbled over to release the giant purple rabbit and thrust it at Roy. “Congratulations, sir!”

Roy closed his arms on the rabbit imperiously, smiling his gratitude to the children who had gathered to watch and were now clapping for him excitedly. “Just pretend those targets are your homework. Destroy it all.” Were his parting words of wisdom before he nimbly exited their crush.

Edward floated up and over them with barely-stifled giggles as he fell in beside Roy again. “You’re merciless.”

“Maybe.” Roy smiled cheerfully, turning his steps to a stand where people were throwing balls at cans in order to earn a prize. “What do you want me to win for you? This is for Elysia.”

“I don’t need one.”

“No one ever needs one of these things.” Roy objected as he steered them in the direction of his next imminent victory. “But I’m getting you one regardless, now spill.”

Edward gave him a look that Roy merely smirked at before glancing over towards the prizes. “Very well… that big sheep.”

“Then the big sheep you shall have.” Roy agreed, and setting Elysia’s giant purple rabbit atop a convenient stool against the booth, he bought his way into the game.

Over thirty obliterated tin cans later, Roy was carting off a giant purple rabbit and one massive sheep
under each arm and enjoying all the envious looks that children were shooting him.

Several minutes later found Roy using the massive stuffed animals to block anyone’s view of the fact that Edward was pulverizing a whack-a-mole game with alarming accuracy. So it was that Edward found a new addiction in arcade games, and Roy found out that his neck was a convenient spot for Edward to loop his horde of paper prize tickets.

Following several tours of the dart boards and a very firm decline on Roy’s part to have his weight guessed – much to Edward’s snickering delight – they tracked down the Hughes family once again. Roy at least wanted some lunch, and perhaps by now his friend’s stomachs would have settled enough to join him.

“Dare I ask what poor booth you attacked in order to get those?” Maes asked his best friend warily as Roy joined them on the grass underneath the shade of one of the schoolyard trees.

Roy snorted and thrust the giant purple rabbit into Elysia’s arms as she squealed in excitement.

“Thanks!” She promptly began cooing over the plush rabbit, entirely ignoring her grilled cheese.

“And who is that one for?” Maes prodded as Roy sat down with one arm still firmly clamped around a massive plush sheep.

“Not for you, that’s for certain.” Roy informed him flippantly.

Edward beamed as he settled in next to Roy, reaching out to pat his first-ever stuffed animal. “I like my new sheep. It’ll work as an emergency pillow in case you steal mine again.”

Roy flagged down a food vendor as he mulled that over… and decided that on the next reasonable opportunity, he was stealing Edward’s pillows again. Just to be able to see the apparition wrapped around a massive fluffy sheep. So with a new plan in mind and a subtle smile he bought himself two slices of pizza before waving the vendor off.

Maes was smirking at his evasive best friend, and eating a few more bites of his mustard-doused hot dog, he wondered if it were possible to stalk Roy after he left the carnival. He felt nearly certain that the massive plush sheep was being given to this mystery man that Roy loved. And he was beyond curious.

Roy could feel the weight of Maes’s stare, and glancing over at him with a reproachful look, he shook his head. “I’m going straight home after this. So whatever madness it is you’re concocting, stop.”

Gracia looked over at her husband in time to see him deflate, and she chuckled before turning to Roy. “You’ve been busy since you ditched us. And had a measure of success, it appears. What are you going to buy with the prize tickets?”

Roy shrugged as he leaned over into the stuffed sheep and closer towards Edward as he precariously perched a pizza slice onto his fingers. “ Haven’t decided yet.”

“Something loud!” Edward announced helpfully, beaming with pride at all the tickets he’d acquired from simply working off some pent up aggravation. Picturing those moles as Grand’s face had helped immensely in his quest for prize tickets.

Roy barely managed to choke back a laugh at Edward’s idea, having to bite down on the sudden suggestion that he get the ghost his own toy box. But as surely entertaining as Edward’s reaction would be, if ever he told Maes about Edward, this would not be his chosen moment. So he wrestled
his thoughts away from his mouth… opting for a smirk instead.

After that, everyone seemed to fall to the task of eating, leaving Edward to flop down onto his back, curled somewhat behind Roy and pillowing his head on the stuffed sheep as he watched over them through partly closed eyes.

Once pizza slices and wedges of grilled cheese had been finished off with hardly a crumb wasted the group finally rose from their shady picnic spot and pressed their way back into the crowd of screaming children and otherwise general chaos.

“What are we doing next?” Edward asked eagerly as he bounded at Roy’s side.

Roy chuckled to himself, casting a teasing glance Edward’s way before turning to Maes and Gracia. “So, where were you wanting to go next? I’ll come with you.”

Elysia cheered, waving her stuffed rabbit by one paw.

Maes immediately whipped out his camera to start photographing his excited daughter, leaving a resignedly amused Gracia to answer their friend. “We were considering the bumper cars.”

Roy burst out in a short, abrupt laugh before nodding his head. “Yeah, sounds like fun.”

“What are bumper cars?” Edward asked in confusion. While he felt he grasped the concept, he was baffled. What fun was bumping some cars together?

Roy could only shake his head in amusement, knowing exactly what awaited them once Edward discovered what bumper cars could do.

It didn’t take Edward long after the group had joined the queue for the bumper cars to discover just what they were. And just why Roy seemed to be having trouble not laughing helplessly as the man watched him curiously.

“Yes!” Edward declared, straining over the temporary fence that formed the queue in order to get a closer look as his feet kicked through the air. “Yes! We are so riding those!”

Roy bit the inside of his lip to at least keep from laughing, although nothing could be done for the grin on his face. Quickly he glanced over to see that Gracia and Hughes were both busy with their own hyper charge, and turned his attention partly back to Edward in order to murmur: “Sit with me, I’ll let you drive.”

Edward practically bounded over the fence in his eagerness, but somehow he managed to contain his enthusiasm from launching him over to join the fun immediately. As the queue slowly moved and group by group, children and parents drove the bumper cars, Edward watched avidly.

Beneath the glimmering sparks showering from the charged ceiling, a frenzied mêlée was taking place.

Fifteen bumper cars large enough only to fit an adult and a child were careening about a polished floor, guided by reckless laughter and a clear disregard for anything remotely resembling safe driving. And everywhere they were crashing into each other, bumping free, and skidding off again to find another victim to ram mercilessly into the guard wall.

To Edward, it was one of the most brilliant things he’d ever seen created without the use of alchemy.

And then Gracia was taking the camera from Maes, laughing and kissing her husband’s cheek before
shooing him off with Elysia. Hefting the camera, she winked at Roy and headed to one side to take pictures.

Roy looked over to catch Edward’s eye, and smiled.

Edward grinned back up at him, and taking the plush sheep in one hand, he used it to tug Roy forward eagerly. “Come on, Roy!”

Roy wrestled down a laugh and followed as led where he joined Edward in a lime green bumper car. He managed to fold himself in well enough, although Edward’s constant running commentary on this being the reason he hadn’t wanted his weight guessed made it a bit difficult not to give up and just try and beat the ghost with the plush sheep.

Edward waited impatiently for Roy to get seated, and once the man had he rather easily melded into the bumper car next to him. Flashing a smug smile at the man he reached across Roy in order to grasp the side of the wheel that Roy wasn’t. “Took you long enough, I’ll drive. Else we’ll never get anywhere.”

Roy’s reply was to stuff the plush sheep onto the seat and directly through Edward.

Edward gave a mildly unimpressed look to where the sheep’s head was sticking out of his chest before giving Roy a reproachful stare. “Baa.”

Roy choked on his laughter, trying to fight it back with the fist he’d stuffed to his mouth.

Edward grinned at him, “just do whatever you must to make this thing move, I’ll handle the rest.”

“That should worry me more than it does.” Roy admitted in a mutter.

Edward merely sent him a quick grin before looking around avidly as the remainder of this group of passengers finished getting into their respective bumper cars. Not that he planned to single one or more parties out in this mutual thrashing activity, for it was just that, and he planned to thrash mutually.

Roy merely rolled his eyes, and as he saw the ride operator step atop his platform and reach for the button to release power to the cars, he slammed his foot down onto the accelerator.

Edward yelped, nearly tossed from the bumper car at the sudden movement, only held fast to it by the grip he had on the cheap plastic steering wheel. A wheel which he jerked spastically in his endeavor to center himself with the ride again.

Roy was no longer trying to hold back his laughter, and meeting Edward’s scowl, he shrugged with an innocent smile.

“Bastard.” Edward muttered under his breath, though a grin was soon creeping onto his face.

This way and that, Edward wove the bumper car sharply to cut an aggressive path across the floor. Several times they were sent skidding off from the skills of another group, but Edward was fairly certain he’d sent more people into the guard wall than had done similarly to him.

Even Gracia and Elysia were not safe from his attentions.

It was in one such pursuit of the mother and daughter that the car came to a gradual but clear halt that had nothing to do with the ride being over.
Not when the other participants were still zipping around to crash into each other, and them.

Edward growled low in his throat as they were jostled once again by a whooping pair of kids, turning to pin Roy with a dark look. “Roy…”

Roy chuckled and looked over at Edward with a relaxed sigh. “Yes, Ed?” He implored as if he had all the time in the world to discuss why their bumper car had stopped moving.

“Don’t “yes, Ed” me, you insufferable man!” Edward berated him anxiously, giving several jerks to the steering wheel. The last of which was aided by Elysia sweeping into them with a gale of joyous laughter. As soon as Edward righted himself again, he glowered at Roy. “You’re supposed to be helping me?”

Roy slammed his foot down again, sending them straight into another bumper car. “But I want a turn to drive.” He teased, easing the bumper car to a stop once more.

Edward was about to argue when he thought better of it, and with a retaliatory smirk, he swung his leg through Roy’s own to press the accelerator down himself at the same time he released the steering wheel.

Roy, to his credit, managed to seize it in time before they went head-on with the guard wall, and as Edward crowed with laughter, he swept them around in a left turn in order to resume pursuit on Gracia and Elysia.

Edward’s laughter had calmed somewhat in way of adrenaline, however small chuckles still made it out of him as he applied constant pressure to the accelerator so Roy could pursue the girls. Looking up at him, Edward shook his hair free of his eyes before leaning back against the bench seat in order to watch the focus and amusement play out on Roy’s face.

His gazing was cut short, however, when Roy finally did catch up to Gracia and Elysia, causing the bumper car to jolt them both with the impact.

“That was hardly smoothly executed, you nearly brought us to a full stop!” Edward chastised him with a grin, coaxing the accelerator down again as Roy turned them off in a different direction.

“Did you not feel them crash into us earlier? All is fair in war and bumper cars, my ghost.” Roy waved the matter off, heading them towards a new target.

Edward merely gave a humored shake of his head as he settled back in again, focusing for the moment on keeping the accelerator pressed down, and watching the enjoyment on Roy’s face. The intense focus in the dark eyes, the permanent twitch of his lips to show the laughter he was internalizing, and the minor flashes of annoyance whenever someone else would knock into them and send them off track.

And he had to wonder, was this how he had looked to Roy?

Smiling faintly, Edward looked back out over the floor just in time to see them knock three other bumper cars into one another before Roy was pulling them free of the crush.

Then all too soon, the subtle whirr of the bumper cars ceased, and they all began to glide to a halt either on their own, or by colliding against other bumper cars or the guard walls. It raised groans of disappointment from more than those among the living.

Edwad lamented the end of the fun with a sigh, sitting back in the seat as he wrapped his arms around the plush sheep sitting inside his body. “We need to do that again.”
Roy looked over with a smile, only to chuckle softly as he nodded down at Edward’s torso. “You’re making the sheep glow.”

Edward’s eyes widened marginally, and with a noise of amazement, he realized it was true. The white portions of the faux fleece were glowing faint silver where they passed through him. “I’ve never seen that happen before.”

“Me either.” Roy murmured with a thoughtful glimmer on his eyes. “I wonder if only I can see it. Probably.”

“Well, if Maes asks why the sheep is glowing, you’ll know for certain.” Edward pointed out, and gave a quiet, miffed sort of laugh as he looked down at himself again. “I guess we should go rejoin them?”

Roy tilted his head in consideration, happening to catch sight of Edward’s leg still stretched and tangled through his own. An inexplicable soft feeling coiled inside him at the sight. Why had it taken him so long to notice how close they’d become? How comfortable they were with each other.

“Roy?” Edward pressed with a frown, confused at his silence. He hadn’t thought they’d been knocked around too hard, but then he was a ghost. He hadn’t exactly felt the jolting and jarring as Roy must have.

“It’s nothing.” Roy answered after a moment, hastily stuffing his thoughts away. Now was not the time for them. He could air them out when they were truly alone.

Edward was doubtful, but he conceded with a nod and passing the massive plush sheep back into Roy’s care, he floated up out of the bumper car to fall in step with the man to the exit where the Hughes family was waiting.

“Knock you a bit hard, did we?” Gracia asked smugly as Roy approached.

“Although it was a valiant effort,” Roy proclaimed grandly to her, tossing an arm about her shoulders to steer her off towards Maes, “I have been hit by Hazel harder than you.”

Edward could only smirk as Gracia smacked Roy around the head. “Where are we going next, Roy?” He asked eagerly as he floated through the air beside him.

“Where to?” Roy parroted for him obediently as the group strolled onwards.

“I was thinking about some of those miniature roller coasters.” Maes suggested before looking down at Elysia with a bright smile. “How about it, hunny, roller coasters?”

“Yes! One that goes way up high!” Elysia suggested adamantly.

“Way up high.” Maes agreed sportingly with a wink to his wife and friend. “Shall we find the tallest roller coaster, you two?”

It was agreed upon unanimously, and Maes took his daughter’s hand in one of his own, Gracia dancing around back behind them to grasp her other hand as they swung her back and forth as Elysia shrieked with joy.

Edward and Roy trailed behind them somewhat, Edward sidling in to float almost against Roy. Looking at the man’s profile a moment, he smiled to himself before looking forward again and reaching out to grasp his massive plush sheep around one ear and letting it be the anchor that continued to pull him along.
Roy took one look down at the hand before flicking his gaze briefly to Edward with a soft smile.

Edward saw Roy readjust his arm around the sheep, but said nothing when the man’s hand was suddenly angled up next to his own. He said nothing. Just slipped his hand down and through Roy’s.

He only let go once they boarded the first roller coaster.

They road every roller coaster available. Visited the shooting gallery once again where Maes demonstrated his own skills while Gracia helped Elysia with her aim. They even visited the duck pond that Roy had alluded to Edward about earlier, and were entirely washed out without even a single prize.

Near the end of it, though, Elysia was beginning to show signs of being tired in the way that only a young child could. While she was still hyper, she was becoming rapidly fussy. Which meant that the group was soon trekking across the grounds to the mini Ferris wheel that had been erected as a means to give Elysia one last carnival ride, but one that would help unwind her at the same time.

They were small Ferris wheel cars, allowing only two people at a time. Or as the ride attendant was bribed into, two people and a small child.

When asked if he minded, Roy had snorted indignantly and promptly told his friends that he didn’t need either of them wondering what he was doing to the other should someone be put in a Ferris wheel car with him.

A statement which went over both Elysia and Edward’s heads.

Whereas Elysia’s curiosity was expertly redirected, Edward’s was not.

“What does it mean?” Edward asked again, having been hushed with a look the first time. The look he recognized as the one that meant Roy would explain later. “What are these Ferris wheel cars for that they’d be worried about you riding with one of them?”

Roy chuckled as he snapped the tiny door shut and settled onto the small seat, fixing his gaze on the ghost. “Usually people end up kissing on them.” He managed to get out smoothly, not revealing at all the pained twist in his chest at his present situation.

Edward burst out laughing and curled up on his opposite bench seat to gaze out the window as they were lifted into the sky. Resting his head back against the smooth glass his laughter faded into a content smile. “And here you are with me.”

“Where else would I be?”

The strange guarded tone to Roy’s voice made Edward look over, finding an indiscernible expression on Roy’s face. An answer didn’t come easily to him, or quickly. Slowly he shifted into a more upright position as he considered the question. “You could be anywhere else,” he realized it for the truth, yet it wasn’t the whole of it. “But you chose to be with me.”

Roy couldn’t seem to recover fast enough from the pained plunge his heart had taken, to the disorienting leap of happiness those last words had caused.

Edward smiled at the man before looking out the window again. “I’m glad.”

And he was.

As he gazed at Roy from the corner of his eye, he wrapped himself in the sense of peace and security
the man brought to him. Roy had saved him from unending solitude. Roy had given him a semblance of a life back. Brought him into his home, his family, and treated him... worried over him as if he were still alive.

And in turn, Edward had begun to discover things about himself that he hadn’t known before. Things that Roy had brought out in him, or made him feel.

No... he didn’t want to trade his time with Roy for anything. Even if Roy could be anywhere else, he was selfishly glad that Roy was here, with him.

From across the Ferris wheel car, Roy had propped his elbow on the back of the bench seat and was looking over at Edward through an internal cacophony of nerves only barely tempered by that unexpected sense of peace, relief, and exultation he felt in knowing that he loved this ghost that was to blame for his nerves.

It was a peaceful ride with a comfortable silence as they both sank into their own thoughts. Then all too soon it seemed they were being ushered out back into the madness of the carnival.

Not long afterwards, once they’d found each other again the group headed towards the prize tent so that they could all exchange their prize tickets won at some of the arcade games. Being in agreement that Elysia needed to be taken home soon for a nap.

“What would you like?” Roy whispered to Edward as the Hughes family began milling around the tent with their daughter. Oblivious to him for the moment.

Edward moved in closer to Roy, so the man needn’t talk any louder. “Something loud.” He reminded the man with a chuckle, and smiling at the look on Roy’s face, he reached out to grip the plush sheep again. “Come along then, my ticket bearer.”

Roy allowed himself to be led into the throng of children and parents all clustered around various toys, candy, and books that were being offered as prizes. “How about we get you a nice quiet pop-up book?”

Edward shot Roy a glare that nearly dissolved the man into laughter, and rolling his eyes led Roy to table after table as he examined what was being offered that were in his prize ticket range.

And then finally, he found it.

Sitting innocently on one of the tables was a remote control car.

“That one, Roy!” Edward insisted, pointing to it with a hopeful look tossed in the man’s direction. “Hazel would enjoy it.”

Roy wondered if he shouldn’t feel so inclined to find it adorable that Edward would think to get something for Hazel as well as himself. And while he had the suspicion that the remote control car in question would more than likely end up chasing him around for Hazel’s benefit, he couldn’t refuse that hopeful look in Edward’s eyes.

Edward grinned brightly when Roy gave a mock suffering sigh and waved over one of the prize tent workers. Within moments the prize tickets looped around Roy’s neck had been exchanged for a boxed remote control car.

“Thank you!” Edward beamed up at the man, giving a small laugh. “It should be loud enough.”

“I’m never going to get any sleep.” Roy reflected morosely, fighting back a smile at Edward’s
cackling laughter.

After a few minutes of waiting, the Hughes family was done as well and the group began to weave their way out of the crowds. It was late in the afternoon at this point, and after bursts of excitement and waiting in lines for the better part of the day, Elysia was the signal that it was time to leave for the day.

“My angel needs a nap,” Maes yawned at the thought as they all walked towards the school gates together. “And so might I.”

Gracia laughed at him lightly as she guided the tired Elysia by one hand. “You always need a nap if she does.”

Roy gave a lofty sigh and sent a resigned gaze skyward, “great to know that my investigator is so fond of naps.”

Maes shoved his colonel by the shoulder, disappointed when the man barely budged for it. “Good thing you have two of us then, hm?” And with a sly look added, “you’re not the sort of man to keep a carnival stuffed animal for yourself. Are you giving it to your informant?”

“He better, it’s mine.” Edward told Maes firmly.

Roy gave Maes a dirty look, his arm tightening about the plush sheep protectively. “I’m certainly not going to give it to you.”

Maes grinned at him unrepentantly. “Ah, so it is. You could have brought him along you know, win it for him in person. Isn’t that more your style?”

“If you value your ability to continue being conscious for the rest of the day, you’ll shut up.” Roy glared at his best friend. Very aware in this moment that Edward was right beside him, and he didn’t need Maes spouting off anything unnecessary before he’d had a chance to confess on his own without being under duress.

The situation would be different if he didn’t love Edward, he’d just allow Maes to make a fool of himself.

But that was not his situation.

“He did win it for me in person, and there was no way he was leaving me at home.” Edward stated firmly, despite being unheard.

Roy felt himself warm ridiculously at the words.

Maes burst out laughing and held up a hand in a placating wave. “Fine, fine.”

Somehow the group made it to the sidewalk outside the school without Maes being knocked unconscious by Roy. They got around to saying their goodbyes once Elysia took a breath from whining that she didn’t want to leave yet, and after Gracia had all but blackmailed Roy into coming over for dinner again soon, they all parted ways to go home.

Edward floated down to walk next to Roy, his hand gripping onto the stuffed sheep again and his head leaning unconsciously toward Roy’s arm. “Thanks, for today.”

Roy looked down, a tugging sensation in his chest as he noticed how Edward leant into him. Smiling softly he reached his free hand over to place it through Edward’s on the sheep. “You’re welcome.”
“You still need to take me to the zoo and the circus.” Edward reminded him helpfully with a bit of a laugh, and he looked up to meet Roy’s gaze with a teasing smile.

“That I do.” Roy agreed with an answering smile, and knew that he would have plenty of time to do all the things he promised he would, now that he’d finally sorted out his heart. “And wherever else you want to go. All you have to do is ask and I’ll find a way to make it happen.”

Edward flashed him a quick grin before looking away, his head falling on its own back towards the man’s arm. His mind beginning to consider other things he had always wanted to experience as a child. Either those that his mother had refused him to do, or those that he’d been unable to do after he’d died.

“Edward?”

Startled somewhat from his thoughts, Edward hummed in query as he focused back on Roy.

“There’s something we need to talk about when we get home. Will you promise me you’ll hear me out?” Roy met the sudden, confused expression on Edward’s face with what he hoped wasn’t a nervous look of his own. “Please?”

“Yeah…” Edward frowned at him in worry as his mind raced to find answers for him. “Are you okay?”

Roy’s nerves shattered at the burst of helpless laughter that made it out of him, and with a tiny groan he shook his head as he smiled fondly down at Edward. “I’m more than okay, Edward.”

And he hoped beyond hope that he still would be, after the greatest show of his courage he’d ever give.

Edward frowned a bit, not entirely sure he believed it. This was, after all, his personal idiot. Some leeway had to be given in certain things the man claimed. Knowing, however, that he’d get no clarification standing here on the sidewalk, he lightly tugged the man forward again by use of the plush sheep. “Come on then, let’s go home.”

Roy followed obediently, trying not to notice that with each step towards home he took, his heart pounded louder in his chest.
Chapter 47

They ended up taking the back alley to get home. At first to be sure it was completely opened to Edward’s range of travel. But as soon as Edward realized the alleyway was empty save for them and they were blocked from view by the tall fences of the homes, the alley was soon to present a new opportunity.

Ever since they had left the carnival, Edward could not deny that the walk home had become increasingly… unsettling.

Looking up at Roy, he frowned minutely in worry as he took in the tightly-wound posture. And Roy was trying to claim he was more than okay? Looking away again Edward’s frown deepened as he stared idly at the gravel that covered the alley. How could he be claiming such a thing if he was wound this tightly with nerves? What could Roy need to talk to him about that could possibly make him this nervous?

Was Roy really this concerned about what his reaction would be?

Edward’s expression relaxed into something more long-suffering, and he fought down a sigh. How many times, and in how many ways, and at times in not so many words, had he told Roy he wouldn’t leave him?

This idiot.

No… this wouldn’t do at all. If he let Roy continue on this path for too long, the man would be so highly strung with whatever nonsense he was currently worrying himself over, that Roy would hardly be in the correct mental state to have whatever conversation it was that he wanted to have.

He needed to snap Roy out of it.

Knowing that Roy would likely balk at his asking, he instead went about his plan of attack in his own underhanded way. Letting go of the plush sheep, he held instead onto the plastic bag that contained the remote control car. If he still knew his estimations in this, the bag should be his within minutes. And once that happened, Roy could do nothing about it.

Just as Edward suspected, Roy didn’t even notice what he was doing. Not until it was too late and the bag dropped fully into his hand, startling Roy at the sudden absence of its weight.

“My!?” Edward crowed in delight to the background of eager rustling into the plastic bag.

Roy was so thrown by what had just occurred, that he couldn’t manage to find words until the plastic bag ended up discarded on someone’s waste bin along the side of the alley - the box for the remote control car now firmly in Edward’s eagerly unpacking hands. “And what if someone sees you?”

Edward shot him a brief laughing look, finally getting past all the tape on the box to begin pulling free all the cardboard flaps that guarded the interior packaging. “Roy, we’re in an alley, in the middle of the afternoon. If anyone else is in here with us, they’re bound to be drunk. And if they aren’t, play it off as a magic trick. You’re good at convincing people with utter bullshit.”

Roy sent Edward a dirty look, not entirely sure that could be construed as a compliment. But nevertheless he did relax marginally, watching as Edward flung bits of brown packing paper through
Edward chuckled to himself, before a noise of success escaped him as he pulled free the car and its controller. “What can I say, it’s your fault for introducing us.” And turning towards Roy in question, he held up the objects in his hands. “How do I make it turn on? I never had toys like this as a kid.”

Roy couldn’t help but smile broadly in affectionate amusement at the plight. He wasn’t sure that it would get old, this introducing Edward to all the things he’d missed out on as a child and as a result of having been dead and trapped in that office. “There’ll be a switch on the underside of the car, and there should be a similar one on the controller.”

Edward hummed to himself in concentration as he flipped both of them over, and spotting the red switches, he flicked them both to the ‘on’ position with a bright grin. Not wasting a moment, he sank down to set the remote control car upon the gravel, and straightening he took the controller in both hands where it took him only moments to discover how to make the car suddenly spurt forward with a clattering of gravel and reckless abandon.

“Don’t let it get out of range.” Roy cautioned as he watched the car speed off and around various tin cans that littered the gravel.

Edward laughed, and with a smug look towards Roy that the man didn’t see, he careened the joystick around to cause the car to come hurtling back towards them. Straight for Roy.

“Edward…” Roy uttered with a note of uncertainty to his voice, before realizing that Edward had no intentions of not sending the car straight at his boots, and at the last moment had to dance aside. Rolling his eyes at Edward’s snickering, he sent the ghost a glare while at the same time keeping a vague eye on where the object of terror was. “And you once wanted me to teach you how to drive.”

“But Roy,” Edward soothed with a wicked grin, “at least then you’d be in the car with me. Completely safe!”

“You should know, that doesn’t make me feel at ease at all.” Roy informed him drily.

Edward shook his head, still quietly chuckling to himself as he guided the remote control car back around in front of them where he practiced weaving it around various discarded items and trash bins. And it proved the very distraction he needed for Roy, because every time the man’s posture became even remotely tense again, he’d careen the whirring vehicle straight at him.

He determined that he much preferred Roy’s attempts at ballet and cursing to the nerves the man had been displaying earlier.

And despite what Roy tried to convince him of, he kept the car whirring at Roy’s heels all the way into the backyard. Only once they were inside the house did he turn it off, setting the controller on the floor next to the car it commanded before straightening to meet whatever this was.

Roy was setting the plush sheep down onto the couch when Edward found him, and it was with an almost hysterical realization that his hands felt as if they might start shaking. It startled a laugh out of him, and he shook his head in disbelief at himself.

Edward’s forehead pulled into a concerned frown as he came around to be next to the man, turning to lean back against the back of the couch, ducking his head over in front of Roy in order to cause the man’s attention to shift to him. “Whatever it is, Roy…” he began gently, “I seriously doubt that it
is worth turning yourself into a mess of nerves like you were doing. I wasn’t that nervous when I was being chased around an island by my teacher’s half-naked husband.”

Roy spluttered wordlessly in wide-eyed shock.

Edward didn’t remark on the gaping, though it did make him smile as he finished. “And I was a child. That shit’s pretty scary when you’re a kid.”

“Who the fuck was this teacher of yours?!” Roy managed to get out at last, still wondering as to how Edward could say stuff like that with such a carefree attitude.

Edward grinned at him wickedly, “Izumi Curtis, remember?” But he waved his hand flippantly. “But you’re missing my point, Roy.”

“I’m sorry, I’m still trying to get my head around the fact that your alchemy teacher thought that having her half-naked husband chase you around an island was in any way appropriate.” Roy defended as he drew back from the couch with a disbelieving shake of his head.

“Are you more offended at the actual situation, or the fact he was half-naked?” Edward’s wicked grin turned positively feral as he tried not to laugh too hard at Roy’s predicament.

“Both!” Roy flared up, before scowling at Edward, who seemed entirely too amused with this. “Fine then, what’s your point?”

Edward’s amusement faded as his grin softened into a fond smile as he tilted his head to watch Roy as the man gradually came back over to lean beside him against the couch. “My point is, is that I legitimately thought the guy was going to kill Alphonse and I. What you need to talk to me about, is there any risk of me killing you over it?”

Roy sobered instantly, and looking over at Edward with a weak smile, he shook his head. “At least, I hope not.” Yet he let out a long sigh, and sank to the floor, the back of his hair sticking up everywhere against the rear of the couch. “I made you worry again, didn’t I.”

Edward immediately sank down next to him, and turning to look at the man, he offered a reassuring smile. “Just talk to me. I promise I’ll listen, and if I feel it merits me killing you after all, I’ll give you adequate warning to try running for it.”

“You’d never make Grand that offer.” Roy pointed out with a flicker of humor.

“I’m the only one allowed to threaten your life, Roy.” Edward countered, but said nothing further. He could see Roy was trying to figure out what he wanted to say, and while the man was showing nerves again, these were a different, less damaging sort. So he stayed quiet, and waited patiently beside him.

Roy let out a slow breath, and turning to look at the ghost he met the concerned silver gaze that was watching him unwaveringly. “Do you remember when I told you that I was stopping the manwhoring, as you’ve so delicately been putting it?”

There were several things Edward wanted to say to that, yet the majority of them he felt were far too flippant for the way Roy was currently acting. They’d moved beyond the teasing line, and Edward knew that with very sudden certainty. So instead he merely nodded, nothing but calm as he replied, “you know I do.”

Roy smiled faintly, yes, he supposed Edward would. The ghost had been understandably shocked and confused by the declaration. “I wasn’t being entirely honest with you. Yes, everything about the
manwhoring getting dangerous was true, but alone I doubt it would have been sufficient reasoning to actually make me abstain."

“You certainly managed to protect yourself well enough.” Edward muttered, a frown pulling at his face as he thought back to the bloody sight that Roy had presented when he’d returned home. Yet none of the blood had belonged to Roy in the slightest. If that wasn’t a recommendation for Roy’s skills, he wasn’t sure what else it could be.

Roy gave a quiet chuckle, surprising himself that he wasn’t too nervous to do so. Nodding his head he shot Edward a fond look, “and do you remember, that same morning, when you accused me of being distracted?”

Edward shifted his legs underneath him so that he could sit sideways against the couch to look at the man. “Is it no longer an injustice to tell me? Is that what this is all about?”

“I didn’t want to just…” Roy bit the inside of his lip in debate of his words before he continued hesitantly, “not right after that night. It didn’t seem the right time, it didn’t seem like I’d done enough to make up to you leaving you alone when I knew you wanted me to stay.”

“Roy,” Edward ventured gently, reaching a hand out towards the man’s knee and hovering it there. “Please tell me you’re done with that mission? You had nothing to make up for.”

Roy met Edward’s insistent eyes with a lopsided smile, “I think it’s time I told you the whole truth. Just…"

“I won’t go anywhere.” Edward reassured him, and if anything, he shifted closer to the man so that their legs were nearly about to pass together.

Roy drew in a steadying breath, and despite it, felt light-headed from anticipation of what he was about to do. He was about to leave behind this last remnant of his old life, and it was a strange moment to realize just how much Edward had changed his life, and yet… it was time.

“I’ve fallen in love with you, Edward.” He admitted softly, not looking away from the stunned apparition. “That night… I accepted that I had.”

Edward could only stare at first, wide-eyed in shock, trying to convince himself that he’d heard Roy correctly. And slowly, ever so slowly, he managed to find his shaken voice. “You love me? You’re in love with me?”

“Very much so.” Roy answered with a soft smile, though he was, if anything, more nervous now that he’d confessed. Yet oddly, he barely even noticed it this time, such was his focus on Edward. He knew the ghost had absolutely no experience with this, and he still looked entirely taken aback. “I never thought I’d feel for anyone the way I do you.”

Edward didn’t know when his gaze had fallen to staring wide-eyed at his knees, but it suddenly jerked back up at those words as he felt his emotions crash in around him. All of them, at once – all of the joy and relief, all of the uncertainty and fear, and a yearning so abrupt that it nearly left him reeling.

That same yearning desire he’d felt before, the overwhelming need to know what it felt like to be touched by Roy. To be held by him. And the reminder that it could never happen, he would never be able to touch Roy, brought with it this time a wave of sadness coupled with a pain he’d never felt before. Had he still a body, he expected the pain he felt now would have been in his heart.

“But you can’t even touch me.” Edward replied despondently, his face falling as he shook his head
and began to float to his feet, “I’m just a ghost.”

“What in our history together could make you believe, that for even a second, that matters to me?” Roy frowned in confusion, and slowly, feeling that if he moved any faster he might spook the ghost, he stood as well to move within arm’s reach of the ghost. “I realized something as I was trying to ignore how I felt for you, none of it fucking matters. I love you, and it doesn’t have to make sense. Our existence together isn’t exactly typical in the first place.”

Edward tilted his head as he considered the man with confusion in his eyes, “you could be happy with just… this?” He asked uncertainly, reaching for Roy’s hand, only to have their hands merge together without contact.

Roy looked down at their hands, understanding with a faint smile as he looked back up to Edward at the same time he curled his fingers as best he could tell around Edward’s hand. “I may not be able to feel you, Edward, but I know you’re there.”

“I…” Edward broke off as he looked aside with barely tempered frustration, “I don’t know what I feel. I’ve never felt this way about anyone else… but I don’t know what it is. Before I met you I wasn’t even aware I could feel this way.”

“I wasn’t either.” Roy replied with wry irony in his voice, “you sure knocked that fence down.” And as Edward met his gaze a bit reprovingly, he gave the ghost a lopsided, understanding smile, “I can’t tell you what you feel, Edward. I can’t tell you how to feel. That’s something you’ll have to figure out for yourself.”

Edward bowed his head as he tried to ignore the twisting wrench of pain that took residence in his chest as he slowly shook his head. It didn’t matter what he felt… he couldn’t do this to Roy. Couldn’t let Roy do this to himself. “I’m just a ghost.” He repeated hollowly, “I can’t let you waste your life loving me. You get a chance to live, and I care about you enough to want you to do that!”

“Then if you care about me that much,” Roy ducked his head to try and catch Edward’s gaze again, never once removing his hand from where Edward’s still lingered towards him, “you’ll forgive me when I say that you should know me well enough by now to know that this is never something I’d say to you lightly. Also when I say that you’re incredibly fucking wrong to believe that loving you is a waste.”

Edward met the eyes trying to seek his with apprehension, his expression tortured. “But Roy – ”

“No.” Roy cut him off firmly this time, his gaze narrowing. “If you’re going to try arguing that point again, don’t even bother. It won’t work.”

Edward managed a slight scowl at the reproach.

“I love you.” Roy intoned firmly, “and believe me, I know that it’s scary as all fuck – ”

Bowing his head slightly again, Edward couldn’t repress a faint smile, try as he did to hide it.

“– but I love you all the same.” And Roy smiled back as reassuringly as he could, “whether or not one day you can return my feelings is for you to find out. Just know that I’m yours regardless, if ever you want to be mine.”

Edward could feel his defenses beginning to fracture inside him, his efforts fruitless to seal them back together. Yet, he tried. Because how could he, someone wholly unable to give Roy everything the man deserved from love, be deserving of that love? Roy mattered to him desperately. How could he chain Roy to a life loving someone who could never embrace him?
“Talk to me, Edward.” Roy spoke gently, his eyes never leaving that uncertain face. “Just because I love you doesn’t mean I can’t listen to you anymore.”

“Can you understand the guilt, Roy?” Edward asked quietly, fixing his pained gaze on the man. “You deserve to have everything from the one you love. How can I be deserving of you if I can’t be everything?”

“And you call me the idiot.” Roy breathed out affectionately, smiling as Edward glared at him. Reaching out he hooked his fingers into the silvery locks, incorporeal, yes, but even as such it had never stopped him. It never would. “Edward, you’re always telling me that it’s not about me deserving you, that I have you. Can you not see that I feel the same? Can you not understand that if having a clichéd everything means I can’t have you, I don’t want it? That I want you, just as you are, to be that everything?”

Edward found himself rendered speechless, not only by the words which had struck a chord in him that resonated straight through to him, the edges of the guilt that had clenched at his heart beginning to loosen its grip; but by the sheer audacity of Roy using his own words against him. And it was that which led his widened eyes to crinkle up in laughter that quietly began to spill from him. “We’ve really switched roles,” he got out as a growing warmth began to smother the shadows that had clenched his heart. “Haven’t we.”

“You were being a bit of an idiot, yes.” Roy chuckled, his expression tender as he took a chance and stepped closer to Edward, his other hand rising to trace along that laughing face. “Are you through with the whole idiocy thing?”

Edward snorted in affront, and his laughter tapered off until he was gazing at Roy with something close to wonder in his eyes. “You really do love me, don’t you.”

It wasn’t a question, but Roy answered it anyway with an affirmative nod.

Edward gave a faint, fleeting smile as his gaze cast towards the floor beside them. “I can’t honestly say whether or not I feel the same for you.” He reiterated with a hint of regret to his voice. “But I’m willing to try and figure my emotions out.” And he raised his gaze back to Roy’s with a steady determination. “If you’re willing to support me. If you’re certain I’m what you want.”

“You know I am.” Roy reassured as he leaned his forehead down to rest at the space where Edward’s began, his hands still framing the ghost’s face. “Edward Elric… you are by far the most amazing man I’ve ever met. And downright baffling.”

Edward let out a noise of protest, his head tipping away so that he could frown reprovingly into Roy’s smiling eyes. “Were you really concerned about my not having sex anymore? You?” Roy teased with a growing grin.

Edward would have blushed, were he able, but as it was he settled for practicing a scowl on the aggravating man. “True. Even if you could touch me, let’s not assume I’d let you.”

Roy laughed at the claim, but as he leaned in to Edward’s ear there was no laughter in his lowered voice, “you assume I wouldn’t enjoy making you beg for me to touch you.”

Edward nearly shivered in reflex, and as Roy straightened he found himself pinned by that look that had so often warmed him while at the same time seeming to obliterate everything else around them until his entire world had narrowed to the man. “You’re very sure of your abilities.” He managed to
get out in a voice that sounded far too unsteady for his liking.

Roy smirked at him before moving his hands down towards Edward’s, and as he did so his expression softened. “Edward, thank you for worrying about me... but know you’re never a decision I’d make lightly. So take whatever time you need… don’t decide lightly on me.”

A serious light entered silvery eyes as Edward considered Roy with a solemn expression, and he slowly nodded just once. “I won’t. You really do mean a great deal to me.”

“I know,” Roy smiled faintly then and drew away, “you fight too hard to protect me to make me believe otherwise.” And this, he knew, was potentially one of the hardest parts he knew he had to do. He needed to give Edward space now, until the apparition sought him out again. So managing a stronger smile to brace himself, he continued, “in any case, I’m going to go see what I have in the freezer for dinner tonight.”

Edward stood frozen to his spot as he watched Roy disappear into the kitchen, and as soon as the man had it felt as if all adrenaline inside him vanished at once, and he collapsed to his knees with a shuddering exhale. Raising one hand to his face he closed his eyes as his shoulders slumped in an emotional exhaustion.

Never, in his life or death, had he courted the idea that someone might fall in love with him. Never would he have thought that it would be Roy.

That man… Roy really had changed his entire life, from the moment they’d met. Roy had seen him, freed him, and become the only one in this vast world who he knew he’d stay beside until Roy’s time was done. And even then, he still hoped fervently that Roy wouldn’t leave him alone in an empty world. That’d they’d still be allowed to be together, by whatever power had created this existence for him.

Yes, there were people he loved in this world. Alphonse, Winry… even his father, for his part. Yes, he wanted to see them all again… but the thought of not having Roy by his side for any such length of time left him feeling a stabbing pain and the barest flutter of panic.

Roy meant everything to him. He knew that without any doubt in his soul.

Yet his soul harbored other doubts. Doubts about the meaning of the way Roy could make him feel… and he needed to be sure. Roy had clearly taken the time to think this through, and knowing he now held the man’s love… he needed to be certain of how he felt. Anything less would be an insult and only hurt them both.

It was a bright yellow ball that bounced through his thigh and hit the back of the couch that startled him out of his own head. Blinking at it as it skittered this way and that through his legs as it lost its forward momentum he smiled faintly and plucked it up.

Hazel chirped in approval, and bounced on all four paws, snapping his tail as he chattered commandingly. He wasn’t sure what was going on with his human or his invisible friend, but whatever it was, he didn’t like the conflict he could sense in his friend, or the forced unyielding posture of his human – it made it very difficult to have a soft shoulder to sleep on.

“You like me even though you can’t see me.” Edward continued to smile, and obeying the clear commands to throw the ball again, he did.

Hazel immediately pounced on it, wrapping his body down around it before shooting a smug look towards the space he could sense his friend. Lifting himself off the ball he butted his head sharply
against it to send it rolling off towards where his human had disappeared into the kitchen.

Edward blinked after it, before Hazel’s chattering made him look down again. The squirrel was sitting on his haunches, looking every inch regal and affronted as he stared after where the ball had rolled off to. Edward only needed a few moments to understand, as a kid he’d often played fetch with Den, only to have the dog sometimes decide that it was more fun for him to fetch the ball. And looking off towards where Hazel had rolled the ball, he felt his chest tighten as he closed his eyes briefly.

“Sorry, Hazel.” He said to the unhearing squirrel, “I can’t right now.”

And with a last apologetic look towards both the squirrel and the kitchen, he sprung up into the air to vanish through the ceiling and then quickly thereafter, the roof. Which was where he came to rest. Touching down to it he walked across the roofing tiles until he reached the topmost point, and once there he sat down, staring off into the sun as he let himself sink into reflection.

Still in the kitchen, Roy looked over as Hazel slowly scampered in, looking put out.

“Hey now,” Roy soothed as his pet sat down next to the yellow ball and tapped at it dejectedly. “He’ll play with you later, I’m sure.”

Hazel huffed at him as his human walked over, and when Roy was close enough, he scampered his way up the nearest leg and into his human’s arms where he tucked his face into the crook of one arm. As Roy’s free hand came down to pet him he curled his tail around the wrist of the arm he rested in, and gave a morose chirp.

“I’ve never let you find a lady squirrel,” and Roy tilted his head with a considering look before adding, “or a gent squirrel, let’s be fair, so I know you won’t understand when I say this stuff is a bit complicated. So be patient, Edward has a lot on his mind right now, and this time, I can’t help him.”

Looking towards where he’d left Edward, he smiled faintly, feeling a strange sadness as he saw the ghost was gone. Yet he didn’t feel any panic that Edward wouldn’t return when he was ready. Patting Hazel absently he slowly made his way out into the hallway again and into the sitting room. Still no Edward.

Letting out a slow breath he walked over to the couch and sat down, Hazel still curled up in one arm. Reaching over with his free hand he picked up the telephone receiver which he tucked between his head and shoulder as he dialed. Once it began to ring he held it properly, his gaze resting on his confused pet.

It seemed that Hazel wasn’t accustomed to not being able to put Edward at rights again.

After the fifth ring, the other line was picked up.

“Hello?”

Roy couldn’t help but smile at the sound of her voice, and he rested his head back against the couch cushions, closing his eyes. “You knew, didn’t you.” He accused, but fondly.

“Parents generally know everything,” came Daphne’s amused voice, “but enlighten me as to what act of brilliance I pulled off this time.”

“I love Edward.” Was all he replied, it was all that was needed.
There was a pause, almost too long of one, nearly smug in its length, before his mother replied sounding far too pleased with herself. “Finally! What with your quest to sleep with all of Amestris after all, I was worried. Mostly for Edward, he’s a sweetheart, and you’re an emotional blockhead.”

Roy’s eyes flew open in indignation, “I am not!”

Daphne’s laughter rang clearly over the other line, “don’t argue with your mother.” And then there was another pause, before in a suspicious tone she asked, “you have told him, haven’t you?”

Roy felt a warm smile creep onto his face, despite how turbulent the confession had been. “Yes, I told him.”

“And you’re calling me…” Daphne’s voice trailed off in clear consideration of this, before she asked, “when?”

“About ten minutes ago,” Roy answered quietly, his eyes closing again. “He… when he died he was a kid. He doesn’t really have experience with emotions like this, he isn’t sure how he feels.”

Daphne was silent only long enough to be sure Roy wasn’t going to add anything more, before replying in that firm, comforting tone that only mothers seemed able to create. “Roy, I want you to listen to me. Do not, for one second, doubt that Edward could love you back. Like how it was with you, it might take a while… so if you love him, don’t waver from him for one second. Because that ghost of yours is willing to follow you for the rest of your life. And it’s rarer than it should be to find someone willing to stay by your side forever.”

“I couldn’t waver if I tried. And I tried.” Roy replied with a self-deprecating laugh, before shaking away the bitterness at those actions and opening his eyes again as he sat up straighter on the couch. “I just wanted you to know you can stop worrying about me. I found someone I love.”

“Oh hun… I’m your mother. I’ll always worry about you.” But the smile was clearly evident in her voice. “You’ll be okay, I promise. Especially with Edward there with you, that ghost… I don’t worry about you as much as I once did, not since you have him.”

“I’m supposed to protect him.” Roy argued with a frown.

“We protect the ones we love, it’s in our nature. Now I want you to do something for me.”

“Yes?” Roy asked hesitantly, knowing better than to feel entirely at ease with a request from his mother.

“Get off the phone with me, in case Edward needs to talk to you. And when you see Edward again, take your cues from him.”

“I’m not an idiot!” Roy informed her hotly, and he glared at the receiver as his mother’s laughter came over the line. “Just be grateful I thought to tell you.”

“We both know you only called me because you needed your mother’s support.”

Roy decided that the only way to respond to that was to promptly hang up on her. So he did.

“Honestly, where does she come up with that stuff?” Roy huffed and got up again, Hazel still cradled in his arm. “I truly hope that insanity only runs in her side of the family, I’d like to have a small hope at avoiding turning into her.”

And settling Hazel on his shoulder he began to make his way upstairs. He’d been putting off the
housework for a while, and right now in the maelstrom of thoughts and emotions, simply doing his laundry seemed like a port of haven.

He didn’t see Edward again until long after he’d finished dinner.

Edward wasn’t certain how long he’d been sitting on the roof. All he knew was that the sun had long set, and now a sheer covering of stars littered the sky. It was the opening and closing of the back door that broke him from the trance he’d fallen into. He knew Roy was down there, and that tug he’d been feeling to go back to the man only doubled at the knowledge.

Rising up from the roof he padded across it to look down to where Roy was standing on the steps of the porch, leaning back against the wall and just watching the night sky. And he was startled to realize that despite how badly he wanted to rejoin the man, he was nervous.

Did he even still belong? Did everything have to change now, because he didn’t understand his own heart?

For what seemed eternity to him, he gathered what of his bravery he could find, clutching onto it desperately. And then, before he could talk himself out of it, he floated down to silently alight beside Roy on the steps.

“I had a feeling you were up there.”

Edward startled at the sound of Roy’s voice, so focused he’d been on trying to find his own.

Roy looked over, resting a warm gaze on the uncertain-looking ghost. “You okay?”

Edward opened his mouth to respond, but ended up biting down on his lower lip in clear indecision before focusing his gaze intently on the porch. “Are we?” He asked quietly, hesitantly, still not sure he wanted to be heard.

Roy’s eyes widened in surprise, before they softened, and offering out a hand at Edward’s side, he smiled. “No matter what happens between us, I want there to still be an us. In whatever fashion you choose.” And he knew that some part of that was what Edward needed to hear, when a fleeting smile crossed the apparition’s face.

For a time, they stood together silently, Roy’s hand still in offering.

“I don’t even know where to begin.” Edward admitted softly, looking over at Roy now in carefully collected distress. “How did you figure it out? You’ve never loved anyone before either... have you?”

Roy met Edward’s tumultuous expression with a tranquility he couldn’t remember feeling before, and without looking away, he shook his head subtly. “Only you.” He answered softly. “I wasn’t sure, at first. But a man can only take so much of your unfair intelligence, sheer stubbornness, and selfless heart before he gives in and admits defeat. I realized that, despite whatever boundaries are between us, you’re the one I want beside me through everything. Love, and life.”

Edward looked away with a slightly flustered expression, although a smile was trying to break its way onto his face. With the way something inside him had soared at Roy’s words, fighting the smile would be a losing battle in the end. “You’re unfairly charming when you want to be.”

“Honesty, my ghost.” Roy chided fondly, “it’ll make poets out of the most helpless of us men. Just be glad I left out the bits about how damnably attractive you are.”
Edward sneaked a look at him, before looking away with an embarrassed laugh as he finally slipped his hand in with Roy’s at his side. “Maybe we can get to that another day?” He ventured with uncommon shyness as he looked back up at Roy once more.

“If ever you’re ready.” Roy agreed gently, even as his heart skipped with hope at the words, and that hand through his own.

Edward nodded jerkily, a hesitant smile on his lips now as he searched Roy’s gaze. “Just… stay beside me.”

“I promised I’d support you.” Roy reminded him, and turning away from the wall he kept his attention on Edward. It wasn’t hard to do, not with how his ghost glowed so brightly in the darkness. “No matter what, I’m here for you.”

Edward bowed his head in acceptance, before looking up with a smile and stepping away from the wall as well, leaving his hand melded with Roy’s. “I think I owe Hazel a game, want to play with us?” He asked, hoping that this time, Roy would stay and help him play with the squirrel.

Roy chuckled at the suggestion, but nodded. “I think that’s a fine idea, considering how baffled he was that you wouldn’t play with him earlier.”

They made their way inside together, not straying from the other’s side as they located both Hazel’s toys and Hazel himself. And soon they had settled down onto the first few stairs side by side, Roy leaning against the wall of the staircase as they took turns throwing bouncy balls against the front door for Hazel to chase after.

By the time they had tired Hazel and made their way upstairs to the bedroom, Edward felt much more at ease. It was only with some hesitation, that while Roy was in the bathroom, he climbed into the bed. Shoving away the prickles of nerves with accusations of them being foolish – Roy couldn’t touch him even if he wanted the man to. Just a bit disgruntled, he tugged the blankets up around him to help make a prop for the book he grabbed.

When Roy exited the bathroom, he’d admit to feeling a measure of relief that Edward hadn’t forsaken the bed. He’d been worried that the ghost would feel too uncomfortable to share the bed at the moment, so he carefully refrained from mentioning it as he walked over to climb in under the covers himself.

“Roy?” Edward asked quietly after the man had turned off the lamp on the bedside table, his hand resting in the hollow of the blankets created by their bodies.

Roy turned over onto his other side in order to blink up at the shining brilliance that was Edward, “yes?”

Edward set aside his book in that moment, and shifting so that he too lay beneath the blankets, he blinked contentedly across the space separating him from Roy. “I want you to know… I never thought I’d have a second reason to be glad I died.”
Chapter 48

Chapter Forty-Eight

“I knew when I was moved here I was slotted for execution, but I didn’t realize you would be attending the party. I would have had my straightjacket ironed.”

Bradley stood before the steel bars of the tiny jail cell, wearing a stern expression of disproval as he eyed the man lounging on the filthy cot inside – looking as if he were at a spa, instead of rotting behind steel bars. “It would take more than an iron to fix the state of disrepair you’re in.”

A bright, mocking laugh erupted out of him, and turning his head to look at last at the broad figure blocking what little light could reach his cell, his grin widened an unsettling amount. “Tell me, what’s it to be? I hope you at least had the decency to make my execution amusing. Gas chambers and firing squads are so dreary.”

Roy Mustang.” Bradley began, yet the laughter that erupted out of the cell cut him off, and he began to glare at the man who was rocking back and forth on his cot in genuine amusement.

“Mustang?” The man laughed out, before letting out a weary breath as if the laughter had taken all his strength. “Roy Mustang may despise me as much as I do him, but he’d never kill me. Not for you.” And sliding into a sitting position that caused his lank black hair to fall about his shoulders in disarray, he smirked pityingly. “Don’t tell me you’ve been fooled into believing you can trust that bastard to do your dirty work?”

Bradley sneered at him, and holding one hand up, dropped down the key ring he was holding, causing the singular key to jangle enticingly. And as he saw sharp eyes fix upon it, he resumed what he’d been about to say. “If you can kill Roy Mustang before the week is out, Basque Grand will take your place among the inmates, and you can take his at Headquarters. But if you fail, I will personally ensure that the last thing you see is your impending death.” And giving the barest jangle to the key ring he held, he glared into the dim light of the tiny jail cell. “Do we have an agreement, Kimblee?”

Slowly, but with a languid ease that seemed wholly out of place for a man confined to a straightjacket, Kimblee rose and slunk over to the steel bars that separated him from his Fuhrer. “Don’t insult me. Grand is hardly worthy of replacing me anywhere.”

“Do we have an agreement?” Bradley repeated again, voice stern, cold. His gaze fixed firmly upon the former State Alchemist that had caused him such scandal during the last war. A scandal he was willing to overlook now, if it meant Mustang would be out of the way. Basque Grand was proving to be a liability these days, and he was now under heavy pressure to make this philosopher’s stone happen, forcing him to rethink many things he had thought he wouldn’t.

Such as the wreck of a man that stood before him now.

Kimblee chuckled darkly, and looking away from Bradley he let out a mock-suffering sigh. “Why not just kill him yourself? A quick call to your office, a slit to the throat, and no one ever has to know that the mission you say that you sent him on was a sham.”

“I am hardly in a position to explain anything to you.” Bradley snapped in dwindling patience. “Now choose. I will only make this offer to you once.”

Kimblee looked away from the Fuhrer with a snort of derision. “Where is he now?”
“Here in Central.” Bradley informed him silkily, giving another jingle to the key ring.

“Well that’s just touching!” Kimblee snickered in mockery, “you’ve practically gift-wrapped him! Is that truly the best you can do? This is as far as you can get to killing a man? I have to say, I’m a bit surprised at you.”

He knew it was coming, he just hadn’t expected the sheer blinding speed that, for as quick as he was, he failed to avoid. And Kimblee barely managed to cry out at the blinding pain of his head being slammed sideways into the stone wall of his tiny cell before the Fuhrer’s hand pressed around his throat and with every second, it pressed in harder to make his vision blank once more.

“Let me make one thing clear to you,” Bradley sneered in icy hatred, “being Fuhrer means I have little insects like you to make my life easier. If I gift-wrap you the opportunity to kill a man you despise and earn your freedom at the same time, you shouldn’t question the reasons why. You should be on your knees in gratitude.”

Kimblee grunted out into a coughing fit as he was abruptly released, and gritting his teeth as he glared at the Fuhrer, he took that step away that would put him out of reach again. Unable to rub at his abused throat, being firmly encased in his straightjacket, he tried to swallow against the uncomfortable remnants of the ghost of that hand against him. “What makes you think that if you release me, I won’t just do Mustang and I both a favor and kill you?”

Bradley huffed out, unimpressed and entirely unconcerned about such a happening, and his dark gaze bore into the other man. “You are a thousand years parted from the skill it would take to kill me. Now make your choice… patience is a virtue, and I abhor virtues.”

Nearly half the city away, Edward found himself occupied by something that kept his thoughts far from the danger that continued to circle closer towards Roy.

“I was thinking that we could go to the zoo next weekend.” Roy called out a bit distractedly from the bathroom, most of his attention on trying to convince Hazel to give him back his comb.

Edward was sitting cross-legged on the bed feeling more than a little confused. A little less than twenty-four hours ago Roy had confessed love for him, yet overnight it was as if Roy had forgotten it completely. Nothing had changed with the way Roy was acting, the man hadn’t even hinted towards what had passed between them the previous day. Which left Edward trying to puzzle out whether Roy was just trying to be solicitous of giving him space to sort out his own feelings, or if Roy had been in love with him for so long that this was normal.

“Edward?” Roy popped his head out from beyond the bathroom doorway, comb finally rescued, but Hazel climbing up the back of his shirt in clear intent to steal it back. Yet he only absently switched the hand it was held in to stave off the little furry thief, his attention focused more on the guilty expression that crossed Edward’s face when the ghost realized he’d been being spoken to.

“Sorry.” Edward admitted a bit bashfully, worrying a hand through his silvery hair as he met Roy’s gaze. “What did you say?”

Roy considered the ghost a moment in thoughtful silence before passing the comb back to Hazel’s thieving paws – little terror would have snatched it anyway – and walked back over to sit on the bed just in front of Edward. “Are you okay?” He asked, expression shadowed in concern as he searched Edward’s face.

Edward opened his mouth to confirm it, but at the last moment looked away towards the floor with a troubled sigh. “I’m confused.” He admitted quietly, “it’s like nothing’s changed.”
Understanding dawned on Roy sharply, and after that initial moment of realization, he smiled softly as he reached out to pass a hand through silvery, incorporeal hair. It still did not yield to his touch, but it did do the trick of bringing Edward’s gaze back to him. “And nothing will change unless you want it to.” He explained firmly, but kindly. “Don’t misunderstand, you’re still subject to my apparently atrocious flirtations, as you call them – ”

Edward gave a soft laugh at that.

“– but I’m not going to force my love on you either. So until you say otherwise, we’ll carry on as we always have.”

Edward bit down on his lips a moment, casting his gaze aside in thought, before giving a quick series of jerking nods and meeting Roy’s gaze again. “I think I was just worried you’d start to distance yourself from me.”

Roy gave him a reproachful look, a short laugh escaping him as his hand fell away from Edward. “Edward, I do consider myself to be a man of strong willpower, but what you’re suggesting would be impossible for me.”

“Yeah, well,” Edward reached up to fiddle with his hair in a nervous twitch, “what were you saying to me before?”

Roy smirked somewhat, wondering if he should inform Edward exactly of how he felt when the ghost was flustered, but stamped down on the urge. “Want to go to the zoo sometime this weekend? You still need to see what rhinoceros are. I’d show them to you in their natural habitat, but that’d take far longer than a weekend.”

“Only if you promise not to freak out when I go into the enclosures.” Edward began to grin.

“I’ll make you that promise if you promise you won’t try and smuggle something out somehow in order to set it on the Brigadier General.” Roy’s tone and expression were wholly deadpan.

Edward took one look at Roy’s face and bit back a laugh. “I could only share the honor of terrorizing him with you, don’t worry.”

“Promise me.” Roy pointed a suspicious finger at him.

Edward rolled his eyes with a bit of a smile, giving an amused shake of his head before holding both hands up in surrender. “All right, all right. I promise.”

“Good.” Roy breathed in relief, getting up from the bed. He’d not wanted to have escaped tigers suddenly roaming all over Central come the weekend. “I’ll go finish getting ready and then we should leave.”

Edward watched Roy go back into the bathroom, a faint smile on his lips. Yes, this was their normal. Even with love thrown into the mix, the afterlife he’d come to be grateful of was still there. It just had the promise to be more… if he wanted it to be. If he were to realize that he shared Roy’s feelings.

He looked down at the bed with a quiet huff of amazed laughter, shaking his head slightly.

Never, in all his years of life and death, had he even considered that someone would fall in love with him. It just hadn’t been a fantasy worth courting. That it would be Roy…

He didn’t know if he loved Roy in return, if he ever would.
Yet there was no denying the way Roy made him feel as if he might, even in death, still have a beating heart. Or the way that every time Roy made to touch him, he wished the man could. Or that somewhere along the way, he’d become devoted to protecting Roy’s life, even at risk of the crippling pain the Fuhrer could instill upon him.

But was that love?

Was what Roy made him feel, in moments of joy, of sadness, of anger and panic… was it love?

At that exact moment Hazel deposited Roy’s stolen comb through his knee.

“Are you making me an accomplice in your thievery?” Edward asked in mild amusement as he was pulled from his thoughts. Picking the comb up he turned his head to watch as Hazel bounded up onto the pillows and began to groom himself looking wholly smug.

“I’ll throw you both in jail later.” Roy consoled Edward as he rejoined the ghost. “But for now we should get going.”

Edward glanced up at the man, and offered the comb back out to him. There was little chance he’d held onto it long enough to turn it incorporeal as well. “How many people are in the jails because of you?” He found himself wondering.

Roy, having repossessed his comb, finished with his hair quickly before tossing the comb at Hazel in minor revenge. “I don’t leave many alive. Fire has a tendency to not have mercy.”

“Neither will Riza Hawkeye, I wager,” Edward lamented with a sigh as he rose from the bed, “if you show up late. Let’s go.”

Riza Hawkeye was always sufficient threat to get Roy to leave for work, and within minutes they had left the house and were on their way to Headquarters. Yet despite the ever present threat of a displeased Hawkeye looming over Roy’s head, he led Edward on a rather circuitous route, opening more of Central to Edward’s eyes.

And Roy vowed that one day, it wouldn’t be just all the streets of Central that Edward would have opened to him, it would be all of Amestris.

Yet that was a lifetime project, and they ended up at Headquarters far too soon for either of their liking.

As it turned out, however, not even being on time to work was enough to placate the veritable wildfire that was Riza Hawkeye. For as soon as she arrived, and spotted Roy just settling down at his desk, she marched straight past Havoc, who had ineffectually attempted to stop her, and into her commanding officer’s office.

The door slammed shut behind her.

“Lieutenant.” Roy greeted with a small measure of unease as he suddenly recalled why he was facing an angry blonde with a firearm.

Riza came to an abrupt stop before the desk, her gaze unyielding as she glared at Roy. “Any other day, any other moment in our lives, and I’d have accepted that running off is just what you do, but this is not that time!”

Roy considered her in silence a moment, thinking over her words. It did not take him long to understand their meaning, and his expression softened as he looked at her.
“Don’t you even try to talk me down from this, sir!” Riza cut in quickly upon seeing that look.

“I won’t.” Roy assured her gently, yet he wasn’t finished. “You had every right to be worried, you have every right to be angry at me now. But was Central not in the safest hands for my doing that?”

Edward had floated over to perch on the edge of Roy’s desk, yet in that moment it was not just Riza who looked at him in surprise. A smile slowly slipped onto his face as he realized what Roy had done, and he shook his head with a warm fondness. “If only you could always be three steps ahead in our chess games.” He chided fondly, smiling over at Roy. “You might actually win more of them.”

Roy made a mental note to glare at Edward for that one later.

“We were looking everywhere for you.” Riza breathed out before giving a subtle groan and glaring at her Colonel, all the more fiercely. “Just what the fuck is going on that you had to trick Maes and I into canvassing the city daily?”

Roy grinned despite the way it made Riza eye him, as if wondering if she could get away with grazing him with a bullet. “Thank you, for worrying about me.”

Riza knew a distraction when she heard one, yet there was something more pressing about it, and her expression turning tired as she looked at Roy. “Sir, you’re leading us all down a path you’re blinding us from seeing. So when you do things like run off…”

Roy let out a slow breath when she didn’t continue, and on impulse he stood and walked around the desk to take her gently, but firmly, by the arms. “Were I scheming anything but what I am, I would tell you. You know this.” And he didn’t wait for her scowl of confirmation. “I won’t apologize for keeping you in the dark, just try and trust that I have my reasons. Not the least of which is keeping you alive.”

“Colonel – ”

“Keep trusting your instincts, Riza.” Roy cut her off gently. “I may yet stay alive if you do.”

Riza bristled with renewed energy, “and how is that supposed to make me feel any better about any of this?!”

“Because I know you,” Roy informed her frankly, releasing his hold on her arms now, “and I know that right now, you’re operating at two-hundred percent just because you’re worried about me and what I’ve gotten myself into. And I need you to be that way.”

Riza looked at him a long moment before her posture showed her acquiescence, even if it was still somewhat unwilling. “Tell your mother that if you die, I claim no responsibility.”

“I will.” Roy agreed, though he intended to do no such thing. His mother already knew what he was attempting to do, and he had a feeling that should he die, his mother wouldn’t waste time blaming anyone. Instead she’d likely be more invested in trying to locate Edward.

Riza nodded shortly before straightening her posture with a slight huff. “Do your paperwork, sir.”

Edward watched silently with Roy as Riza left the office then, not entirely placated, but not about to shoot Roy, either. He then watched as Roy walked to the office door to shut it closed behind her, and as Roy turned back around he shook his head with a slight smile.

“I’m glad they worry,” Roy sighed as he walked back over, “I’d not have them on my team if they
didn’t. But sometimes I feel like they should have already adjusted to my doing everything by my own plans.”

“Even if you told them, they’d still worry.” Edward told him quietly, thinking back to his own fears for Roy’s safety. “If I think about how I’d feel if I were still prisoner to this office, and I knew what you were doing, and still I was unable to protect you?” He shook his head, faintly troubled. “I’d feel sick inside.”

“That’s another good reason for me not to have told them.” Roy came to sit on the edge of the desk as well, next to Edward.

Edward looked over at him then, “you’d best be right about how you think this will play out for them.”

Roy nodded, but didn’t give any confirmation as he pushed away from the desk and went around to sit behind it, pulling a report towards him. With several days of backlog piled up on his desk, he knew he needed to get started on it now if he was still going to have time to play chess with Edward later.

He needed to get the ghostly brat back for that comment earlier.

Edward watched him in silence for a few minutes before grabbing a report himself and flipping it open. It took him only a few minutes of reading it to understand what was required, and grabbing a pen he began to correct what needed correcting before passing it over to Roy for a signature, distantly amused at the fact that Roy was accepting and signing off on his help without checking what he’d done.

“For all you know, you’ve been signing orders to require all State Alchemists to cross-dress.” Edward pointed out to him.

Roy chuckled even as he continued reading his current report. “Well, since I’ve been unable to institute a miniskirt policy for the women, I don’t think I’d suffer too much.”

Edward eyed him sidelong, “wanting to see all the ladies in miniskirts, are we?”

“I’d not say no to seeing you in a miniskirt.” Roy teased without hesitation.

Edward might have flushed, were he able, but as things stood he was forced to swat Roy with the report he was holding. “Never thought I’d say this, but I’m glad I didn’t die while playing dress up in my mother’s clothing.”

Roy grinned widely at the thought, turning a solicitous look on Edward. “Tell me more.”

He was swatted again for his efforts.

Between the two of them the stack of reports began to quickly dwindle from the inbox. Edward only pausing in his assistance whenever Riza brought in something else, but as soon as she was gone, he was back to helping. He wasn’t even entirely sure why he was, just that it felt like the right thing for him to be doing right now. Besides, the reason it was this backed up was because of him.

Little did either of them know, but deep in the military district of the city, Maes Hughes was beginning to truly realize part of the picture of what was going on.

And he didn’t like it one bit.
It was easy enough to press himself further into the shadows around the furthest wall, a wall that had so helpfully concealed him from being noticed by absolutely no one. The whole time he had been doing this stake out for Roy, he’d never once laid eyes on anyone going in or out of those gates. Not the Brigadier General, not any of the General’s lackeys, not even anyone’s lackey.

And who happens to be the one person to break the unfortunate chain?

Fuhrer Bradley.

Maes barely kept from cursing as he stayed pressed against the wall, his body thrumming with nerves as he forced himself to remain. To watch. Knowing that he needed to report everything he could about this to Roy, right before he gave him a well-deserved punch for not giving him a warning that the Fuhrer was apparently actively involved in this, and not just an enabler as he’d led himself to believe.

Fuhrer Bradley finished locking the padlock that kept the gates to the laboratory visually secure. The true guardians of the facility patrolled just out of sight of the gates. With no further matters to concern him here he turned and walked to the edge of the sidewalk, whereupon a sleek black military issue sedan pulled around the corner to meet him.

Entering the vehicle he adjusted the saber strapped to him habitually, and one hand remained resting on the hilt as the sedan pulled away from the curb and onto the empty street.

“To Headquarters then, sir?”

Bradley didn’t look in the direction of his driver, his gaze fixated more on what was outside of the vehicle he rode in. One thing in particular.

His human eye couldn’t see it, but perhaps all the more fortune that he wasn’t exactly human.

“Not just yet.” He replied with a measuring thoughtfulness to his tone as he continued to gaze out the window. “Turn left at the next corner. Do not signal your intent.”

Maes felt that swearing at this particular moment would be well within reason. Yet there was no time to even consider the proper phrase one should use when it became abruptly apparent that now would be a good time to run.

But running was off the table. There was no outrunning this, running would only make it significantly worse.

Either way, he started walking in the direction of Headquarters with as relaxed a stride as he could fake. There was a chance he still might make it out of this, that this wasn’t what he thought. That if it was, there might be a way out of it.

Yet there was no denying the way he could feel the car come up behind him. That cold feeling of slippery dread snaking up his spine and settling around his neck like a noose. The way every part of his body seemed to sharply attune to the decreasing proximity between them. Or the way his heart seemed to cease beating, as if trying to conceal its sound from a highly-evolved predator, as the sedan pulled up next to him along the curb.

And then it was gaining on him again, allowing him just a purely single moment of hopeful relief before it glided to a halt just ahead of him.

Maes knew what the rear door being opened out by a familiar uniform sleeve meant, he didn’t need to be told to get in, but it still took him a moment of feeling as if dread had rooted him to the sidewalk
before he was able to move, and knowing that not only his life rode on what was about to happen, he
drew on every bit of acting talent he had as he made to obey the unspoken signal.

He was about to find out if he was truly as talented at deception as he believed himself to be.

“Close the door, Major.” Bradley instructed with a disarmingly pleasant smile as the man sat inside
the car.

Maes did as instructed, the snap of the car door closing sounding unnervingly final in this moment.
Yet as he settled himself on the seat as the vehicle began moving once more, he schooled his features
towards curiosity and confusion, instead of the cold dread that he felt instead. Looking over at the
Führer at last he was absentely pleased he managed a salute without his hand shaking, and instead of
putting him at ease, the kind smile the Führer was giving him only made him warier.

Once again embracing that act of curious confusion, Maes prayed for a steady voice. “Is there
something I can do for you, Führer?”

Bradley considered this man carefully from behind the mask of warmth he displayed. Major Maes
Hughes… he knew of the man’s skills as an investigator. It was one of the reasons he had risen so
quickly to the ranks, and been so sought after in the investigations department. Yet despite those
skills, despite the demand for them, it had been made clear through past history that this man’s
loyalties lay with Roy Mustang.

It was always beneficial to know your enemies, and the friends of your enemies.

To find this investigator lap dog of Mustang’s so far from where he knew the man lived, so far from
Headquarters, and so close to the laboratory… it seemed he was not mistaken in the least in his
decision that Roy Mustang needed to be dealt with immediately.

“Oh nothing at all.” Bradley at last replied to the question, the gaze of both his eyes fixed unwaveringly
on the Major. “I merely thought to offer you a lift to Headquarters. I’ve never seen you walking
around here before, I thought you might have become lost.” And a silken concern colored his tone as
he continued, “It would be a shame for an experienced investigator like yourself to go missing.”

Maes met the gaze levelly, his façade wholly in play now, concealing his reaction to the veiled
threats and accusations. And in a distant corner of his mind, he found some measure of hysterical
amusement that he was fencing words with the Führer. Yet now that he was in the act, he was
bolstered by artificial courage, and it allowed him to slip into an almost vulnerable demeanor as he
nodded. “I had a fight with my wife last night, and we’ve never fought before!” He exclaimed, his
horror at the thought of fighting with his beautiful wife not entirely faked. “So I ended up just leaving
and walking around to cool my head. I didn’t even realize where I was walking.”

Führer Bradley gave a conceding nod at the explanation, “Women have an innate ability to drive
even the most disciplined man to the end of his patience.” And he offered a pacifying smile, “I am
sure that things will be made right between you both later. From what I can recall of my subordinates
complaining, you love your family dearly.”

“Yes, sir.” Maes agreed simply. “In any case, thank you for the lift. I am not sure I would have made
it to Headquarters at all today if left to my own devices.”

“No,” Bradley agreed as he continued watching the man, “I expect you’d have not.”

Maes felt it was his turn, and encasing himself in that artificial courage he had created for himself, he
did not hold back. “What brings you out this way, Führer? I thought you lived further east, isn’t this
“Matters of state.” Bradley replied simply enough, “as a former member of the investigations team, I am sure you can appreciate the results of being hands on with situations. There becomes a significantly smaller chance of something unexpected occurring.”

“Whatever the situation that brought you out here, I am sure that it will resolve itself in the appropriate manner. With your direct influence, how could it not?” Maes offered out with just a touch of pride to his voice.

“Indeed.” Bradley determined, before offering a slight smile. “Your confidence in me is welcomed. However I have not remained Fuhrer as long as I have by expecting that everything will always stay according to plan. Always stay a step ahead of your target or goal, is that not correct, Major?”

“At least three steps, Fuhrer.” Maes countered with an easy smile. “Minimum.”

Fuhrer Bradley considered him in silence a moment, his face carefully devoid of any hints towards his thoughts or emotions, before he slowly began to smile. Followed shortly by a brief huff of laughter which ended with him eyeing Major Hughes with a measure of respect that wasn’t wholly faked. “As I would expect from the former shining star of our Investigations Department. Do tell me, what is it that Colonel Mustang has on you that keeps you at his heel?”

“He offered me the most money.” Maes replied without pause, a bit of a smug smirk gracing his lips. “His budget is disgustingly large, of which I suppose I have you to thank.”

“He earned it.” Bradley admitted, and knew it was entirely the truth. If not for Colonel Mustang becoming such a heroic figure during the war, he would have encountered nothing but a damaging public backlash due to the war crimes of other State Alchemists.

But the Colonel’s usefulness to him as a public figurehead had closed. He could no longer afford to keep a wild card like Colonel Mustang around, not with the increased pressure now being placed on him to complete his mission. That singular human held a great deal of sway over the public, good and bad, and he had far greater skill as an alchemist than he’d encountered before. Colonel Roy Mustang was a threat to his task, so like all great men, the Colonel too must fall.

“You picked me up in the research district, where most of the laboratories are,” Maes began just a bit recklessly, but he wasn’t done with his veiled interrogation just yet, “what matters of state are happening there that need your direct input?”

Fuhrer Bradley did not answer at first, instead he contemplated his guest a long moment, before giving another of his pleasant smiles. “I’m afraid that knowledge is beyond your current classification, Major. But I will tell you this, in concern for a talented member of my military,” and his expression hardened, “you are not an alchemist. Your only weapon is your mind. If you must fight with your wife again, do not wander into an area where curiosity might lead you astray. The research laboratories of the State Alchemists are exceedingly dangerous.”

“I’ve been around Colonel Mustang’s temper for years, Fuhrer,” Maes countered carefully, still not having taken his eyes off the man. “I am still whole despite his efforts.”

Bradley’s expression was almost wholly benevolent now, some amusement etched there in his face. “I daresay he wasn’t trying to the best of his abilities, then. I only warn you as a kindness.” And then his smile returned, one shadowed in concern. “I would hate to see your lovely wife and daughter brought to tears, should something happen to you.”
“I would hate that too.” Maes agreed slowly, his hesitance at the man’s words did not need to be fabricated as part of his acting. And he barely kept from startling as the car came to an unexpected halt.

“We’re here.” Fuhrer Bradley announced with a touch of disappointment to his voice, he had wished that his driver had thought to go slower, but there was no way he could have communicated that without alerting the Major to it.

Maes darted a quick look out the window to see it was the truth, they had arrived at Headquarters, and he didn’t believe he’d ever been so glad to see that massive structure in his life.

“Remember what I said, Major Hughes.” Bradley told him with his smile still in place, and as the man looked back around at him sharply, he added, “I’d hate for anything at all to happen to your wife and daughter, should something unfortunate happen to you.”

“Thank you for the lift, Fuhrer.” Maes replied instead, hand already reaching to push open the door so he could escape the vehicle. “And I will always remember your concern for my family.”

“Make no mention of it.” Bradley waved off the matter nonchalantly, still smiling disarmingly. “I am glad we had this chat.”

“As am I.” Maes agreed, then got out of the vehicle, giving the Fuhrer a parting salute he closed the door again and then turned and began making his way as calmly as possible into Headquarters. He could hear the Fuhrer getting out of the car as well at this precise moment, and it took every fiber of his remaining bravado to keep his shoulders squared in a confident nonchalance.

Even when he had entered Headquarters and joined the milling masses of military members he did not let his façade drop. It would be too dangerous among all these people. Many of whom he knew were spies for the Fuhrer. He didn’t need anyone reporting back that he’d fled through the building like a madman.

He only let the façade fall the moment he entered the office complex of the rest of Roy’s team, and he waved off the immediate look of concern Havoc gave him when the man looked up at his sudden entrance. He instead motioned at Roy’s closed office door with a slightly shaking hand.

“Is he in there with anyone?”

Havoc was wondering if he should offer the man a cigarette to try and calm the clear nerves that Maes was operating under, when Riza stood up from her desk while shaking her head.

“Good. Someone do me a favor and call Armstrong, tell him I need to meet with him at lunch. It’s urgent.” Maes didn’t waste another moment in striding over to the door, flinging it open without knocking first, and slamming it closed behind him.

Roy did not startle at the sudden, loud entrance, but he had just narrowly avoided setting his best friend on fire. Taking a good look at the expression on Maes’s face, he doubted an accidental torching would have gone over well with the man.

Edward was fairly sure he’d set the report he’d been working on for Roy down in time, yet one look at Maes’s face told him that the man hadn’t been paying attention to the reports upon his entrance. Concern instantly flooded him as he slipped off the desk that Maes had marched up to, and standing at the man’s side, he glanced over to Roy, “something’s wrong.”

As it turned out, Roy didn’t need to ask to find out just what was wrong.
Maes wasted no time in getting to the point. In situations like these, there was little time to be wasted. “Good thing you’re the Flame Alchemist, Roy, because I get the feeling things are about to heat up for you.”

Roy frowned in concern, sitting back in his chair as he considered the harried state of the man. He would do no one any good in leaping about to conclusions or action without understanding what was going on. “What’s happened?”

“All this time I’ve been playing spy, and no one has gone near that damn place.” Maes began with passion borne of stress, “well all that came to an end today. The fucking **Fuhrer** walked out the gates like he owned the place.”

“He does technically own the place.” Roy pointed out unhelpfully, but with a smirk all the same. Edward was not the only one to glare at Roy for that statement, but he did feel some pride in that it was his glare that Roy shrunk from.

“Then all of a sudden his car pulls up and guess which direction they decide to head?”

“Straight for you, I’d wager.” Roy offered out. Maes wasn’t particularly caring to listen to his best friend at the moment, and continued plowing on ahead. “Right for where I was. And those shadows aren’t enough to conceal me from a close distance, so I was forced to start heading here. Try and avoid suspicion, I mean, it is a military district, I didn’t look out of place. Wouldn’t have, if you weren’t such a fucking peacock!”

“I beg your pardon?” Roy blinked at him owlishly.

Edward, for his part, had fallen into a peal of glorious laughter at the comparison. Just yesterday he’d compared the man to a rooster, and the more he thought about it, the more Roy did resemble flashy male birds.

Roy really was trying not to twitch at Edward’s clear amusement, promising to get the apparition back for it as soon as he had a moment to do so.

“He knew who I was because of you, Roy!” Maes accused vehemently, “shining star of the investigations department my ass, he’d have no interest in me if it weren’t for you always strutting around with your chest puffed out herding your flock wherever you see fit because you’re the Flame Alchemist! And I wouldn’t have near had heart failure!”

Roy leaned back in his chair with a sigh, quirking an eyebrow at his friend. “Would you rather go back to the investigations department?” And when he received a glare, he rolled his eyes. “Well it’s not like he wouldn’t recognize any of the others, you’re the person most qualified to do this and you know it. You agreed to it. You’re the one trained to do investigations, not them.”

“Then what’s this other informant of yours doing, that you couldn’t put him to watching the laboratory? Since none of us know him, I sincerely doubt the Fuhrer or Brigadier General would.” Maes pressed, the stress of the morning wearing at his patience regarding the subject.

Roy sighed internally at the query, yet did not answer straight away.

Edward had resumed sitting on the desk by this point, and adjusting his legs to fold underneath him he gave Maes a regretful look. “Would that I could, but Roy’s not taken me there yet. I think he still worries what I’d do if I could gain access to the place before he’s ready.”
Roy would admit, that had been his initial concern at first, but now it was more the desire to keep Edward away from potential danger. The knowledge that nothing in the laboratory *could* hurt him was still not enough to ease his mind. Or his heart. Love was irrational that way. “That’s not something I can explain right now. And while the Fuhrer has already hurt him enough, and I’m loathe for it to happen again, it’s not the reason I’m not having him watch the laboratory. Right now he is of more help to me where he is, just as he is.”

Maes frowned slowly at the words, his head tilting somewhat in concern as his focus shifted. “The Fuhrer hurt him?”

“I’m fine.” Edward whispered to them, and really, he was. He knew he’d experience that debilitating pain again if it would mean saving Roy. “It’s not like I can die again, no matter how much pain I experience.”

Roy had to force himself not to look at Edward in that moment, not to speak to him, instead focusing his attention actively on Maes. “The Fuhrer never saw who he attacked, but despite that, his assistance is needed in other aspects of this.”

Maes sighed and ran a haggard hand back through his hair, causing much of it to fall askew. “Fine, keep your secrets about him while you still can. But one day I’m going to find out who he is. Just not today.” And he looked at Roy again with determination in his gaze. “But you may want to tell him that things are about to get dangerous. The Fuhrer is a fool if he doesn’t get suspicious over my being in that area, I doubt my excuse fooled him, despite how he acted. He’ll know you’re up to something now.”

Roy nodded at the warning, “I’ve always been prepared for him wanting to kill me. But he won’t succeed, I have too much advance warning regarding him.”

“I hope that’s the truth, Roy.” Maes told him with raw honesty, before giving a regretful shake of his head. “In any case, we need to get my own family out of the city until your scheme has come to a close. I’m not an idiot, I know he was threatening them. I’m fine with him threatening me, but if anything were to happen to my girls because of me…”

Roy nodded immediately at the problem, “can you alter train manifests?”

Maes snorted at the ludicrous implication that he *couldn’t*. “I almost want to end our friendship based on that question.”

“Shut up.” Roy demanded through a scowl as Maes smirked at him. “You’re taking sending them away rather well.”

“Believe me, I’m not.” Maes admitted, suddenly subdued as he kept Roy’s gaze. “But like you with your other informant, I’m loathe for the Fuhrer to hurt them. If I have to do this to keep them safe, I need to do it. And I need to do this, Roy. Wars, no matter how small, are no place to keep a family near.”

Roy could understand that sentiment all too well, could understand Maes’s desire to see those he loved remain safe and free of the grip of those who might harm them before all was said and done. And while he knew it had to be hurting Maes to do this, the man’s determination to see them safe was overriding everything else. “Then send them to my mother, as soon as you’re able. I’ll let her know they’re on their way. She’ll keep them safe.”

Maes’s eyes widened in surprise at this being suggested as some sort of safe house. “Not like I think anyone would follow after them there… I don’t think I’m that high on the concern list for the Fuhrer
or Brigadier General, but are you sure?"

“She’s shot her fair share of spies.” Roy reminded his best friend frankly, “she can handle herself, and keep everyone safe until it’s safe for them to return. Just alter those train manifests to throw off anyone they might send who’s a bit more stupid than the rest. She doesn’t like killing the weak ones.”

Maes nodded after a moment, and shot his friend a grateful smile. But it was a distracted one. “Thank you. I’ll go give Gracia a phone call, let her know what’s happening. And then I think I need to work on spreading that rumor that we had a fight this morning, it was the excuse I gave the Fuhrer. It might help create a story that she left me in a fit of spite.”

Roy nodded in agreement, and as his best friend turned to leave, he called after him softly. “I don’t plan for this to go on much longer, you’ll see them again soon. I promise.”

Maes looked back, but he couldn’t find the words in him to answer, instead nodding mutely, and just a bit sadly, before letting himself out of the office to begin his task. Wondering with some trepidation what things would be like when Roy went after the Fuhrer, once the Brigadier General was out of the way.

Left alone in the office once again, Roy rested forward on the desk with his elbows as he let out a heavy breath.

Edward looked down at his bowed head with a sympathetic smile, reaching out to lay his hand through Roy’s black hair. “Don’t think to try to send me with the girls. I’m not about to leave you.”

“I wouldn’t be able to force you onto that train.” Roy pointed out, looking over at the ghost. “Besides, I’ll never be able to get you to fall in love with me if I send you away.”

Edward smiled at the reasoning, giving just the faintest laugh before letting his hand fall from Roy’s hair. “And how were you planning to go about making me fall for you?” He asked with fondness in his voice, his smile widening a fraction.

“Well I’m certainly not about to send you to see my mother!” Roy told him firmly, “she knows I love you, so she’d just spend the entire time telling you embarrassing stories about me. I’d never have a hope of you loving me afterwards.”

Edward gave a soft huff of a laugh, his smile never lessening as he watched Roy. If he were being honest with himself, he imagined such stories would only be endearing to him, but he didn’t tell Roy that. “Will Daphne be able to keep them safe?”

“You saw the size of her shotgun.” Roy pointed out, and as Edward’s expression turned into a form of amused agreement, he smiled. “If anything, Gracia will come back with a handgun, knowing my mother’s influence. Maes should be more worried about her returning, than her staying.”

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And as Roy began to protest the implications there, he rolled his eyes and grabbed up the file he’d been working on before Maes’s abrupt arrival. With that, he began to actively ignore the man as he went back to his task. Idly reflecting on how superficial and meaningless all this paperwork seemed, when all of the real activity of the military was conducted in the shadows, as lives were wagered with the success or failure of each cloak and dagger operation.
“Sir,” Riza began reproachfully as she saw the massive stack of files destined to be redistributed, “did you even properly read through them?”

Well, he had his own, but he sat back in his chair and turned his head just enough to bring Edward into view. Feigning reflection on the matter, he quirked an eyebrow at the ghost in humored question. He didn’t doubt that Edward had been helping him properly, after all, he’d been alerted to several matters already thanks to the ghost’s careful perusing. Yet he didn’t want to speak for his unseen assistant.

Edward caught Roy’s gaze and gave a quiet laugh, “nothing else seemed odd save for the ones I already had you double check. You’re fine.”

Roy couldn’t help the smile that flashed onto his face, and turning back to face Riza he waved a hand idly. “Everything’s in order. I know which lines I signed on.” And as her expression shifted into something containing less suspicion, he leveled a chiding look on her. “Seriously, I’ve been so much better about administrative tasks since we got here. You still doubt me? I thought you supported me wanting to become Fuhrer, and that’s going to come with far more paperwork than I’ll ever see as I am now.”

Riza caught herself, rethinking the words that she’d been about to say as she studied her superior. “It’s that you have been, when in all respects, I can’t understand why. Yes, you say it’s because we’re finally back in Central,” and she narrowed her eyes somewhat as she continued to puzzle over the man before her, “but I know that you’re not telling the whole truth.”

Roy didn’t respond, merely quirked an eyebrow at her.

Letting out a quiet sigh, Riza shook her head. “Whatever else it is, will it be enough to keep you like this when you become Fuhrer? Because I support you, I do. But – ”

“He’s more than enough.” Roy interrupted calmly, but firmly all the same, and as her eyes widened in shock, he offered her a small smile. “You at least deserve to know that much. Dreams, objectives, they come and go as they’re either obtained or forgotten. And somewhere along the way the purpose that drove you to them is lost. I won’t lost my purpose in this, even once I’m Fuhrer. Because if it means I can continue to protect him… I’ll do anything.”

Edward didn’t see Riza’s reaction to Roy’s words, he was too busy staring at the man in shock.

For several long moments Riza was lost for words, before finally finding her voice again. “Your secret informant?”

Roy’s smile widened momentarily before nodding his head in easy agreement. “So don’t worry, I’m not about to do anything to screw this up. Especially not on something as basic as paperwork.”

Riza eyed Roy closely in that moment, her friend hadn’t said as much, but she could read between the lines; Roy loved whoever it was that was helping him behind the scenes. And suddenly, she knew with a cold certainty that Roy wouldn’t be stopped. Not unless he died in the effort. She’d seen him in battle before, and if she were entirely honest with herself, the first time she’d seen Roy fight, it had been terrifying. She’d never admit it of course, least of all to him. But if Roy was about to go into this fight, fighting for someone he loved…
“Was there anything else? Or did you just come to bother me?” Roy redirected her smoothly, as much as he was enjoying the emotions flitting through her eyes as her face remained in an expression of stunned silence.

Riza shook herself out of her thoughts, and the icy tendrils of dread they wrapped about her, leaving her to only pray that when everything came to a head, it would be away from the public. And his words had reminded her of her original purpose, and the course paper of the small package she carried in her left hand. “This came for you.” She abruptly thrust the package out to him. “And I’ll send off the files you’ve already done.”

Roy had no sooner accepted the package from her than she was gathering the files into her arms and striding off for the office door, yet he called after her as she reached it. “Riza,” and as she turned to look back at him, he offered her a bracing smile, “thank you.”

Riza watched him a moment longer, before giving a quick nod of her head and ducking out of the office with the files balanced precariously in her arms.

“I knew part of your reason for doing this became me,” Edward said softly as the door eased shut behind Riza, “but it always surprises me… you surprise me.”

“Do I?” Roy asked with a huff of laughter as he looked over at the silvery apparition that floated at his side cross-legged.

“I didn’t think you’d tell her it was partly because of me. To keep me safe.”

Roy leaned back in his chair, the package having been set on his desk. “She would have learned eventually from Maes, and you’re something I’d rather tell them about myself, and not have them hear through my office’s version of telephone.”

“When will you tell them about me? Completely?” Edward asked then, not hesitating a second in the asking as his brows drew together in the beginnings of a frown. “The more information, the more confirmation they get from you about me… they’re going to try and find me. How do you think it’s going to make you look when they can find no evidence that I exist?”

“That you’re fucking brilliant at covert ops.” Roy suggested reasonably, and smiled, before his expression turned more serious. “You still want me to tell them about you?”

Edward let out a slow breath as he directed his gaze more to the package resting innocently on Roy’s desk. “I have nothing against it, you know that… but I also know you’re selfish. I won’t force your hand in this. I know how protective you are of me, of your time with me. I know you want me all to yourself,” and here he snorted, “which is ridiculous, because I don’t want to be with anyone else. I’m just worried about your relationship with your friends, with your team, if you continue to hide me away.”

Roy tipped his head back where it rested against his chair, directing his gaze to the ceiling panels above them. “What I said before, to my mother, about not wanting to be like what keeps you caged… that stands true with them as well.” And his eyes fell shut as a slow breath escaped him, a steadying one. “I don’t think it will ever be easy for me… but know that I’m not under the illusion that I’ll be able to keep you secret forever. I know the time will come I’ll have to tell them, it’s the when that I can’t seem to decide.”

“I wasn’t aware that the last time you tried to wait it out went so well.” Edward remarked dryly. “What with your mother overhearing you yelling at me in the backyard. Definitely doesn’t make you seem insane.”
“Shut up.” Roy half-laughed, but mostly tried to sound annoyed at the reminder.

A grin flashed across Edward’s face, “just think on maybe telling them once we’ve dealt with Grand?”

Roy didn’t answer, but he didn’t say no, either, and sitting up straight again his gaze fell on the neatly wrapped brown package on his desk. It looked innocuous enough. Course brown paper wrapped around a standard sized postal box, but it was the label that made him frown at it.

His name stared up at him in thick black ink.

Just his name. Nothing else.

“What is it?” Edward asked as he watched Roy stare at the package on the desk, his own gaze soon following. Roy wasn’t looking at it with the eagerness he commonly would associate with receiving a package in the post. Nor was he looking at it with confusion, or even suspicion. It was more calculating than all that, a quiet sort of calculation that set Edward on edge.

Roy’s mouth drew into a thin line as he reached forward to turn the package over in order to access the taped edges of the brown wrappings. “We’re about to see.”

The paper was torn away, leaving just a plain white box with the lid taped shut to it. A quick slit of a pen across the tape and Roy was easing the lid off of the contents inside.

He would have preferred it was a bomb.

Roy stared down at the small object in the box as an icy clench settled around his stomach, and his gaze hardened with the first tremor of anger that snaked down his spine.

“What is it?” Edward repeated, now with confusion and a healthy dose of wariness at the look in Roy’s dark eyes.

Roy swallowed as he slowly replaced the lid onto the box, before tucking it carefully into his uniform shirt up against his chest. “Better than a postcard.” He replied in a deceptively even tone as his anger began to steel along his spine, as defiant, protective instinct grew to a deafening beat of his heart as it acknowledged the adrenaline fine tuning his senses. “We need to leave. Now.”

Edward startled back in the air as Roy swiftly stood from his chair. “Roy, what the fuck is – ”

Roy glanced once at Edward as he rounded his desk, not pausing as he strode purposefully for the door. “Come now, or I’m leaving you behind.”

“Not on your life.” It took Edward all of two seconds to be at the man’s side once more.

Roy shot Edward an indecipherable look and was out his office door where he quickly turned a pointed look on Riza who looked up with minor surprise at his sudden appearance. He didn’t give her the opportunity to settle from it, and knowing it would alarm Edward, there was no way he knew to code this so the ghost wouldn’t become alarmed. “Sniper rifle. Go. Now.”

Riza didn’t hesitate, even for the fraction of a moment her eyes widened in surprise. Yet even that moment was spent with her pushing back from her desk and holstering her handgun before she was whirling from the room at a clipped pace.

“Fuery,” Roy’s gaze fixed on his subordinate even as he moved to follow Riza out, “crash the coms in and out of HQ. Give me gridlock, I don’t want the Fuhrer getting anywhere fast should he leave.”
“Sir!” Fuery agreed with a snappy salute, before whirling in his desk chair to launch it into a swift roll over to the cabinet against the far wall, where only then did he stand up and whip the doors open to begin grabbing the equipment he’d need.

“Stay!” Roy ordered the rest with a pointed look before striding from his office complex decisively.

Havoc watched as Kain darted from the room whistling a cheery tune while gripping tight to the handle of his personal tool box, and turned his gaze to Falman and Breda who were staring after their comrades with varying looks of unrest and shock. “Two hundred on it being collateral damage of three city blocks.”

In the hallway, as Roy marched his way down it scattering everyone in his path without having to do more than look at them, Edward finally managed to grasp onto some of the words stuttering through his brain. And if his voice was a little higher than he’d remembered it being, it could only be Roy’s fault.

“Seriously! What the fuck is going on?” Edward demanded, his eyes casting down to Roy’s chest where he could see the slight bulge of the box that had clearly set the man off. “You told Riza to get a sniper rifle!”

Roy cast an apologetic look towards Edward, giving a subtle shake of his head.

Edward groaned aloud, swore several phrases that actually made Roy’s eyes widen comically, and worried a hand into his hair. “I swear, Roy, this ‘only you can see and hear me’ thing is going to be the death of you one day. And don’t you doubt it, because I’ll be the one killing you.”

Roy found himself smiling at the threat, smiling at the scowl he earned.

It took far longer than Edward was happy with for them to get outside, yet only once they had passed out of Headquarter’s main gates and were ducking down the nearest unused alleyway did Roy explain.

“Hopefully Riza won’t need to shoot.” Roy began even as he quickened his pace now that he was no longer in any view of any of the high windows of Headquarters. “But if I get in a tight spot, she will, and she won’t miss. I have no intention of dying on you, but if something should happen to me, I trust her to finish the job and keep everyone safe.”

“And just who, exactly,” Edward replied in a voice tight with worry, “is she supposed to be shooting, should you fail? You know whoever it is that sent you that box. What is that thing, anyway?”

Roy cast a dark look Edward’s way, “I’m surprised you don’t know.” Looking back to his path, as he wove his way towards the nearest large park that was still in view of the highest buildings of Central, so that Riza could spot him from any of them easily. Fortunately also knowing it would be relatively empty at this time of day, yet he let out a weary breath that had nothing to do with the pace he was setting. “Fact remains is that you’re going to get your wish sooner than you thought. You get to see me fight, and not hold back.”

Edward found it hard to ignore the wave of unease that filtered through him. He’d known that Roy would have to, eventually, but all the same, perhaps naively, he’d thought this moment wouldn’t come until Roy and Grand finally stopped their orbiting and crashed into each other.

Roy caught the expression on Edward’s face, and while he wanted nothing more than to erase the clear anxiety, he knew there was nothing he could say or do to achieve that and still achieve what
needed to be done. “I am sorry.” He offered out carefully.

Edward looked at him sharply, still trying to shore up his apprehension about this whole affair. “I don’t want an apology. I don’t want you to worry about me.” Because if the way Roy reacted was any clue, whoever he was intending to fight wasn’t any common alchemist. This wasn’t some common challenge.

This was personal. By an alchemist talented enough to cause Roy to make a contingency plan.

“All the same,” Roy began hesitantly at first, his heart faltering as he stared ahead, not really seeing the path he walked. “If I die, I want you to go home and take Hazel. Find the train we took before and ride it until you get to where my mother lives. She’ll figure out how to get you what you need.”

Edward growled, anger spiking through him, and lunging forward he whirled around to stop dead in the air in front of Roy, causing the man to stumble to a rapid halt.

“Edw – ”

“Shut up!” Edward snarled at him, silver eyes flashing. “How many times, how many ways do I have to tell you that I fucking need you! So don’t you dare die on me, because I’ll take your precious squirrel and give him to Elysia! Let her dress him in ribbons and bows and little frilly hats!”

Roy was fairly certain that his jaw had dropped.

“Do you understand, Roy Mustang?” Edward demanded, hands firmly on his hips as he stared the man down.

“Y-yes.” Roy managed after a long moment in which Edward’s eyes narrowed dangerously at him.

“Good.” It was little more than a hiss, and then Edward was turning back around and continuing to float off the direction that Roy had been heading them in.

Roy blinked twice, owlishly, before slowly a fond smile began to cross his lips as warmth began to tendril about his chest. Quickly he stepped forward, jogging several paces to catch up with the ghost, “is it bad that I kind of enjoyed you yelling at me?”

Edward sent him a sidelong scowl. “Keep it in your pants, Mustang. I doubt this is a measuring contest you’re intending to partake in.”

Roy snorted despite the seriousness of the situation he was about to partake in. He wasn’t sure if it was bad or good that Edward had this sway over his emotions right before an alchemy match of likely life and death, but he could no more consider sending the ghost from his side, than he could attempt to lose him. No matter what outcome, he wanted Edward beside him.

Edward cast him another searching, worried look, before averting his gaze. “So what is that thing? Why does it mean you have to fight?”

“You’ll have your answers soon enough, I expect.” Roy replied quietly, and was grateful when Edward didn’t press the subject. He was only minutes away now, and he could afford no distractions. Not even that of the one he loved – especially him.

As they reached the park he’d been aiming for, Roy felt the predatory shift snap into place within him. In an instant he found himself reverting to the feral creature instincts that had kept him alive during the war. The once racing, adrenaline-suffused staccato beat of his heart had become flat-lined in comparison. All senses on alert and fine tuned, his breath barely moving his chest, the increased
thrum of his pulse dulled in his ears. As he led them both further in, but not so far as to become shielded by the cover of trees, he waited – pure hunter.

Edward hovered uncertainly next to Roy, his quick eyes scanning the quiet park as he forced himself to remain silent. He might know nothing of battles such as Roy was clearly getting ready to engage in, but he knew enough to understand that right now, his silence was absolutely imperative. More than anything, he didn’t want to lose Roy, and that meant that unless absolutely necessary, he shouldn’t break the man’s focus. Although, as he cast a quick look the man’s way, he was beginning to honestly doubt that anything could break the intensity of focus being exhibited.

The moment the man came within range, Roy knew. Yet he reacted only to turn and wait, his gaze hard, and his hands at his sides still with focus.

Edward noticed the abrupt change, and quickly pivoted in midair, before floating backwards a pace and landing so that he was off to Roy’s side, slightly behind him. Enough that he knew he’d remain in Roy’s peripheral senses, but not far back enough so as to cause him worry as to his location. For all he believed Roy would, and could, remain focused, he wanted to do nothing to potentially hinder that.

Though he would be lying if he said he wasn’t on his own guard, watching a singular man in a blindingly white suit approach. Silence stretching to even the birds of the park, as the future storm came ever closer.

Kimblee wasn’t exactly in any hurry, but nor was he dawdling as he languidly made his way over to where Roy Mustang stood. And as he came within several yards of the man, tipped his fedora off his head with the tip of one finger to begin twirling it idly as he swept an assessing look over the State Alchemist he hadn’t seen since the war – not that he’d exactly have accepted prison pen pal letters from the man, he’d never considered them remotely friendly. Still, it was interesting to see the change. Where he’d last seen a young State Alchemist once untried by life and war and suffering the consequences of experiencing it, here before him stood a man who’d accepted and adapted from the experiences of both – enough that it lit an eager spark within him.

“Interesting prison onesie you’ve got there. I didn’t realize the guards loved it on you enough to have it tailored.” Roy offered out in greeting.

Kimblee threw him a smirk. “I never was a fan of the tattoo removal forced upon me, so I daresay they adored me when I shanked my own hands so I could make their chests explode. It added some color to the place, all that grey stone gets so dreary.”

Edward’s eyes widened, his jaw dropping slightly as he cast an uncertain look at Roy. This psychopath was who Roy was intending to fight?

Roy quirked an eyebrow at the information. “Bit desperate much? Have you ever tried masturbation? Might achieve the same result for you, less body count.”

Kimblee shot him a reproachful look, and slowly he turned sideways to the man, beginning a slow and easy prowling walk in intention of circling him. All the while twirling his fedora absenty. “Became a bit hard when they put me in a straight jacket or my hands in little stockades.”

“Had I known I’d have gotten the old group together, and we would have come down to celebrate and sign our names on the cast.” Roy informed him blandly, easing his position slowly around as Kimblee moved, knowing better than to give the man any potential opening for a quick blind spot.

Kimblee snickered just a bit at that, “and I’d have told the lot of you to fuck off.” And he turned his
attention back to Mustang with a hint of mocking disappointment. “Got my post a lot later than I was expecting. I actually had time for lunch.”

“I’ll let you know when I start caring that you believe I’ve in any way inconvenienced you, Kimblee.” Roy told him in a frank tone. “Since when do the prison guards let you go eat lunch with innocent civilians?”

“Innocent?” Kimblee didn’t have to fake a surprised look, nor the one of disappointment that then crossed his face. “Mustang, Mustang, Mustang! No one is innocent, I thought you’d have known such simple truths.” Yet he waved his free hand dismissively, “and the prison guards don’t let me do anything, any more. New day, new lease on life, new suit,” and he shot a predatory look Roy’s way, “new target.”

“You just gained release this morning, and you’re already throwing down a gauntlet to me?” Roy questioned the sense of it, “but then, you were always overeager to spill a warpath.”

“What sense is there in prolonging inevitable fate?” Kimblee queried back lightly, still twirling his fedora idly on one slender finger as he continued his idle, elegant prowl around his target.

Roy snorted derisively, “I just never pegged you as a poster boy for Bradley’s commands.”

Kimblee shot a grin Mustang’s way, giving a slight shrug to his shoulders and tipping his head back unconcernedly to stare up at the cirrus sky. “You know, Flame, I’d be after your blood even without an offer to take it.” And he stopped his prowling to half-turn and give his once-colleague a disgusted look he might give to a suit not bespoke. “I did all I was asked and more, happily, willingly. Even slaughtered some of the little animals in their sleep as a mercy, and what is my commendation? Prison.” He tipped his head back with an ill-humored laugh before focusing in on Roy once more with hawkish observation. “While you get labeled a hero, and the country either fears or falls at your feet. You… who showed weakness.”

“Valuing the lives of others is not a weakness, Solf.” Roy replied quietly, but he knew he was heard by the flicker of irritation that crossed the man’s face briefly.

“Life is expendable.” Kimblee informed him somberly, his expression almost pitying as he began his circling prowl once more. “Life comes and goes, it’s a constant. When a fire burns down a forest, does it not regrow? What never will regrow, though, is the plague that was once there. Life will have been reformed for the better.”

Roy’s eyes narrowed ominously, anger licking at the walls of composure that were meant kept his mind unclouded, focused. “The only plague of humanity that has ever merited being annihilated, is the Fuhrer. Ever since he took power there’s been nothing but war and genocide.”

“I’m no more his screaming fangirl than you are.” Kimblee smirked, then shuddered reflexively at the mere idea and gave a lilting laugh. “Hopefully he’s smart enough to realize that releasing me signed not only your death warrant, but his own. I do love a good fight, and you’re a delicious warm up routine, old friend.”

“We were never friends.” Roy pointed out, though he supposed they both knew it the truth without it being said.

“Really?” Kimblee shot him a disappointed look, his face pulling in distaste. “I line up that beautiful little pun about a warm up, and you focus on the obvious? Fuck, Flame! You’ve gotten dull!”

“I daresay I’ve heard all the temperature puns before, Crimson. You’ll forgive me if I don’t shower
you with admiration, I might go in for a slow clap though.” Roy deadpanned.

Kimblee gave a sardonic eye roll. “I’ll save you the trouble. Can’t have you hurting your hands with all that enthusiasm, else you’ll be even more useless than you are in the rain.”

Roy didn’t feel the need to reward that with more of a response than the unimpressed stare he was already leveling. Instead, he pulled free the box that had rested against his chest, noting how Kimblee’s eyes darted to it in rapt focus. “You would have been the only one to dare keep one.”

“Am I hearing a question?” Kimblee frowned, and gave a dismissive shrug, tearing his gaze away from the box. “I won’t bore you with the details, but it turned out to be fairly handy to use as a calling card. I knew you’d get the message properly, so I may have requested a spare from someone who seems to want you dead as violently as I do, and I’ve got all I need aligned to make this fight memorable.”

Roy’s eyes narrowed, glittering with dark emotions he dared not put names to, lest they take over his focus. “If you think I’d ever use this accursed thing again, you don’t know your opponent as well as you should.”

Kimblee halted from his circling, turning to face Roy fully with a grim expression as he popped his fedora back onto his head in a fluid motion. “Then perhaps you’re not as worthy an opponent as I had hoped you’d have become. No matter,” he brought his hands up to casually slip free the silk gloves that hid the rough alchemy circles now scarred into his flesh, “I will still enjoy taking from you what was rightfully to be mine.”

Roy’s sharp gaze didn’t leave Kimblee for a moment, even as his body tensed. “Edward,” he began in sudden need, “get to the sidewalk and don’t leave it. Now!”

Edward shot a torn expression Roy’s way, as loathe to leave the man’s side as he was to be in Roy’s way, even if only visually. But fear for Roy’s life soon had him obeying the command, darting for the sidewalk even as he felt the air tear around him in an unearthly shriek of shockwaves.

And as he turned with wide, anxious eyes back to the battle, it felt his body had turned to lead as his fear choked at his throat. All he could see after this first, initial clash of testing the other’s strength, was shredded earth and scorching flames within a haze of smoke. Whoever the hell this Kimblee was, Roy hadn’t lied... there would be no holding back.

Already after this first attack, Edward could hear distant screams of what people had been nearby running for cover, and he absently wished them speed. He could hear the squeals of car tires of vehicles that had aptly decided a change of streets was beyond essential. And he found himself hoping that through all this smoky chaos, Riza’s aim would remain true, should it come to that.

Yet a second attack did not immediately follow, and Edward found himself waiting with cold nervousness until the smoke cleared enough that he could ascertain why.

Kimblee was staring down indignantly at what remained of his fedora, his once pristine white suit a deep charcoal grey and singed through over large portions, exposing angry red skin already beginning to blister.

Roy had fared little better, a deep gash along his arm from shielding his face, several less severe cuts along his face, legs, and torso. Yet his uniform remained free of burns, his gloves yet intact, and he met Kimblee’s calculating gaze across the distance still separating them. “You came into battle against me without a flame-retardant monkey suit? That ridiculous hat of yours deserved what it got. Now stand still, and I’ll do the same to your head.”
Edward missed whatever it was Kimblee snarled back, he was too overcome with near-hysterical relief at Roy’s sheer brilliance with clothing. He was never teasing the man again about how horrible the uniform slacks looked – ever. He wasn’t sure what genius Roy had hired to work such magic, but he was fairly certain that were he in possession of the ability to touch others, he’d kiss the tailor right now.

However, as a telltale snap of fingers and the ominous echo of hands clapping together, Edward found his attention abruptly stolen.

A veritable cyclone of fire shot upwards with an earth-quaking roar just in time to clash into a purplish-white bolt of energy not unlike lightning, that upon impacting the fiery cyclone, exploded outwards and forced the fire back in an engulfing blast and a deafening shriek. The smoke poured outwards, lined with embers and static pulses of light all the way to where Edward stood frozen on the sidewalk.

Because as he watched the fiery glows and brilliant flashes of light, and listened to the howls and shrieks of the air as it was ripped apart with incomparable force, he was realizing, quite suddenly, that something was very, very wrong.

He knew alchemy, had done alchemy that many alchemists could only dream of comprehending or aspiring to. He’d sacrificed himself because of it. And what he was seeing now, in the engulfing infernos and fiery blasts that were vanishing trees to ash and smoke as they were snapped into existence, was a level of power, a level of control with alchemy that left him with no uncertainties that Roy was frighteningly, awe-inspiringly deadly.

But he also knew alchemy twisted and violent, impure and not of true nature. He’d seen it. Felt it. And what he was seeing in the purplish-white snakes of lightning that met Roy’s explosions without fail, was wholly unnatural. Kimblee had warped it, somehow, to the extent that Edward could see that Roy was only able to purely defend.

“Fuck this.” Edward swore softly, his eyes darting from the battle with sudden hard purpose, searching out anything, anything he could do to get Roy an opening. He wasn’t about to stay on the sidelines while the man who had freed him, given him his afterlife, loved him, could only defend.

He’d seek forgiveness later.

He found his idea further down along the street, alongside the curb.

Not sure he’d ever flown so fast in the entirety of his death, Edward phased through the top of the car and immediately began digging for the wires he needed with a sarcastic smirk. “I knew reading car engineering manuals while Roy slept would come in handy.” He muttered, and within seconds the engine was sputtering to life before settling on an idle chugging purr of a noise.

And drawing upon the driving experience he’d gotten sitting between Roy’s legs during their bumper car venture, he shifted the vehicle into drive and hit the accelerator while steering it up and over the curb, aiming to where he could see the light of Kimblee’s attacks beginning.

From through the smoke cloaking their clash, Kimblee only saw the oncoming car seconds before it would reach him, and darted backwards, but not quick enough to keep it from clipping his leg and sending him flipping uncontrollably through the air.

Roy’s eyes widened as he saw through the momentary part in the smoke the car whiz past, Edward in the driver’s seat, and deciding that he’d scold the ghost later, he wasted no time in snapping to life another attack just before Kimblee would have hit the ground. This time, it hit without interference.
Kimblee screamed, before the flames robbed his throat of his voice, the fire surrounding him, eating at him with feral greed even as the explosion half of Roy’s attack blasted through his body. Blood ran down his ears as the interiors burst, only to be burned away by the fire digging through skin. His femur, fractured by the car, was pushed back through muscle by the shockwaves.

And yet… he was not done.

His teeth bared, lipless, but for the moment, and his burning hand grasped for the titanium chain still about his neck, scorching him. Searching towards the end until he grasped cool, smooth stone.

Roy threw himself to the ground for cover as the immediate area around Kimblee exploded outwards with haunting crimson light. And before the last of the smaller debris had finished falling, he was quickly regaining his feet, watching with an icy pit in his stomach as what smoke remained after the blast thinned. Enough that he could easily see that the car had ended up in one of the craters, and that a naked Kimblee was picking himself back up off the ground with an angry sneer.

His wounds were healed, and between his fingers the pulse of red light finally began to fade.

“It’s not going to be that easy, Mustang.” Kimblee snarled, his fingers falling from the stone around his neck. “As long as I have the stone, I can just keep healing myself.”

“Then I’ll just have to outlast you until you use it up.” Roy quipped back, voice coldly level. “I wonder, how long it’ll last after a healing of the magnitude I expect you needed. We never did field test that. And that’s hardly a brand new sample, Marcoh’s rather out of the business, or hadn’t you heard?”

Kimblee let out a dismissive huff of breath, “you speak like you will actually live long enough to know.” And he raised his hands palm up to give them brief inspection, before aiming his gaze over the tips of his fingers and to his opponent. “You won’t, unless you accept that using the stone I sent you is the only way you’ll be able to defeat me.”

“I’ll let you monopolize the road of least resistance.” Roy informed him, his gaze narrowing in focus and threat. “I regret nothing mine has led me to.”

“I’ll ask you if you still believe that, right before I watch the life leave your eyes.” Kimblee promised him solemnly, and waited only a moment after Roy snapped his fingers to bring his hands together. It was becoming tedious, this fight with someone who refused to give him the challenge he wanted. It was time to bring this matter to a close.

From beyond where the car had come to an abrupt halt, Edward was standing, stunned, as he absorbed everything he’d just heard. From what he could now quickly piece together, the Fuhrer had released this man, and set him on Roy with the very objects that had made the man nearly commit suicide. And now Kimblee was fully using that upgrade of power, while Roy still refused.

And it was more than obvious their past together was not amiable.

But something still wasn’t right… at least, not entirely. That stone, the way it shaped Kimblee’s alchemy wasn’t right. True, he had known it wasn’t right before he’d realized what it was that was causing it. But this was even more wrong.

He had seen his father do alchemy before. Granted, there hadn’t been many times before the man had run off to fix whatever it was he claimed needed fixing, but he’d seen it. He’d never forgotten any alchemy a day in his life or death, and when he recalled his father’s alchemy…

His father was a Philosopher’s Stone. Living. Breathing. And the alchemy he created had never
once looked anything but pure. This was something twisted and evil, and he shivered internally.

Inside the sea of choking smoke Roy had redoubled his efforts with moderate success.

Kimblee was fast, yes; even for a man once confined purely to a prison cell. And while his alchemy power was being enhanced by the counterfeit philosopher’s stone, Kimblee could only attack with both hands.

Snapping his fingers on both hands was something Roy had long mastered.

He’d wear that stone down, void it’s power, and then he’d burn the life from Kimblee.

Blast after blast of exploding, raging fire met each one of Kimblee’s attacks, only to have a second chase it before the man could react, and slowly, ever so slowly, he was driving the man into a defensive circle. And as he managed to force Kimblee to circle all the way around to where the car still remained, he couldn’t help but smirk as he watched Edward open the lid to the gas tank chamber.

Edward whistled innocently as he quickly darted away, seeing that Roy had noticed his idea.

Roy waited until he was once again able to attack with one snap of his fingers, holding Kimblee’s attention on fending off the explosion his other hand was creating. Watched with stony vindication as the car exploded into molten shrapnel, slicing into Kimblee from behind.

Yet he wasn’t free of the blast by pure virtue of causing it, and he grunted low in his chest as he felt several metal shards he’d not noticed hurtling his way dig deep into his calf and forearm. He counted his blessings that they were deep, because the blood flow was being stemmed by their presence, and he was losing enough blood as it was already. His left sleeve was darkened black, sticky and wet, the glove on his hand impossible to make out the alchemy array stitched there.

Shaking his head quickly to center his vision he watched as Kimblee glowed in red light, working on picking himself up from the ground once more. The blast had likely sent metal skewering very important areas, and he could only find himself glad of it. The more he could force Kimblee to heal himself, the quicker that philosopher’s stone would disintegrate.

He attacked again, before Kimblee was finished healing himself. There was no time, nor room, in a battle of this nature for such chivalry.

Out of the way of the explosions of fire, Edward had come to something of a halt in midair.

He’d given Roy another opportunity to wear the stone down, and the man had taken it. Yet instinct was telling him it wouldn’t be near enough. This may not be a true philosopher’s stone, but if his father was any guide to judge a counterfeit by…

His eyes darted to where Roy had lunged into another attack, closing the distance, increasing the force of the blasts.

The man was bleeding, heavily, though his sharp consideration could detect no weakness stemming from it. Yet something deep inside him faltered even so, tightening his throat in anxiety. Adrenaline was likely the only reason Roy wasn’t faltering, and that frightened him.

Forcing his gaze away, he searched out the origin of Kimblee’s attacks once more. There had to be something he could do to tip the scales to Roy’s favor, there had to be – else, what use was there in being the genius he was! If he could still do alchemy, even Kimblee, enhanced as he was, would be hard-pressed to overpower him. But that option had long set sail when he’d gained a ghostly
existence.

He had no power in this world. No alchemy. The only thing he could ever affect was –

Edward’s thoughts screeched to a tumbling halt as his eyes shot wide. But of course… that was it!

“Let’s see you cheat your way out of this one.” He hissed icily, and darted back into the wailing, smoky exploding chaos of fire and impure lightning-reminiscent flashes.

Within seconds he found his target, and whirling around behind Kimblee, grabbed the titanium chain in a rigid grip and pulled.

Kimblee let out a strangled noise of surprise, finding himself falling backwards, stumbling in the same direction to try and keep his feet as the chain that held the philosopher’s stone about his neck dug mercilessly into his throat.

Edward snarled as he saw Roy had stopped attacking, and was staring at him in wide-eyed shock and panic, and maybe a hint of comprehension. “Don’t fucking stop, Roy! You can’t hurt me!”

“We’re having a long talk about what staying on the freaking sidewalk means!” Roy shot back at him, perhaps just a bit hysterically.

“Oh do shut up!” Edward snapped back at him, giving another hard yank to keep Kimblee stumbling backwards as he silently pleaded for the chain to give way, to become as incorporeal as himself. “This will hardly take long, and – Roy!”

Roy saw it before Edward screamed the warning, saw Kimblee give up trying to claw the chain away and bring his hands together. Clearly banking on Roy not attacking when there was apparently a comrade just behind him... but Edward was right. And as much as he hated to accept it, he couldn’t hurt Edward.

His flames would never touch the ghost.

He snapped.

Edward fell back through the air long before the echo of the snap faded to his waiting ears, the chain and its stone fading through Kimblee’s body and into his whole possession. He hit the ground just as the two attacks met with a resounding crash and an outward blast.

He watched with wide eyes as the outward thrusting force of the shockwaves moved as a visible flickering wave of fire to slice trees in half, and slam light posts to the earth. He felt it move through him, yet not in any physical sense, it was something eerie, unsettling, and he shuddered at the sensation. Until this battle, he’d never felt the air such as he had... and that was an unsettling thought in itself.

Yet he pushed himself up from the ground as it slowly began to sink in.

*This* was what Roy was capable of. This level of utter destructive annihilation. Without Kimblee’s attacks able to be bolstered, Roy had not only managed to hold off the attack Kimblee had clapped to life, he’d sent it crashing back on itself and its owner like a tidal wave.

Edward shivered reflexively, and slowly he stepped the few paces that had remained separating he and Kimblee, to look down to where the man lay sprawled on the grass with his limbs contorted around and underneath him. To where the still-glowing burns all but covered his naked body as smoke curled from the wounds.
“I knew he couldn’t be so strong.” Roy spoke as he approached with a clear staggering limp, his breathing unsteady, heavy and suffusing his voice. “Those scars he carved into himself were hardly perfect, low power generation comparatively to his old skills. Never been more grateful for tattoo removal, he was a terror with perfect arrays.”

Edward looked up at him shakily, “and what now? He’s not dead.”

“No.” Roy agreed simply, hunching unconsciously in on himself as he peered down at the nude, burn-riddled form of an unconscious Kimblee. “Not yet.”

“Why not yet?” Edward echoed disbelievingly.

Roy shot Edward a pacifying look, before glancing down to the chain that still dangled from the ghost’s fingers and with a pained grimace, reached into his torn uniform to pull free the box that still rested inside it. “Because, if he came from where I think he must have, he’s going to sing like a bird once I’m through with him.”

Edward wasted no time in throwing the impure philosopher’s stone into the box with the other one, watching with an ill look as Roy closed the box and tucked it back away. “That alchemy… it’s all wrong.”

“I know.” Roy’s tone was heavy with remorseful nostalgia, and raised his gaze back to Edward, “I want you to look away, Edward.”

Edward glared at him heatedly. “Do you seriously believe that you could do anything to him right now that would make me feel even the slightest sympathy? He wanted to kill you! Was trying to kill you! And without my help, I’m sorry, but you’d still be fighting! I think I’ve earned the right to be your equal in this, Roy!”

Roy opened his mouth a few times, searching for the right words, before he finally gave in under the unmoving weight of Edward’s stare. Closing his mouth one final time, he gave a slight nod and raised his hand once more.

Though Kimblee remained unconscious, an eerie scream escaped his lips as he thrashed violently on the charred earth as his hands exploded into nothingness, the amputations sealed shut near instantaneously by the heat of the flames Roy bore into being.

“There,” Roy breathed a rattling sigh of relief, his posture slumping in on itself as the extent of his own injuries and the blood loss that stemmed from them began to make themselves known as the adrenaline began to subside without the immediate threat of danger.

“You took away his ability for alchemy.” Edward whispered in a voice laced with understanding, and regret – but not for Kimblee, for himself, and the feelings it stirred within him about his own absent skills. The very thing that had saved him from drowning in depression when his father had left, that had kept his mother happy… that had taken his life, in the end. And he wondered, had he managed to live, but live without ever possessing the ability to perform alchemy again, how would he feel?

“He’s harmless, now.” Roy finished, his eyes searching Edward’s expression carefully as the ghost still remained staring down at the man lying there defeated and nearly-dead in the dirt. There was something odd in Edward’s voice, in the way he looked down at Kimblee, and he had just opened his mouth to ask after it when a sudden wave of dizziness spiked through him.

“Roy!” Edward was by the man’s side before he’d even truly registered moving, kneeling next to
him as Roy hunched doubled-over on his knees, his hand pressing to the deep gash in his left arm that now spilled blood in a steady, thin stream down the whole of his hand. Frantically, Edward poured through everything his mother had ever told him or done when he’d gotten injured, before he quickly snapped his fingers in Roy’s face to demand focus. “Jacket off, now!”

Roy groaned out a miserable chuckle, giving a shake to his bleary head as he removed his hand in order to begin peeling off his uniform jacket in answer to the ghost’s orders. “Never pictured this as the moment you’d be telling me to take my clothes off.”

Edward scowled at him, as Roy gave a few chuckling huffs of laughter that sounded ragged and weary. “Do as I say, or you may never have the scenario you were hoping for.”

That seemed to have given adequate incentive, and Roy managed to peel the blood-soaked jacket off to reveal his likewise stained once-white shirt underneath.

“Give.” Edward snatched the jacket from Roy’s hands and quickly, deftly, ripped one of the sleeves off as Roy made a subtle noise of indignant protest. He ignored the man, binding the sleeve around the deep gash with a swift efficiency that left him surprised at himself and his lack of panic.

Piece by piece, strip by strip, Edward tore and shredded the uniform jacket to bind the cuts on Roy’s body as he absently heard the wail of sirens begin to sound over the silence that had stretched just after the battle’s finale. The ones that still had pieces of metal inside, he left for the moment – the metal was doing an adequate job of staunching the blood flow, and given the woozy way that Roy had begun circling about as he knelt sitting back on his heels, the man needed all the help he could get.

Roy blinked down hazily at Edward’s handiwork, giving only another passing mournful thought for his ruined uniform, before focusing in on the ghost’s worried face with a squint. “Sexiest nurse I’ve ever had.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Edward found himself darting his gaze about in a flustered attempt to not have to look at the loving way Roy was gazing at him with. “Shut up, Mustang.”

“Yes, dear.” Roy answered amiably.

Anything Edward might have said in return quickly fled his mind as the abrupt squealing of tires, followed by a rather impressive crunch of metal against sidewalk jerked his attention away.

A black military-issue sedan bore down upon them so swiftly neither had time to react, before it swung wide of them to squeal to an earth-showering stop just behind where Roy knelt. The door was thrown open, and Edward felt the sudden fear and need to defend Roy that had shot to brilliant life within him slip away into relieved gratitude as Maes practically tumbled out of the car and straight into a run to Roy’s side.

“We’ve gotta move.” Maes insisted hurriedly, taking quick enough inventory to see that Roy, while in danger, it wasn’t immediate. Then he was reaching to take Roy under both arms to haul him back to his feet where he wrapped a firm arm about his best friend’s waist.

“Don’t forget my wife.” Roy implored through the head-rush of such a quick ascent back to his feet, before blinking with eyelids that felt far too heavy for his face. “Life?” No, not the right word either.

Edward was equal parts torn between indignation and embarrassment, and perhaps a slight flicker of humor as well. “I’m not leaving you, Roy.” He promised instead, slipping into the passenger seat of the car as Maes dumped Roy as carefully as possible across the backseat. “Just please, keep your
eyes open. I’ll stay with you the whole way if you do. Can you promise me that?”

Roy met Edward’s silvery gaze through a haze of want to slip into unconsciousness, and the worry there settled deep into his heart as he attempted to nod.

“Your wife, huh?” Maes rolled his eyes and opened the boot of the car before running to grab Kimblee’s naked and mangled form and toss him unceremoniously into the space before slamming the lid shut. “You’re worse off than I thought.” He muttered in concern to himself before hurrying back to the driver’s side door and getting in, slamming the door shut even as he pressed the accelerator firmly to the floorboard.

The car pealed out of the park, and down off the sidewalk with several crashing thumps that Maes was sure would void any warranty on the shocks – luckily the garage had no idea who’d swiped it amidst the chaos that had befallen Central Headquarters when all the tech went down and the city came to a screeching, grid-locked halt.

By the time the emergency aid vehicles arrived, the military sedan had careened around a far corner.
Chapter Fifty

Roy was fairly certain that had he any energy at all to speak of, he’d have vomited long before now in response to Maes’s driving. As things stood, he was putting everything he had into keeping his eyes open, and his hand resting through the one that Edward had reached back for him in a comfort.

At the helm, Maes sounded the horn again, squealing tires and flagrantly committing at least five traffic violations so he might steer the car up over another sidewalk to avoid the bumper-to-bumper traffic that Roy had ordered created. Good for stopping enemies from getting to Roy if he was injured, bad for reconnaissance.

Honestly, it was a miracle he hadn’t hit anything or anyone yet.

It was several more minutes of reckless driving and near-misses before Maes was finally free of the traffic jam as horns from the vehicles he’d skidded around sounded in annoyance behind them. Then he was pressing the accelerator firmly down once more as the car hurtled further into the residential districts.

Once there, it took only minutes before the car was skidding in a burning rubber cloud of smoke around the street Roy lived on and roaring up the pavement before coming to a halt that fish-tailed the vehicle halfway onto the sidewalk.

Maes didn’t bother correcting it, instead throwing his door open and dashing for Roy’s.

Edward had the foresight to reach over and cut the engine, snagging the keys out and as he too exited the car quickly, then tossed the keys up onto the porch where they landed with a clatter. Then he was darting for the gate to the front yard, opening it before Maes had ducked back out of the car with Roy half-draped on top of him.

Maes shut the car door with his hip before bodily hauling his best friend around the car and up the sidewalk heading for the front door. The brief flicker of confusion that he’d thought the gate had been closed when they pulled up faded quickly into not caring, and he hurried them through as Roy stumbled and otherwise failed to be of much assistance.

Edward waited long enough to see that Maes was clearly digging for a key, apparently having a spare, before ducking through the door and going for the light switch. He had the hallway and kitchen illuminated just as the lock turned in the door and it was opened with a rather enthusiastic crash against the wall.

He darted back to the hallway, reaching it the same moment Hazel did.

“Ah, a blood donor.” Maes announced with a grunt as the squirrel scampered over to them eagerly.

Roy felt an absurdly powerful wave of affection grip him as Hazel suddenly scurried up his body and onto his head, chittering at him in worried tones as paws began to groom his hair. “Haz – ” he broke off with a groan as Maes was suddenly dragging him to the stairs.

Edward, sensing Maes’s plan, bypassed the stairs and was in Roy’s bedroom well before the man. Soon enough to sneak the door open and turn on the lights including the one in the bathroom before Maes had reached the top of the stairs.
Maes was panting by the time he finally hauled Roy into the man’s bathroom, and was more than grateful when, after depositing him carefully down into the shower, he knew he was momentarily done with the heavy lifting. “All right,” he began as he stooped down onto one knee, reaching out for the many bindings that he knew to be putting pressure on the man’s many wounds. “You did a good job at this.” He remarked as he began untying the binds of the ruined military jacket.

“Thanks.” Edward breathed in worry as he settled onto the toilet seat to watch anxiously, but when Roy began to struggle a bit when Maes flicked open a switchblade in order to begin slicing the rest of the clothing off, he was suddenly at the man’s side with a stern expression as he reached out a hand to direct Roy’s gaze to him. “Stop struggling, they’re just clothes. I want you – I need you better. I don’t give two shits about your uniform.”

“You’ll see me,” Roy managed to grunt out, blinking slowly at Edward against the fog suffusing his brain. “Naked.”

“Nothing I’ve not seen before. Buy me a beer after all this and I promise I won’t make too many comments about your bits.” Maes remarked with a roll of his eyes as he continued slicing.

Edward smiled with fondness, holding back a chuckle at the idiocy of this man. “Oh dear, my sweet virgin eyes.” He teased gently, before his voice turned a path for the more stern. “Stop fighting what needs to happen for you to stay alive. You promised me, remember?”

Roy let out a mournful noise, but didn’t struggle any more as his clothing was deftly sliced away, the box that had remained tucked inside clattering to the shower floor, his boots being tossed over Maes’s shoulder. He did renew his struggles when Maes began pulling free the metal shards still wedged in his skin, before the pain faded into a hazy blur once more.

Maes reached up to pluck Hazel off his owner before grabbing the removable shower head down and turning the cold water on. He snorted as Roy hissed at the freezing temperature and attempted to move, but managed to do little more than look ridiculous.

Edward watched as Roy’s eyes slipped closed as the water began to stream down over him, washing the sweat and blood from his body in ever-lightening streams. He stayed there somewhat under the spray with the man, watching as little tremors of shivers began to appear from the cold water and just beginning to wonder how long Maes was going to continue when the shower was suddenly turned off.

After an effort with which Roy did try and assist, Maes had hauled the man up out of the shower and grabbed a towel to quickly pat him dry as Roy hissed at the contact with his wounds. Then Maes was practically carrying Roy into the bedroom where he dumped the man onto his bed and pulled his legs up and over to lay him flat.

“Stay.” He informed his best friend needlessly, he doubted Roy was going anywhere, but he felt it merited saying anyway. “I’m grabbing your med kit and we’re going to patch you up.”

Maes didn’t wait for a response, already hurrying back into the bathroom. He was back within seconds, with several more dry towels which he left on the bedside table before turning to fairly run downstairs to fetch the whiskey.

Edward listened to Maes go as he settled onto the bed next to Roy, casting a troubled look down the gashes along the man’s body. Not all of them were deep enough to be concerning, most had already clotted. But there were three that even now, were seeping blood steadily. Looking back up he realized with a jolt of overwhelming delight that Roy’s eyes were open again, and watching him through a haze of pain. “Hey, you.” He whispered in a voice heavy with fondness and relief.
“– ey.” Roy croaked out, his left hand twitching at his side.

Edward immediately put his hand through it, and immediately Roy fell quiet again with just the mere trust that he was there. “You’ve lost a lot of blood. So stay still for me, yeah?”

“‘m still naked.”

Roy sounded almost humorously put out by that fact, and Edward couldn’t help but smile as a faint laugh escaped his lips. “Are you cold? Or are you just still stupidly annoyed that I’m getting to see everything you have on offer?”

There was a correlation between being cold, and being naked for the first time in front of Ed, that Roy knew was supposed to annoy him, but struggle as he might the thought kept flitting away each time he made to grasp it.

Edward took one look at Roy’s contorted face and laughed again, reaching up to brush his fingers slightly through the man’s forehead as he leaned over him. “Stop worrying. I’ve got you, and I’m not letting you go.”

Maes returned at that moment, approaching the bed as he took a swig of the whiskey himself before reaching down to raise Roy’s head in one hand. “Okay, drink. You don’t exactly have epidurals, and I need you to stay still.” He needn’t have worried that Roy wouldn’t toss down a swig when he put the bottle to the man’s lips.

The bottle was set aside and Roy’s head laid back down before Maes opened up the med kit and began gathering the supplies he needed. Threading the suture needle he set it aside momentarily to swab the areas he was about to sew back together before picking up the needle once more and giving no warning, began on the worst gash first.

Edward wasn’t entirely sure what he was saying as Roy’s body clenched to stay still against this new pain. He honestly doubted that half the time they were identifiable words at all as he tried to soothe the man. All he knew was that as long as he was speaking, Roy lay quietest, but if he fell silent to watch Maes work, Roy only tensed more. So he kept talking, and stitch by stitch, Maes drew ever nearer to the end as Roy listened to his voice.

When the stitching was over and the areas bandaged and wrapped against infection, Roy practically snarled for more whiskey, and instead was given several painkillers by Maes and told to swallow – which he did, but only after glaring in a cheated manner at his best friend.

Edward didn’t move from Roy’s side as Maes began to turn down the comforter from the bed, damp as it was by trickles of blood and sweat. It was removed entirely and Maes left with it and the whiskey bottle under his arm with promises to come back with water and a blanket. And now that they’d been left alone again, save for Hazel perched there on top of the windowsill watching over them, Edward settled down next to the man to lie down nearly against his side. “Can I do anything?” He asked into the quiet surrounding them, broken only by glaring in a cheated manner at his best friend.

“Just need sleep,” the words were slow, careful in the clear exhaustion in Roy’s voice.

A sad tug crept to Edward’s lips as he nodded unseen into the sheets. “You’ll live, right? You won’t leave me?”

It didn’t hurt nearly as much as it should, but then, Roy’s head wasn’t too clear right now, and managing to tip his head enough to bring the ghost into view, he drug his arm out along the bed to pass it through Edward and then rested it around him. “Sleep.” He repeated simply, as reassuringly
as he could in a voice drained of energy. “Few days off work,” and he lost the fight against a jaw-cracking yawn, “to replenish blood. I’ll be fine. Sexier nurse I’ve never seen.”

Edward spluttered in flustered indignation before whipping up onto one elbow to gape down at the man in uncertain amusement. “Thought I was your wife?”

“If you insist, love.” Roy agreed amiably, the painkillers already addling his thoughts so that the question of why Edward thought that slipped from his grasp.

Edward tried to say actual words, he was sure of it, but all that made it out of him was some sort of deranged sounding squawk. Which caused Roy to only beam at him brilliantly, the bastard. And when Maes re-entered the room with the aforementioned items, he was saved from having to focus too much on what that smile did to him.

“All right,” Maes announced as he entered the bedroom, setting the glass of water on the bedside table next to the med kit. “You are to sleep. Doctor Hughes’s orders.” He declared as he unfolded the blanket and tossed it over Roy’s naked, bandaged form. Reaching back into the med kit he dug out several more pills, antibiotics developed during the last war to prevent sickness setting in, and passed them into Roy’s mouth before tipping the glass of water to the man’s lips. “Few days and you’ll be fine if you just sleep as much as possible. I’ve called ahead to your office, sent Havoc to borrow some blood packets from med bay. We’ll get you transfused as soon as he does the handoff to Riza.”

Roy grunted in approval, but found himself fighting to even try and keep his eyes open as the painkillers continued to work as quickly as he remembered. Though at this point, it was honestly a hazy memory.

“Sleep.” Edward told Roy gently, reaching out to stroke his fingers along the man’s brow, their tips just slightly passing through his head. “You’ll be just fine, and I can’t wait to scold you for putting me through this. I’m going to yell at you, Roy Mustang… so put it off as long as you can and sleep.”

Maes had settled onto the edge of the bed, and watched as an overwhelming expression of peace washed over Roy’s face, smoothing the lines of hurt that had lingered. Granted, there had been a pure amusement reflected in that peace… but within seconds Roy had succumbed to the pull of sleep, and he watched the man’s breathing even out for several moments before pursing his lips and directing a cautious gaze across the bed.

“Guess Roy really had you worried.” Maes began in a conversational lightness, “not that I didn’t appreciate the help, but it’s fairly obvious to someone as detail-fixated as I am when light from an opening bedroom door spills into the hallway above.”

Edward froze as he was, still looking down at Roy’s face, though his expression began to slowly become panicked.

“But what I don’t get is why you’re hiding. Or why he’s hiding you. Or for that matter,” Maes began to look around in puzzled confusion, “where the fuck you are hiding. Are you in the closet?”

Edward slowly began to raise his head, his eyes darting to see Maes still searching him out. But fuck… he hadn’t even – but Roy had needed help, and Maes had needed help to achieve that swiftly!

“Look,” Maes continued with a slight frown, “he might not be in danger of losing his life, and yeah, he might be fine in a few days, but seriously, don’t let my being here stop you from staying with him. If you’re who I think you are, he’ll heal faster with you beside him.”
It took Edward only another moment of flurried thoughts to decide, and suddenly, he whirled from the bed to scramble over to his own bedside table, whipping it open and finding himself only slightly regretful he wasn’t seeing the look on Maes’s face. Grabbing the notepad and pen he’d stashed there for when he was reading texts at night, he spun around with it in hand to walk on his knees back across the bed even as he quickly flipped to a blank page.

Maes was fairly sure his heart had stopped. Or he was dying, probably both together. And fuck if he wasn’t going to blame the whole thing on Roy, because there was no way he was seeing what he was seeing. No fucking way. And while part of his base instinct told him to piss himself and run, a morbid, fearful human curiosity kept him frozen where he was.

Edward shot one quick look up to see that Maes’s jaw was hanging and a look of near terror was on his face, before giving a quiet chuckle and finishing what he was penning before turning the notebook so Maes could read.

Maes was fairly sure his heart was about to flee his chest to save itself as the pen stopped and the notebook shifted, but the same morbid curiosity that kept him where he was also directed him to read the carefully written words.

Edward gave another soft laugh as Maes’s eyes became nearly as big as his gaping mouth. “Roy is going to kill me.” He breathed in hindsight knowledge, before his mouth quirked grimly. “Again.”

“A ghost?” Maes breathed out weakly, “are you – are you fucking with me now?”

Edward quickly penned a negative response to the question and rotated the notepad once more.

Maes’s response was a high-pitched, strained noise that was intended as “shit,” but honestly he wasn’t too sure if coherency was something he was achieving right at the moment.

Edward watched with some amusement as Maes performed some deep breathing that seemed just shy of needing a paper bag assist. But if this would give Maes time to try and wrap his head around it, and keep him from fleeing in terror, he’d give the man as long as needed.

Finally, after several long minutes that managed to ground Maes enough, he spoke again in a tone hinging on astonished. “How the blazes did you end up haunting Roy? Can he even see you?”

Edward turned the notebook back around, writing down his replies as succinctly as possible before turning it once more to Maes’s perusal.

Maes stared in shock a moment more, then as something occurred to him, he suddenly began to laugh – albeit a bit hysterically, but really, only a ghost was able to judge him for it. “You’re the one who’s been pranking the Brigadier General! Right?”

Edward rolled his eyes, “not nearly as much as he deserves.” And he wrote similarly, to have the confirmation met with more laughter. Approving laughter.

Maes stared with stunned amazement into the general space the ghost seemed to be in, Edward, as the first message had stated. “So you’re his other informant I’m guessing… the one he loves.” And he let out a soft huff of even more amazed laughter before glancing down to his unconscious best friend. “Fell in love with a ghost, you never do things in halves, do you.”

Edward didn’t confirm it, it didn’t seem like Maes needed the confirmation.

“Are you two actually married? Or is he just really delusional from the pain?” Maes suddenly asked, turning back to look towards the center of the bed where the notebook and pen still hovered.
Edward was seriously going to murder Roy when he woke up, it couldn’t be good for his state of mind to be this flustered this many times after the afternoon he’d just experienced. But eager to absolve Maes of any false impressions, quickly penned his denial… and after a moment of indecision, added in his hesitation about his own feelings. Just to keep everything absolutely clear.

Maes’s mouth quirked into a wry, but fond smile as he nodded upon reading the words turned to him. “I’ll only say that this idiot has been my friend for far longer than I care to recall, and not once has he even thought he might be in love with someone besides himself. And given what little I heard from him this afternoon, he genuinely cares for you.”

Edward found himself looking back down to Roy, a heavy, worried weight in his chest. He knew Roy cared for him, had no doubts that Roy had meant it when he’d told him he loved him. That was no longer a question in his mind.

“I’ll interrogate him about why he’s been hiding you when he wakes up.” Maes decided to himself, frowning at Roy. This was so much more than he’d been led to previously believe. “But until then,” he raised his suddenly eager gaze to above where the notebook and pen yet hovered, figuring Edward was somewhere there, “do you mind if I ask you a bunch of questions? I’ve never met a ghost before.”

Edward chuckled faintly and scribbled down a reply before letting Maes read.

Maes smiled as he read the conditions, and nodded as his gaze raised once more. “I’ll tell you all the best stories, promise. By the time Roy wakes back up, you’ll know stories he dared not even tell his mother.” Which made him snap his fingers in sudden epiphany. “I need to call her, let her know he’s okay. He’d want her to know.” Before a frown began to line his brow, “and now I understand all the things she said to me, about why I’d understand all this secrecy once I met you.”

“To be fair, it was all him. I didn’t care if you all knew or not.” And after a quick moment of debate, wrote exactly that for Maes to read.

“And I’ll kick his ass for it later.” Maes promised to the air, before getting to his feet. “I should call her. Once Riza gets here we have to set up the blood transfusion, and then I’ve got to get my wife and child sent off her way. I’d rather them not get there with news of this before I am able to tell her myself. Postpone the Q and A until a better time?”

Edward wrote down his agreement, a jolt of eagerness inside him at the realization that if Maes could be persuaded, he could communicate to Daphne too. Yet just as he was about to show the waiting man his notebook, he quickly wrote another line.

Maes leaned over to read the words, before his face fell into a saddened look of understanding and he shook his head. “Don’t be silly, you’ve nothing to apologize for. I knew the risks when I decided to follow Roy through hell and back. I’ll miss the girls, yeah… but right now Daphne can keep them safer than I can.”

Edward hadn’t a flicker of doubt that the woman could, he’d seen the results of her marksmanship. He’d seen the intense focus in her eye and aim. But he also knew how it felt to have family gone from your life, and while this situation was hardly as permanent as his own, family was family, and you missed them when they were gone.

He watched as Maes turned to leave the room, and glancing down once more at Roy lying there asleep, he reached a hand out to brush at the man’s black hair. “I’ll be right back. Promise.” He whispered over him, and darted up from the bed to follow Maes just as the man turned back to try and spot him.
Maes gave a somewhat overcome laugh as a notebook and pen began to float through the air next to him, before floating over the stairwell and into open air. “This will take getting used to.”

Edward found himself smiling at the thought of how Maes would react if he told the man how Roy had first reacted upon seeing him. Then decided he would, he’d make certain of it. He genuinely liked the man, and Maes deserved as Roy’s best friend to know a few more innocent blackmail stories.

Together the journeyed into the sitting room where Maes promptly picked up the receiver and began to dial. Holding it to his ear he waited for it to pick up as he watched the notepad and pen circle around to perch on the arm of the couch nearest him.

“Hello?”

Maes breathed out a silent sigh of relief that she’d not been outside or anything. Though he’d been counting on the idea that she’d still be prepping for the arrival of his wife and daughter. “Hey, me again.”

“They’ll be fine, Maes. I promise.”

Smiling at the dry tone in her voice, Maes felt an upsurge of warm affection for the woman. “It’s not that. Roy got into a fairly dangerous alchemy fight, it looks like. I’ve patched him up and he’s stable and sleeping now. I just knew you’d want to know.”

There was some muted swearing that wasn’t entirely audible, but what Maes could piece together made his eyes widen in equal parts shock and impressed approval.

“As soon as he’s able tell him to call me so I can scold him properly.”

“Of course.” Maes agreed amiably, before darting a smirking look in the direction Edward appeared to still be in. “You sure you don’t want me to give Edward the phone so you can scold him too?”

“He’s okay?”

The hitch of desperation in her tone threw Maes off, startling him silent.

“Maes!”

“Yeah, mom,” Maes answered with a quiet gentleness, his heart warming as he understood that Roy, for all his love for Edward, wasn’t the only Mustang who loved the ghost. “He’s been writing to me. I thought you’d want to know they both were safe… glad I was right.”

“Give him the phone!”

Maes knew better than to question or refuse her, especially knowing how fiercely she protected her family, and he wasn’t sure he’d ever be convinced that she didn’t view Edward as a son by extension. Not after hearing that tone in her voice, the urgency she expelled. Taking the phone from his ear he held it out in the general direction Edward seemed to be, “she wants to talk to you.”

Edward blinked owlishly at the words, reaching out for the phone with some hesitation. He wasn’t exactly sure what Daphne had in mind, but he knew from a previous attempt to call home back in the first week after he’d died, that he couldn’t be heard over the phone. Yet he took it in hand regardless, too uncertain to even really appreciate the jump that Maes didn’t quite succeed in stifling. Holding the phone up to his ear he waited with a frown.
“I’m guessing you have the phone by now.” Daphne’s voice came over the line after several more seconds. “Here’s the beauty about phones, if you push one of the buttons during the call it’s going to make noise that I can hear on my end. One push for yes, two for no. Give it a try?”

Edward’s face lit up in a brilliant smile, an overwhelming joy bubbling up within him as he quickly leaned over and pushed such a button once. She was trying to find a way to talk to him! And he hadn’t known until just this very moment, how much it would mean to him that she would try. Even towns away, she would try.

“Yes, Edward! That was perfect!” Daphne’s voice was full of praise, and a relieved happiness.

Edward’s joy only spiked higher at this success.

“Are you injured at all?”

Edward quickly pushed a button twice, and moved the base of the phone from where it had previously rested and onto his lap to cradle it closer.

“Thank goodness for that.” What sounded like a sigh heavy in relief left her, before she spoke again.

“While I doubt anything could make you leave, will you promise me that you’ll stay there with Roy? Promise me you won’t do anything rash?”

Edward didn’t move to push any of the buttons at first, finding himself puzzling over her words. Why would he leave Roy? What rash actions did she think he’d be doing when the man his world centered around was lying upstairs, hurt? And then he knew.

If there was one person left who had done this to Roy, it was the Fuhrer.

The hand holding the receiver clenched in tight, quiet anger. “I will kill him.” Edward whispered in a voice tight with his anger, his gaze turning towards the ceiling at the angle where he knew the bedroom lay. But not yet. Despite the hatred beginning to burn inside him for what the Fuhrer had done to try and kill Roy, he couldn’t go after the source.

He couldn’t leave Roy. If something happened to Roy, he’d never forgive himself for not having been there to try and stop it. And besides, if his father was to be believed, killing the Fuhrer wouldn’t be so easy. As loathe as he was to admit it, he would need Roy’s help.

He pushed the button once.

“Good.” It was more an exhale than words. “And I doubt I’d be wrong in saying this, so thank you, for whatever you did for Roy today. And I know, how he feels about you.”

Edward didn’t wonder as to why the words didn’t surprise him, merely gave a shaky smile.

“I just want you to know that I’m so very grateful to you. Despite what happens, or how you feel for him. Thank you. He’s a better man because of you.”

Edward’s shaky smile didn’t vanish as he looked down at his knees. Roy was a great man, the best he’d ever known, though he doubted he had anything to do with it. Yet it was incredibly nice to hear.

Looking back up to the ceiling once more, he made his decision, and setting the two halves of the phone back onto the table he grabbed his notepad and pen and darted back upwards and into the bedroom. In an instant he was back on the bed, curled up against Roy to listen with eyes closed to the man’s drugged breathing.
"He’s gone.” Maes said into the phone after retrieving the receiver and taking a seat on the couch. “Else, it sure looks like he left.”

"He’ll have gone back to Roy, then. It doesn’t surprise me, really. Between what I learned from Edward when they both visited me, and what Roy’s told me over the phone, it doesn’t surprise me that he can’t stay away from Roy for long right now.”

“You think Edward loves him?” Maes guessed, and honestly it seemed to fit.

“I think Edward was in love with Roy well before my son was in love with him.”

“I’ve missed a lot, haven’t I?” Maes sighed, rubbing at his forehead with one hand.

He remained talking with Daphne for several more minutes, until he heard the squeal of tires out front and saw a flash of familiar blonde hair after the telltale slam of a car door shutting. Promising to have Roy contact her as soon as he was able, he hurried to get the front door open for the Lieutenant just as she reached the front stoop.

“T ook the scenic route, did you?” Maes bantered with an easy grin as he held open the door.

“Havoc had to take the scenic route to avoid suspicion, I took all the alleyways.” Riza corrected with a roll of her eyes as she jerked her head towards the stairs. “He up there?”

Maes gave an exhausted half-laugh and nodded, shutting and locking the door firmly behind them and offering out a hand for the long black case she had slung over one shoulder. “Need me to set that up for you?”

Riza shook her head, but rolled her shoulder forward to deposit the strap of her sniper rifle case into the man’s waiting hand. “Just didn’t want to leave it in the car.”

Maes nodded and rested it down against the wall of the entryway. “You couldn’t have taken a shot or something? He’s in pretty interesting shape.” He informed her, testing the waters as they mounted the stairs together, an insulated medical case swinging from her grip between them.

He well knew that if Riza had been sent to cover him with her sniper rifle, there was little chance that she hadn’t noticed something odd. The scope she had was top of the line, and he was fairly certain she could pick off ants with it.

“You know how smoky he can make things.” Riza growled in minor frustration, before casting a narrow-eyed look Maes’s direction. “Besides, something odd was going on down there. I spotted until you showed up, and had I not seen it all myself, I’d think I was crazy. You wouldn’t happen to know anything, would you, best friend?”

Maes had a feeling… and he gave her a smile that honestly came out feeling more like a grimace. “Know? Yes. But let’s get our boss on the path to recovery, then we can talk about whatever it is you saw.” And as they finally reached the bedroom he waved her in ahead of himself politely.

Edward’s head lifted at their entrance, and he curled himself upwards into a seated position though he did take to hovering just above the bed. He had a feeling he’d be spending quite a bit of time at Roy’s side. He didn’t need to be staying on it to the point where they’d finally discover how long it would take him to assimilate the bed to his own incorporeal state. Not when Roy really wasn’t in any condition to go freefalling onto the floor. This was as good a moment as any to release his influence.

He watched as the two quickly, quietly got to work setting up for the blood transfusion. There was
an efficiency to it that made him relieved that they clearly knew what they were doing, though he was left with the concerning hope that they didn’t know all this because of Roy. They only spoke to direct each other, and soon the makeshift IV was set up and the first of two blood packets was attached.

Edward felt some of the worry weighting him down fall free as he watched that first stream of blood run down the tube and into the needle taped into Roy’s arm. “You’re taking me back to the library and I’m borrowing medical texts.” He determined as he watched each precious drop of blood go into Roy’s body. He was beginning to realize quite suddenly that protecting Roy meant this too, and he needed to know how.

“Four hours and then we’ll hook up the next.” Maes said aloud, more for Edward’s benefit and information than their own, and he stood up straight once more to stretch with a groan.

Riza eyed the setup closely once more before turning her attention onto the pale face of her friend and commanding officer. “Do you ever stop to consider sometimes how damn lucky he is that we love him? Despite all he puts us through?”

Maes burst into tired laughter and nodded, glancing towards the other side of the bed where a familiar notepad and pen lay, and where he guessed a certain ghost lingered. “Speak for yourself, he has blackmail on me.”

Riza couldn’t help the snort of laughter that escaped her. “Right,” her tone utterly disbelieving, and taking Maes by the crook of the arm she gave a light tug. “Come on, he’s as stable as he can be, and as much as I’d love to hover bedside to tear him a new one when he wakes up, we’re not done with clean up just yet.”

Maes groaned as he remembered. Kimblee. She was right, they weren’t done. They still had to get the former State Alchemist to one of Roy’s safe houses and stabilize him. Because if Roy had wanted him dead already, Kimblee would be dead. Which meant he’d been left alive but maimed useless for a reason.

“You thinking the abandoned dog kennels or the condemned nunnery?” Riza queried, ignoring Maes’s initial groaning. She had a feeling he hadn’t yet realized it meant they’d have to go back out into the heinous traffic, she’d enjoy those groans a bit more.

After all, traffic police could only do so much, and that meant the traffic wouldn’t get much better until Roy either ordered Fuery to fix whatever he’d done, or someone managed to get lucky and somehow reverse the man’s work.

“Nunnery.” Maes decided after a quick moment of consideration. “It’s got higher and sturdier fences than that electrical stuff around the kennels.”

Riza nodded and bent to shut the lid on the remaining blood packet to keep it properly chilled. “Then while we’re stabilizing Kimblee you are going to tell me everything you can about what just happened today.”

Maes gave her a cautious look, glancing towards the bed on pretense of looking at Roy, but he could see no movement that would signal to him what Edward might be thinking. No raise of the pen. No flutter of the notebook paper. “At least everything that I can.” And he looked back to her with a quiet seriousness in his gaze. “But not everything is mine to tell. You’ll have to speak to Roy about some of it.”

If Edward wasn’t taking the initiative to reveal his presence, he wasn’t about to risk saying anything.
Riza felt it only reasonable, and nodded in ascent before giving one last reluctant look to the figure on the bed and walking forward, leaned down to squeeze Roy’s hand in hers gently. “Have you called his mother yet?”

Maes nodded as she straightened away, and together they began to move from the room. “Called her just before you arrived.”

Edward watched as Riza was the first to exit the room, already heading down the hallway, but Maes had paused in the doorway and turned back.

“I’ll stop by again as soon as I can. But just in case, change out that blood packet when it empties.” Maes whispered into the bedroom, and then quickly turned to hurry down the hallway after Riza.

Edward heard the downstairs door open and then close. Heard the start of the car engines on the street, and then the squealing sound of tires as they made a hasty exit up the road. Then he was floating up off the bed to circle around the IV, inspecting it closely. He’d watched how they’d set it up, but just in case, he wanted to get a closer look.

Once he was satisfied he floated back down, absently missing the company that Maes had provided, but at the same time glad to be left alone with Roy.

Hazel chose that moment to leap onto the bed and scamper up to sit at Roy’s head. Well, Roy and Hazel.

Edward smiled faintly as he hovered near Roy’s knees to keep a careful watch on his face as Hazel began carding his paws through his owner’s hair. “My mother used to do that,” he said quietly to the squirrel, “when I was sick. Was some of the best medicine. Did it for her… before – ”

He cut himself off before his voice could break, before he could get lost in the painful memory he tried not to think of.

And he did his best to ignore the pain in his chest that came from knowing he could never give Roy that same comfort. That he was relegated to this bare existence that left him unable to provide such simple comfort to the man who meant so much to him.

But there was one thing he could do that his mother had done for him, and floating over to his bedside table he retrieved the book he’d been reading. And upon reaching his previous position in the air, he flipped open to the page he’d been on and began to read.

He read without tire, not needing to actually breathe did miracles for his stamina in this. Yet after every page he’d flick his gaze up to Roy’s face to see it lined in restful peace, and to check to see the blood in the IV still moved into Roy’s arm, to watch as Hazel continued to move about Roy’s head to card his hair or just warm a side of the man’s face with his bushy tail. And reassured that for the moment, everything was all right, he returned to the book and to another page.

He began to hear the voices of children arriving off of what was likely a very late school bus, the chirping of car alarms being set as the neighbors arrived home from work.

He kept reading.

The hours continued to fade into one another, until when next Edward looked up, it was because he heard the front door opening once more. Instantly he was dumping the book onto the bed and letting himself fall down through the floor in order to check who was coming inside. Roy still had enemies out there, and he wasn’t willing to go on faith that the door had been accessed via key.
So when he saw Maes shutting the door behind him, he nodded in approval before making his way back upstairs.

Edward was waiting on top of the bed again when Maes reentered the bedroom, and he quickly wrote a greeting and a quick query in his notebook before turning it for Maes’s perusal.

Maes walked forward towards the notebook immediately, even as a smile broke his tired features. “Hey, Edward.” He greeted, before bending slightly to read the written words. “Kimblee is stable.” He assured, and turned toward the IV equipment.

The blood bag would soon require switching, and he gave it a light tap with one finger as he nodded in approval. He then sat carefully on the edge of the bed to take up Roy’s wrist and feel for the pulse.

Edward watched as the man counted, a good full minute elapsing before Maes took his hand away with a nod of satisfaction; about to start writing again when Maes turned his general direction.

“He’s responding well. You may even see him wake up before morning.” Maes informed the ghost he couldn’t see, but could guess was eagerly awaiting a status update. “I’ll switch the bags before I leave. But when this last one runs out you should probably remove the needle and patch him up.”

Edward had no problem doing any of that, but he quickly wrote another question down.

Maes looked the paper over and smiled. “Just make sure he drinks only water over the next two days. If he feels like eating give him something easy, not too much work. And he’s not allowed to leave the bed except to use the bathroom for at least twenty-four hours.”

Edward nodded, already taking mental inventory of their pantry and refrigerator.

“I’ll stop by again tomorrow morning to check on you both.” Maes continued, and then his mouth tightened into a thin line. “And let him know when he does wake, that whatever it is he kept Kimblee alive for, he doesn’t have much time to get it out of him. We may have stabilized him, but he’s not going to last out more than three or four days at best.”

Edward nodded to himself once again, and then watched as Maes stood to begin prepping to attach the next and last blood transfusion packet. And as the man did, he smiled at the reminder that came his way about a Q and A session, and thus Maes began to ask simple questions about his pranks on the Brigadier General, only to be required to answer in turn simple questions about Roy’s younger years.

And it wasn’t so much that he was searching for blackmail, as stories to give him some levity.

After almost another twenty minutes Maes stood to switch out the blood packets, and Edward watched closely. He knew he needed to know this for the future… though he hoped Roy would never need this again.

“Well, he’s been loaded up with everything he needs to recover.” Maes said as he turned from the IV back towards the bed, unaware that Edward had floated nearly next to him to watch his actions. “And don’t let him reopen his stitches.”

Edward nodded unseen, taking the words to heart. He suspected he could re-stitch the wounds, but he doubted Roy would enjoy it much. He wasn’t precisely practiced in the arts of needlework.

“Well, he’s been loaded up with everything he needs to recover.” Maes said as he turned from the IV back towards the bed, unaware that Edward had floated nearly next to him to watch his actions. “And don’t let him reopen his stitches.”

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“Now I get this feeling that you’ve been to my house already, when Roy came over from dinner that night.” Maes continued as he looked about to be sure he hadn’t missed anything. “If something happens tonight and you need me, you come and get me. I trust you’ll find a way to wake me up.”
Edward retrieved his notepad and pen, writing a quick agreement and letting Maes glance over it with approval.

“Now,” Maes sighed and squared his shoulders, “I’ve got to get home and get the girls. Traffic to the station will be a nightmare and I want them out of this city before someone else gets hurt.” And his expression fell somewhat at the realization that he was running out of time to be with his family, yet he shook it off. He didn’t need Elysia thinking anything was wrong when he got home to collect them. “Goodnight, Edward.”

“Goodnight.” Edward called after him softly as Maes turned to leave.

He listened to the retreating footsteps and the following closing of the door before glancing Roy’s way. The man’s color was already improving, despite him being paler than most to begin with, and Edward smiled at the thought that popped into his head – Roy no longer looked as white as a ghost.

“Just so long as you never turn silver.” Edward whispered, raising his own silvery hand to his face with a lopsided tug to his lips. “You’re not allowed that yet.”

Looking away from his hand he decided that Roy’s breathing still looked even and deep enough, his features relaxed enough, so Edward began to make his way downstairs himself. Now was as good a time as any to be sure that food would be ready when Roy awoke, should he want anything.

A quick glance reassured him that the front door was locked, and then he continued into the kitchen.

After a fashion he managed to get a simple soup cooking on the stove. He had always wanted soup as a child when he didn’t feel well, and while Roy wasn’t precisely sick, he hoped it would still make him feel better.

As it cooked he popped in and out of the bedroom to check on Roy, each time only finding him resting peacefully. The sky was darkening as the soup finished cooking and he turned the heat off on the soup, covering it to keep it warm and moving it to another burner. Then grabbing the pitcher of water he’d prepared – just in case, he hovered his way back upstairs.

He found Roy as he’d left him, and setting the pitcher down on Roy’s bedside table he landed onto the floor to walk over and pick his book back up. Launching himself back into the air he took to hovering just above his own pillow, next to Roy’s head where Hazel was curled around his head like a furry earmuff.

He began to read again, quietly. The longer he read, the more he seemed to fall into a peaceful trance. Something about trying to do what he could to soothe Roy calming him.

He only paused his reading when at nearly midnight, the blood packet was drained completely.

Carefully he removed the tape that secured the IV needle, then in as steady a movement as he could muster, drew the needle out. Blood tried to immediately well up, and Edward quickly grabbed for the bandages that Maes had left on the bedside table and covered the puncture to clot as quickly as he could so that the bandage would be able to touch Roy’s skin. It was worryingly thin, after all, and his incorporeal influence was oftentimes far too fast for delicate matters. That done, he packed the IV equipment back into the case it had come from, and slid it up against the wall to be out of the way.

Then he settled onto the bed itself, knowing that now at least, he could remain on the bed until morning without risk of sending Roy plummeting. One day they’d have to test the limits, but this was not that day.

So settling himself in next to Roy’s head once more he picked up from where he’d left off in his
reading, his right hand drifting down to stroke at Hazel’s fur, absently wondering if the squirrel
would be soft or not.

He read well into the next morning. Hazel had at some point run off downstairs, likely in pursuit of
eating something. Or destroying something. He really couldn’t be sure which, and considering he
had nearly reached the end of the book he’d likely find out soon when he had to go downstairs to
select another. But if it was the latter… he’d rather put that off as long as possible.

It couldn’t be put off forever though, and eventually he did reach the end of his book.

“Guess I get to go see what Hazel is getting up to.” Edward sighed, shutting the book into one hand
and tipping his head back with a groan. It was so much easier to just pass off the bad behavior results
to Roy.

He would deny to the very moment this world ceased to exist, that he jumped clear off the bed when
Roy’s hand moved towards him underneath the covers.

The book tumbled open onto the bed with a rustling of pages.

Edward whirled, book forgotten, a pathetic strangled sort of noise catching in his throat as he was
caught in a black-eyed gaze. Then before he could stop himself he had thrown himself back onto the
bed and buried himself in the man – literally clear through him.

A near-silent chuckle shook Roy’s chest, and he ignored the pain it caused, and the pain of
maneuvering his arms from underneath the blanket and wrapping them around himself – around
Edward. “I’ve got you.” He croaked in a voice raspy from dryness, but water was the last thing on
his mind right now.

Edward’s voice hitched with a broken sound before he tried again, bringing his head forward on the
pillow so that it was nearly against the side of Roy’s neck. “Shut up.”

Roy found himself smiling peacefully at the whispered words, “love you too.”

The words sent a jolt through him, steadying and grounding him in a way Edward had never before
experienced. Instilling in him some strange peace. After a moment of indecision Edward raised his
head and slowly propped himself up on his forearms to rest just inches above the man, letting himself
become lost in the way Roy was looking at him. “I wasn’t aware I’d given you an answer yet.” He
replied softly.

“When you’re finally able to say the words, then.” Roy replied as he raised a hand up to stroke at the
silvery hair that slipped down from around Edward’s shoulders.

Edward ducked his head with a warm chuckle, before his eyes looked back up to Roy’s with a
mischievous sparkle. “You seem to be pretty confident. I believe you even called me your wife when
you were delirious with blood loss.”

“And you let me live?” Roy grinned, his grin only widening when Edward grinned back at him.

“I thought twice about it.” Edward lied, leaning his head to the side towards Roy’s hand still trying to
fiddle with his hair.

“I’m glad.” Roy whispered as he tucked his hand in towards Edward’s face. “And I’m sorry I scared
you.”

Edward shut his eyes tightly, “you’re the biggest idiot I’ve ever met.”
Roy moved his thumb along where Edward’s cheekbone lay, a slight sliver of darkness against the illuminating silver of the ghost hovering just above and through him. And as he studied Edward’s face, it slowly began to filter back to him, and he found himself smiling. “I did tell Maes not to forget my wife, didn’t I.”

Edward let out a soft laugh, his eyes remaining closed. “Yeah. I figured you meant me.” And then he gave himself a visible shake, his eyes opening once more and with a regretful look he slipped away to fetch the glass of water from the bedside table. Roy’s voice wasn’t getting any less rough the more he talked. “Drink.” He instructed as he turned with it, passing it towards the hand nearest him.

Roy did, although it was somewhat more uncomfortable than he’d anticipated to shift up into a seated position without putting any undue stress on his stitches. But he managed, and found himself drinking the water as quickly as he dared, only to have it quickly refilled by Edward. Halfway through that second glass he finally felt sated.

“Better?” Edward asked quietly as he set the pitcher aside.

“Much.” And it was, this time when he talked his voice didn’t rasp, his throat didn’t scratch.

Edward gave a faint smile towards the wall at the good news, before his silver eyes flashed in the white-hot anger that resurfaced in him now that he was assured that Roy was fine. Without hesitation, he rounded on the man. “Roy Mustang, don’t you ever tell me to sit on the sidelines again! I know I can’t do alchemy! I know I can’t do a lot of things, but what I can do to protect you let me! Take your pride and shove it! I don’t care about your fucking pride! And if you ever hesitate again to attack because I’m there, I’ll kill you myself!”

“Edwa –”

“Don’t make me watch you die!” Edward cut him off with a snarl. “Not like that! The only way I’ll ever accept your death is if it’s peaceful and you’re at least eighty years old!”

Roy didn’t try and speak again until he was sure Edward was done yelling at him, and it took every inch of courage and what strength he was managing to siphon up within him not to hunch down in a useless attempt to escape the heated glare he was being pinned with. And when he did speak again, his tone was quiet, chastised. “Thank you, for saving my life.”

Edward’s glare softened a fraction, though it still remained. “You’re welcome.”

“And…” Roy hesitated a moment, before finally owning up to it. “You’re right. I may not like it, but you’re right.”

Edward nodded firmly.

“I’m sorry for trying to control you.” Roy continued quietly, “for scaring you. I can’t promise I’ll change overnight… I’ve relied on my own strength in these matters for so long. But I’m willing to try, for you.”

“But you rely on Riza.” Edward frowned, warring against the hurt feeling sparking inside him. “On Maes. On all of them. Why can’t you rely on me like that, too? Is it because you don’t trust me as much as you do them?”

Roy frowned at the mere implication, “I trust you with my life, Edward.”

“So let me help you protect it! Don’t hold me back!” Edward snapped at him in confusion.
“No.” Roy made a concerted effort to gentle his tone, and reaching forward to slip his hand along the silvery length of Edward’s hair, he shook his head minutely. “No, Edward. That’s not…” and he sucked in a deep breath before offering a tremulous smile. “I care about them, love them. But not the way I do you. It would kill me if you got hurt because of me.”

“But I can’t get hurt.” Edward reminded him with an uncertain frown.

“And tell me how it would make me a better man to view the one I love so recklessly? Even if it’s true?” Roy’s voice had dropped to almost a whisper, and his hand fell away. “Tell me how I could ever dare try to ask you to be mine if I treated you carelessly?”

Edward hesitated a moment before giving a slight nod of acceptance, even as he felt that fluttering warmth rise up in his chest again at Roy’s words. “Then can we agree that I’ll never do anything I don’t want to? By now you should know you can’t force me to do anything. But will you trust me to do what I can for you?”

“I trust you.” Roy assured him gently, “and I’ll try better at showing it from now on.”

“Idiot.” Edward breathed the insult, before shaking his head abruptly and pinning Roy with a silver-eyed gaze that hinged on exasperated affection. “Is there anything I can get you?”

Roy finally relaxed back, though he was under no illusions that he was in the clear regarding the matter. He’d have to do something, beyond his promises to try and change, to make it up to Edward. He’d likely put the ghost through hell and back with worry because of his injuries. “Information.”

Edward floated around to the middle of the bed and perched in the air beside the man. “Maes stitched you up and he and Riza got some more blood into you. He and Riza took Kimblee to some safe house of yours at a condemned nunnery?”

Roy nodded, a faint smirk quirking his lips. He’d always found some amusement in that locale.

“And you’re not to leave this bed except to use the bathroom until tomorrow.” Which was well over the twenty-four hours Maes had told him, but Edward wasn’t about to take any chances with Roy’s health. “I’ll take care of everything else for you. I even made you soup.”

“You made me soup?” Roy echoed with a growing grin, filing everything else away in the absent manner that someone who’d been injured like this before did.

“Yes.” Edward informed him with an answering smile. “And you will eat every bite, Roy Mustang. Else I’ll be even angrier with you.”

Even though laughing hurt faintly, Roy did so anyway as carefully as he could as Edward scowled at him. “I would never dare slight your cooking in such a manner.” And then he glanced towards the window, “am I right in thinking I was out overnight?”

“Yes. I removed the IV sometime around midnight.” Edward told him. “They gave you two bags of replacement blood. I’m guessing it helped. You lost far too much.”

Roy gave a slight nod, and glanced down at the bandages against his chest and abdomen critically. “All luckily missed arteries, but yes… by tomorrow I shouldn’t be stumbling around like a newborn horse.”

Edward chuckled faintly at the assessment, and smiled as he rested his gaze on the man. “I did always want a pony.”
Holding back innuendos had rarely been so difficult for Roy, but he managed not to put anything on offer. Barely.

“What else do you need to know?” Edward pressed gently, finally settling down onto the bed just beside Roy’s knees.

“That you’re okay.” Roy answered without pause to even consider there might be anything else.

“I – ” Edward stopped abruptly, and his expression fell as he stared into the middle space between their bodies. “I will be, when you are again.”

Roy had suspected as much might be the case, he knew he hadn’t imagined Edward curling up against his side, or talking him through the pain of being stitched back together. “I’ll be back on my feet before you know it.” He comforted the ghost gently, “you’ll be glad to be rid of me as a patient, too. Because I’m going to do my utmost best to enjoy having you as a nurse.”

Edward sent him a suspicious, narrow-eyed look from under his lashes. “How hard was it for you to stop yourself from calling me a sexy nurse this time?”

“Well, if you insist you are…” Roy teased, breaking out into more shallow, pained laughter as Edward glared at him hotly. But the pain was worth it. Yet as soon as he could catch his breath he offered out, “but I vaguely recall you insisting that you were my wife, right before I passed out.”

“You certainly seemed to think I was.” Edward replied with a shy smile, fighting down the nervous sensations rising warmly up within him as he met Roy’s amused, but affectionate gaze. “Called me your life, too. When you tried to correct yourself. At least, I think you meant me.”

Roy barely remembered the hazy incident, shadowed as it was by pain and blood loss, but he could remember Edward’s silver eyes and anxious voice. “Well, even if you choose against the first, the second will always remain true.”

Edward ducked his head with a hesitant smile, “you really – ”

Both of them startled as the front door slammed shut.

“Maes.” Edward breathed out weakly, his eyes widening as he was hit with a sudden frontal attack of nerves.

Roy didn’t get a chance to ask as he heard footsteps hurrying up the stairs, and giving Edward a concerned frown he was forced away from the question that had jumped to the forefront of his tongue. There was no time, for Maes was making exceptional time up the stairs.

“Oh, good.” Maes declared as he burst into Roy’s bedroom, finding his friend sitting up and awake already. Then he stopped short where he was, sending Roy an evil smirk as he realized the man hadn’t dug out a spare set of ignition-cloth gloves from his bedside table. “And a good morning to you, Edward.”
Roy sensed nearly as soon as Maes spoke those words what was about to happen, and whipping around so fast that it sent his sides into a blinding pain he rallied against, he reached out for the ghost. “No, wait!” He pleaded, his pride wasn’t so much as to try and pretend it wasn’t a plea. Not when it came to Edward.

Edward had already sunk halfway into the bed in an attempt to flee as his nerves shot into panic, but when he saw Roy almost double over from pain he was launching himself back to the man’s side. “Roy!”

“ ‘m okay.” Roy grunted out, trying blinking the kaleidoscopes of colors out of his eyes. “Just stay. Please. I knew.”

Edward frowned, his question more a noise than a word as he hesitantly settled back onto the bed next to Roy’s knees.

Roy sucked in a few breaths, the pain beginning to flicker away slowly, relief filling him in its wake. Though it was a relief hinged on nerves that the ghost still might try and run. “Riza was spotting me almost the entire time. She would have seen what you were doing. It doesn’t surprise me that he might have too.” And he shot Maes a quick look to see that the man was leaning against the door frame looking amusedly curious before focusing back in on Edward who looked only a little less uncertain. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner, I thought we’d have more time and I – fuck, what have I done.”

“You haven’t – ” Edward began in confusion.

“I have.” Roy interrupted, anger at himself reflecting clearly in his eyes. “You were so willing to accept what I wanted about keeping you a secret that you… you…”

“No!” Edward denied with a panicked urgency, shaking his head rapidly. “I wasn’t – I just… I haven’t exactly been emotionally stable the past twelve hours! It caught me off guard and I should have told you he knew, and then there was no time!”

Roy rested his head back with a soft curse, though his gaze on Edward was gentle, smiling. “So what I’ve decided is that this is all Maes’s fault?”

It startled a laugh out of Edward, and as Roy joined him in his amusement, he nodded his head acceptingly and with much relief. “Yeah. All his fault.”

“Now wait a minute,” Maes finally spoke up from the doorway, suddenly crossing over to the bedside, “I didn’t see anything but your bedroom light suddenly being on when I was still in the stairwell. That isn’t my fault.”

“You dare to consider it Edward’s fault that he was more worried about me than you?” Roy shot back with glittering amusement in his eyes. “After all, it seems you weren’t too concerned if you would notice such little things.”

Maes gave him a dirty look before sweeping an assessing eye over his best friend. “You would choose his side over mine in this.”
“Love’s a funny thing.” Roy agreed with a smirk.

“How are you feeling? Did you rip any stitches in that little maneuver you pulled?” Maes queried before directing his gaze to where Roy had been looking. “Sorry, Edward. I should have told you last night that there was the possibility he’d believe I’d noticed you. And speaking of,” he looked back to Roy, “Riza did notice something. Obviously. You’re going to need to talk to her.”

“I’ll deal with her when I see her next.” Roy muttered, “and I’m fine. As long as Edward’s okay I wouldn’t care if my stitches ripped.”

“Don’t be such an idiot.” Edward chastised him, but couldn’t keep from smiling.

“Uh-huh.” Maes deadpanned, before smirking as he began to chuckle and shook his head. “Well I’m glad you’re okay. I don’t know what or how much Edward has told you, but you should try and be up by tomorrow. Kimblee won’t last for long, for whatever reason you have for keeping him alive.”

“Don’t worry,” Roy promised in a threateningly quiet tone, “he’ll be dead by tomorrow. It shouldn’t take long to get what I want out of him and then he’s of no use to me.”

“Call your mother too, when you can.” Maes didn’t bother questioning further about Kimblee, when it came to showdowns between alchemists, he didn’t even bother pretending to act as if he’d know what was going on even if he was told. They were a different breed entirely, their minds thinking on a different scientific level. “I told her what happened, that you’d be okay and that Edward was fine.”

“She’s going to be a handful.” Roy grumbled under his breath, but at the same time, he was glad that she’d been informed. But speaking of his mother… “did you get the girls sent off without trouble?”

Maes offered a thin smile and a lopsided shrug, “I managed to wait until they were gone before I broke down. It sucked, you know, waking up without them this morning. But as long as they’re safe, that’s what matters to me.”

Roy did know, and it only became one of the many reasons he needed to bring all this to an end.

“By the way,” Maes gave his best friend a reproachful look, “could you please call Kain off? Whatever he did to bring down the traffic light system hasn’t been able to be fixed by anyone yet, and it’s a nightmare out there! Last I heard they’re thinking about calling in specialists from the other cities.”

Roy outright laughed, and smirked rather smugly about it, and in pride at how well Fuery was able to do his job. “Fine.” He agreed, and looking over at Edward his prideful smirk melted into a smile. “Do you still have some paper in your drawer?”

Edward nodded and immediately turned to crawl his way over to his bedside table and retrieve his notebook. Flipping it to a blank page he tore it out before passing it and a pen to Roy upon crawling back.

“Thanks.” Roy quickly wrote just two words: ‘fix it’, and initialed the paper before folding it in half and passing it to Maes. “Make sure it gets burned.”

“I’m not sure any of us know how to set things on fire ourselves anymore. We’ve rather begun to rely on you for that.” Maes deadpanned, though his eyes twinkled with humor.

“I clearly need to send you all back to basic training.” Roy muttered with a roll of his eyes.

Maes snorted at the lame threat, and decided that now was as good a time as any to turn the tables on
Roy, “So, want to tell me why you decided to keep Edward a secret from me? I’m your best friend, you were my best man at my wedding, I thought that meant something!”

“Oh don’t try and drag your wife into this, or yourself.” Roy scowled at him. “It had nothing to do with either of you. I’m a possessive bastard and at first I thought – I wanted to keep Edward all to myself. Then my mother found us out and I’ve realized that I can’t keep him a secret from everyone. I was going to tell you after I dealt with Grand.”

“You are a bastard.” Maes agreed seriously, but shook his head with a smile. “I’m not sure why he chooses to put up with you, but I find I’m glad for it.”

“I chose staying with him over my own brother.” Edward whispered quietly, determinedly not looking up from the bedspread when he felt Roy’s eyes suddenly on him. “I think it’d take more than him being possessive to make me leave him.”

Roy had never truly stopped feeling unworthy of that decision, and his sobered tone was evidence enough of that when he repeated for Maes what Edward had said.

“Hold on a moment,” Maes was beginning to frown as suddenly, little pieces of puzzles that had surprised or confused him began to fall towards each other seeking joining with that last bit of knowledge. “What’s his last name?”

Roy chuckled, having a sudden idea by the look on Maes’s face what conclusion his friend was coming to. “Elric.”

“That’s why…” Maes trailed off in sudden, wide-eyed understanding as the pieces all snapped together. “That’s why you went to Risembool! For him?”

“He doesn’t exactly ask for much, Maes.” Roy didn’t take his eyes off the ghost who still was being overly fascinated by the thread count of his bedding materials. “I wanted him to see his brother again. And I thought I was leaving him behind there, but he came back with me after calling me an idiot more than a few times.”

“And that’s why you’re so angry with Hohenheim!”

“Don’t even get me started on him.” Roy muttered acerbically, thinking back on how the man had just vanished while he and Edward had been distracted.

“So it wasn’t his wife you slept with, you want to sleep with one of his sons.” Maes smirked wickedly, even in the face of Roy’s glare.

Edward spluttered at the conclusion Maes had drawn, not that it was at all inaccurate. He was under no illusions that if Roy could sleep with him, he would try, given his past manwhoring activities and his current ardor for him. But he wasn’t accustomed to it being put so bluntly, especially by someone other than Roy.

“I can’t touch him, you moron.” Roy growled at him while reaching a calming hand out toward Edward, “stop making him flustered.”

The smirk Maes was sporting didn’t falter, if anything, it only gained resilience in the face of his best friend’s bristling defense of the ghost. “Right, I expect only you want to fluster him.”

“Maes, so help me – ”

“I’ve been trying, you pompous cradle robber. What do you call those stitches?”
“Poorly done.” Roy quipped back immediately, “and I’ve not robbed any cradles. He isn’t even sure he wants robbing.”

Edward burst out laughing despite himself, fisting one hand against his mouth as he tried to stifle his laughter.

Maes unknowingly joined in with his own snickers.

“You both are terrible.” Roy decided.

“Yes,” Maes agreed happily, “but I swear, Roy, it goes to figure that if you’d fall for anyone, it’d be an Elric.”

Edward had managed a slight control over his laughter, but at those words, it died abruptly as he turned a frown onto Roy. “What does he mean by that?”

“Yes, Maes,” Roy couldn’t help but agree, “do tell us what you mean by that.”

“You went and fell for an Elric, and meanwhile the Fuhrer has been hunting Hohenheim for far longer than I care to think about. And it’s not just some standard manhunt, I don’t know much about alchemy, but I do know that the only reason the Fuhrer would still be so dedicated to the matter is because he wants a weapon. And if **you** tell me that Hohenheim is the only alchemist technically more powerful than you, than it fits. Yet if I’m right, you’ve been running about Headquarters with the help of an Elric since we were transferred here.”

“He can’t do alchemy.” Roy felt was necessary to point out. “The only things he’s done so far are all those pranks on Grand and helping me with Kimblee. Besides, just because he’s an Elric doesn’t make him some sort of valuable commodity. I love him, and who his father is has never had any bearing on that.”

“Yes, but you can’t deny that it’s a little ironic that the man whose job you want to kill him for would learn a new level of bloodlust and jealousy where you’re concerned if he ever learned who you’ve been teaming up with.” Maes shook his head in amazement and some worry.

“He will never find out about Edward.” Roy told him quietly, “and even if he does manage to catch Hohenheim, he’d never succeed in using the man. He doesn’t have the power to force Hohenheim to do anything.”

“Wait, what?” Edward’s head suddenly shot up, sudden fear on his face as a panicked thought gripped at his chest as he mulled over their words. “But Alphonse – !”

“Alphonse is safe.” Roy cut in quickly, before Edward’s panic could double in on itself, his attention whipping back to the ghost. “Don’t you worry about him, between what I did to erase the chance of his name showing up anywhere official, and what I imagine he’s capable of himself, he’s safe.”

Edward’s panic hadn’t entirely faded, it lurked there yet underneath the confusion that had come over him. “I don’t understand… what did you do?”

“What did you do?” Maes unknowingly echoed Edward’s question with a frown.

Roy had actually hoped that it would be far longer before any of this came to light, but if it meant reassuring Edward, he’d admit what he’d done. “I called in a favor from one of my dad’s old friends. He works in finances now. I got him to pull strings to allow Alphonse to sell the family house, and when Alphonse found a new place he might have misplaced their copy of the purchase documents to be kept on file. They’re sitting in one of my safes. And I wouldn’t worry too much about him being
found, he bought a place in the same town that teacher of yours who hates State Alchemists lives in.”

Maes was staring at his best friend in amazement, and approval.

Yet it was Edward that Roy was watching carefully.

“You…” Edward couldn’t seem to stop staring at him, utterly stunned and confused and left feeling as if anything he might say was grossly inadequate next to what he’d just learned.

“Oh,” Roy began again, suddenly reminded that perhaps he should divulge everything, “and I might have been the one who bought the house from him, though he doesn’t know.”

“What?” Edward choked the word out.

“I want your brother to be happy too, Edward.” Roy answered, reaching out to lay his hand through the ghost’s knee. “And he wasn’t happy there. You may not get that pony before I’m Fuhrer and can afford it again, but at least he can move on and he’ll be safer for it.”

“Forget about the pony, you idiot.” Edward whispered thickly, and gave a choked laugh and shook his head in amazement. “You… why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I thought you’d be mad at me for interfering, and when it wasn’t that, I just kind of forgot in between everything else.” Roy admitted with a faintly apologetic grimace.

“You forgot to tell me you bought my old house so my brother could go live in peace? That you’re trying to keep him safe?” Edward buried his face in one hand with a stunned laugh.

“And I thought you’d be mad.” Roy reminded him weakly.

Edward’s laughter stopped, and he looked up to pin Roy with an indulgent, understanding look. “I traded my life for my brother’s. I’ll never regret that, or anything that comes as a result of it. You gave him something I couldn’t… I can’t be mad at you for that.”

“Wait,” Maes suddenly spoke up, having been thinking about all of it still while he absently listened to one side of the conversation Roy was seemingly having with Edward. “Bit late to maybe be realizing this, but didn’t Edward die as a kid? Please tell me he doesn’t look like a kid.” And he shot a suspicious look at his friend.

That startled both of them out of the affectionate gazing they’d found themselves in.

“No. He still ages, so it seems.” Roy answered, giving a slight shrug despite the reproachful glare he’d shot his best friend. “He doesn’t know how or why, and I haven’t the faintest idea either. But he’s,” he looked back to Edward with a slight frown of query, “didn’t you say you’d be eighteen if you hadn’t died?”

“Yeah.” Edward agreed with a slight shrug.

“Yeah.” Roy echoed to finish his answer, turning back to Maes. “Death really doesn’t stop him in much of anything.”

Maes found himself smiling as he considered his best friend with wonderment he did try his best to conceal, couldn’t have him getting an even bigger ego. “Didn’t really stop you either, did it.”

“I tried not to love him, but I only ended up hurting him.” It had been a messy night, in so many ways, and he’d hurt Edward only to later end up frightening him. It wasn’t his proudest moment.
“Oh?” Maes leaned forward in curiosity.

Roy glared at him immediately, “that’s between he and I and you’ll keep your nose out of it.”

Maes chuckled and leaned away while holding his hands up in surrender. For now. “I should leave you two alone now anyway. It’s going to take me a fair bit to get to Headquarters so I can have Fuery fix the mess you had him cause. Riza was planning on telling everyone you came down with violent food poisoning yesterday at lunch and you can’t get free of the toilet yet.”

“Wonderful.” Roy muttered dryly, and as his friend moved off the bed he held up a hand to stall him. “Thanks, by the way.”

“You’d have rescued my ass out of there too.” Maes grinned at him knowingly. “Besides, do you know how long it would take for me to hold proper interviews for a new best friend? I don’t have that sort of free time any longer!”

“Oh, shut up!” Roy shot him a dirty look.

Maes smirked and then glanced over to where he assumed Edward still was. “Bye, Edward. Take care of him and I’m sure I’ll be meeting you again once he’s back to work.”

“Doubtless.” Edward smiled before quickly turning to Roy, “thank him for me? Please? For patching you up?”

Roy smiled and did so, and after Maes pretended to be blushing, his best friend was strolling out of his house and the front door slammed behind him.

Roy breathed out a heavy breath now that Maes was gone, “he can really exhaust a guy in my condition.”

“I think it wouldn’t have been nearly as exhausting if you’d not had to speak to him about me for the first time.” Edward pointed out and floated off the bed to refill Roy’s water glass again – it had run dry during Maes’s visit – and passed it back to him. “Drink more. Do I need to get you food?”

“Maybe a little.” Roy suggested in between sips of water.

Edward narrowed his eyes at him, “try again, Mustang.”

“Find the biggest soup bowl I have?” Roy offered out tentatively, though his smile was wholly amused.

“Better.” Edward nodded shortly in approval and immediately dropped down through the floor to float through the walls separating him from the kitchen.

Within minutes he had the soup reheating and found a tray, bowl, and spoon. While the soup reheated he went and found that Hazel was half inside one of the cracker boxes in the pantry, and deciding that wasn’t so bad, Edward left him to it. Besides, he didn’t want the soup to burn, Roy could stand losing a box of crackers as a sacrifice to properly heated soup.

Edward arrived back upstairs with the soup and settling the tray carefully onto Roy’s thighs he took the water glass from his hands. “Eat every bit of it, or remember I’ll be mad.”

Roy remembered, and he smiled as he picked up a spoon.

Edward settled back onto the bed as Roy ate, smiling as he watched the content expression on his
face. He knew it was good, it wasn’t the first time he’d cooked, with or without the man. “My mother used to make me soup when I didn’t feel well.” He murmured as he found himself curling up on his side with his head propped up on one hand next to Roy’s knees as he watched over him.

Roy was smiling around his next spoonful, thinking on how similar all mothers were in that light. “Mine always added just a touch of whiskey to it after it was cooked so all the alcohol wouldn’t burn off. I was fussy as a child, when I was sick. She told me it was the only way to get me to sleep.”

Edward found himself chuckling quietly at the story, finding it utterly believable of the both of them. “I was able to talk to her, sort of, on the phone.” And at Roy’s surprised look, he smiled. “One button push for yes, two for no. She mostly wanted to be sure I was okay.”

“I’m guessing you lied.” Roy surmised as he considered the ghost lying at his side.

Edward’s smile was strained, “yeah. I mean, I wasn’t hurt; and that’s really what she was asking.”

Roy nodded absently around another spoonful, as relieved as ever that Edward hadn’t been hurt. Couldn’t be hurt by alchemy. Yet the most determined he’d ever been to see himself recovered so that the fear that yet lingered in the back of Edward’s eyes in moments like this might be erased.

It was with no small amount of pride that Roy finished all the soup he’d been brought, and while it definitely had been too much, he’d have eaten another bowl just to put Edward’s mind at ease. Luckily the ghost was satisfied with what he’d already managed.

Edward watched as Roy set the tray aside, but it was when he began to shift his legs to the edge of the bed that he suddenly popped up. “Where are you going?”

“Bathroom.” Roy explained, “I think I’m good to try now.”

Edward swallowed down an unhappy noise, knowing that Roy wouldn’t try unless he thought he could do it. He was fairly certain that Roy feared making him panic over any embarrassment he might gain in asking Edward to fetch him a bucket or something. All the same it left him with a surge of bitterness that he couldn’t do anything to help Roy get to the bathroom.

Roy had managed a successful testing of half his weight, still not quite having left the bed, and taking it as a good sign he eased himself to his feet.

The blood suddenly rushing to his feet and back up again made him dizzy a brief moment, but he managed to keep his reaction to only a wobble. And considering the state of him, wobbling was to be expected anyway.

“Haven’t felt like this since the war.” Roy groaned and carefully took his first step.

Edward watched him raptly, even going so far as to hover up off the bed and trail after him as the man progressed slowly, but with admirable steadiness, towards the bathroom. “He was that bad during the war, then?”

Each step had gotten easier, and he’d reached the bathroom entry when Edward’s question came. It filled his mind, taking it to a dark place where blood, fire, and terrified screams filled howling air. Yet it was the flicker of silvery light reflecting in his bathroom mirror that pulled him free again, before the memories could take a truer hold. And he focused on Edward’s reflection, gripped tightly to it. “Worse. Yesterday he just wanted to kill me. Back then, he wanted to kill many. But he isn’t what I meant. War in general made me feel like I’d been blindsided by a tank.”

Edward didn’t say anything, watched carefully and with concern as Roy carefully made his way into
the bathroom before staying where he was at the entry, facing away to give him the illusion of privacy.

Roy had just finished carefully stepping his way over to the toilet when he realized something he really should have sooner, and a special sort of panic began creeping along his spine. “I’m naked.”

Edward couldn’t help it, an actual giggle escaped him, and he fist a hand against his mouth to try and stifle the joyous noise. “Been naked since Maes had to slice your clothes off in front of me.” He offered out delightedly.

Roy swore, and while he knew it made complete logical sense, he didn’t have to like it. But he was beginning to remember now… being annoyed about losing his clothes and Edward hushing him for it, and shortly after another memory surfaced with sudden, heart-pounding clarity: “Edward… the water was cold.”

Edward didn’t even try to stifle his giggles at that, finding himself nearly bent double as he clutched at his sides in fresh, howling laughter.

Roy might have been offended any other time, any other day, but not today. Not when after having seen such fear and worry in Edward’s eyes, his smiles sometimes a little too tight, that now the ghost was laughing with such unbridled delight and joy. Instead, he found a smile flickering to life, and he shook his head fondly as he turned to relieve his bladder while Edward continued to laugh in the doorway.

Edward was only just beginning to get control of his laughter when Roy stepped over to wash his hands, and he shot the man a fond look in the mirror. “I was a bit too worried about you to really spend time looking. This is actually the longest I’ve spent looking at you naked, and I’m realizing that you must not be able to suntan, because your ass is as pale as your face.”

Roy rolled his eyes and turned around in search of a hand towel, and if Edward’s eyes lingered a moment longer than he might have expected before shooting away with a flustered laugh, he could only smirk. “I’m pale everywhere.” He agreed with a wicked gleam in his eyes as he dried his hands.

“So I see.” Edward replied thickly, weakly.

Roy snickered, but as much as he was finding that he was rather enjoying Edward finally being flustered over this, he knew he shouldn’t press his luck. If Edward was getting flustered, it meant he was relaxing again at last, and he didn’t want to push it too far and have that flustered relaxation turn into something defensive. “Want to get me something to wear?”

Edward watched as Roy shuffled past him, and swallowed hard on reflex as his gaze traveled down the slope of Roy’s back and lower still. “Not particularly.” He found himself saying in a voice a little higher than he’d have liked, right before he slapped a hand to his mouth with wide eyes as he realized what he’d just said. “I just – I mean – I – ”

“No, no!” Roy was beginning to laugh through the wide grin that had split his face, and while it hurt his stitches a bit, he didn’t care. Not when as he carefully half-turned back to Edward he could see the ghost practically oozing through the wall in mortification. “Honesty is fine.”

“Fuck.” Edward muttered into his hand, and twisted it to bite at his knuckles as he sank down to sit on the floor, darting a look equal parts nervous and curious Roy’s way. “It just doesn’t bother me, that’s all!”

Roy smirked at him wickedly, “and is that why you’re all flustered?”
Edward tried for a glare as he pointed his other hand towards the bed in a sharp motion. “Bed, Roy. Now!”

Roy managed to smother the suggestions and appreciations that immediately tried to leap off his tongue at the order, forcing himself to settle for a lewd smirk Edward’s way before turning about to shuffle off as instructed. “Probably safest this way anyway, my legs still feel weaker than I’d like. I think if I tried to put anything on I’d fall on my face.” He offered out as an olive branch, hoping to snare Edward back to the bed with him with logical reasons the ghost could cling to as explanations for not minding him naked.

“A few scars might improve it.” Edward muttered grudgingly, and met the dirty look that Roy tossed over his shoulder with a surly expression.

Roy tried to keep from smiling at the defensive bristling emanating from the ghost’s direction, and found that getting back into bed without ripping any of his stitches proved to be the best method for that. By the time he was sitting in it once more and had drawn the blanket back over him, a thin sheen of sweat had broken out at the back of his neck and on his forehead. Only once he was sitting once more did he realize how taxing just that short walk to the bathroom and back had actually been for his recovering body.

Edward had kept a close eye on him, and a lopsided smile tugged at his lips as he watched Roy blink several more times in succession than normal and look about him distractedly. Shaking his head fondly he pushed his remaining embarrassment to the background and floated over to perch on the foot of the bed and pat one hand onto it several times. “Scoot down so you can lay back again.”

Roy knew better than to argue with Edward on anything right now, and if he were being entirely honest with himself, his body was moving to obey long before his brain caught up. Instinct was strong, and it knew Edward had a good idea.

“Looks like you’re about to fall asleep again at a moment’s notice.” Edward smiled amusedly as he floated up to snag his own pillow and give it several patting fluffs before gesturing at Roy’s head.

Roy lifted it without question, and more than a little surprised warmth as Edward swapped the two pillows. This time when he lay his head back the pillow was cool against his skin, and far more fluffy than before. “I think I can make it a bit longer.” He disagreed, his expression twisting apologetically. “But I’ll likely sleep most of the day and night.”

“As long as you recover, I don’t care if you sleep.” It was nearly a scold, and Edward gave him a smile to try and gentle the words. “In fact I’d prefer it. I need you better.”

“I’m just worried about what sort of trouble you’ll get yourself into.” Roy grinned teasingly, and just a bit tiredly.

Edward snorted and shifted about so that he could lay down facing Roy, propping himself up on Roy’s former pillow. “Worry about Hazel, not me. Last I saw him he was relieving you of a surplus of crackers.”

“That little menace has been robbing me blind since I first took pity on him.” Roy muttered, yet not at all resentful about the fact.

Edward smiled at the reluctant fondness that shadowed Roy’s features, and curling his fingers into the blanket he lay atop he tried to muster aside his hesitance even as he began to speak. “I never got the chance to tell you before… but thank you.” And as Roy turned a confused frown his way, he continued. “For what you did for Alphonse. Thank you.”
Roy actually, horrifically, felt himself beginning to blush at the gratitude, “you died to save his life. The least I could do is try to ensure he isn’t forced to waste the sacrifice you made.”

“Even so,” Edward pressed fondly, “thank you.”

Roy gave his complexion up as a lost cause, as well as the giddy pleasure that had filled him. It had been expensive, but it had been entirely worth it. Especially to now be able to see how happy he’d made Edward. Granted, when he’d done it he hadn’t realized he loved the ghost, but even so… “you’re welcome.”

“Will you ever tell him?” Edward asked with a growing frown.

“Only if you decide you want me to.” Roy answered with a slight yawn. “I can’t imagine telling him without also coming clean about why I stopped by for a visit. And that means I’d be telling him that you still exist on some level.”

Edward let out a noise heavy in regret, his eyes falling closed. “He buried me. He’s trying to move on. And I don’t know if it’s the right choice, but I want to let him do that thinking I’m still gone from this world. I can’t cause him any more pain.”

“In that case, it will remain our secret.” Roy agreed, then added with a slight roll of his eyes. “And Maes’s.”

“What were you going to do with the house?” Edward pressed then, his eyes flickering open once more.

“Nothing,” Roy attempted to shrug, and then realized quite soon that was a bad, painful idea. “Unless you want me to do something with it.”

Edward turned to lay flat on his back, his silver eyes hardening with a turmoil of emotion as he stared up at the ceiling. “Had you asked me weeks ago, I’d have told you to burn the thing to the ground.”

Roy waited for nearly a minute, watching Edward’s profile closely, before deciding that the ghost had nothing left to say on the matter at the moment. “Then it will stay as it is indefinitely, unless you make a decision otherwise.”

“I think, for now, there’s too much else, too much that’s more important to me, that I need to and want to think about,” Edward whispered softly. “That old relic can stay in the past for a time longer. I just wish I knew what my mom would say to do… she’d know what was right.”

“Perhaps mine can be of some assistance in the future.” Roy offered hesitantly, unsure really how his offer would be taken.

Edward found himself smiling faintly at first, and then a chuckle grew in his chest and caught in his throat as he turned his head to blink Roy into view. “I think our moms would have gotten along brilliantly. I know you never met mine, but…” the chuckle finally escaped, and if it was a bit choked sounding it wasn’t commented on, “I can just imagine the both of them conspiring against us as a team. She would have adored you, you know.”

“After informing me that if I ever broke your heart she’d kill me, I’m sure.” Roy pointed out with a quirk of a smile.

Edward’s expression went considering, thoughtful as he let his gaze rest on the man laid out injured on the bed beside him, a faint smile on his lips. “You shouldn’t say things like that when you’re like this.”
“No?” Roy queried back in an attempt at being suave, but that was mangled by the wide and uncontrollable yawn that attacked him instead.

“No.” Edward agreed with a bit of a laugh, his eyes glittering with a merry fondness. “I’m a bit vulnerable right now, Roy.”

“Vulnerable?” Roy echoed teasingly as Edward smiled, “I’m the one who’s still naked here.”

Edward smirked at the reminder, “I’ve noticed. But let’s be honest with each other, Roy, you are more than comfortable being naked given all your past manwhoring.”

“Well I never loved any of them.” Roy felt it was important to point out, and did rather firmly before falling victim to another yawn.

“You have nothing to feel vulnerable about.” Edward reassured him with a humored smile, before adding with a wicked gleam in his eyes, “cold water or not,” and proceeded to avidly enjoy Roy’s horrified spluttering.

Roy was beginning to understand that Edward would never let him forget about that, or any of it really. His only relief was in knowing that Edward wouldn’t lie to him about such a thing, the ghost had no qualms about attempting to take his ego down notches.

“Me on the other hand?” Edward let his eyes fall closed. “I could have lost you yesterday. And until you’re yourself again I don’t think I’ll be okay.”

“I understand.” And Roy did, he truly did. “All right, I can’t believe I’m even saying this, but I’m giving you a pass until tomorrow. Today, even if you tell me that you’re madly in love with me, I’m not going to believe you.”

Edward burst out laughing before he could help it, and his eyes opened as he shifted into a seated position on the bed, shaking his head as he looked down at the equally amused man.

“I won’t have your fear of losing me making your choices for you.”

Edward’s head fell to the side with a soft smile as he considered this man, this wonderfully ridiculous man. “Get some sleep, Roy.”

Roy’s answering smile didn’t fade at the gentle order, if anything it only grew momentarily. Any other day he likely would have continued to push through the exhaustion trying to pull him back under, but he knew how badly he needed to rest and recover. Not just for himself, but for Edward too. So he obediently burrowed himself deeper into their bed just as another yawn escaped him.

“Realizing I love you, or not, won’t be a choice.” Edward continued as he reached out to readjust the blanket over Roy so that he’d not risk chilling. “It will just be.”

“Such a romantic.” Roy smiled blearily, already letting the exhaustion pull him closer towards sleep. “Always found that endearing.”

Edward smiled, but said nothing as he watched Roy’s eyes drift closed and soon the man’s face was smoothing out in sleep. Giving the blanket one last adjustment he sat back on his heels and looked out the window in quiet contemplation. There were still things he needed to take care of today, but for the moment he just wanted to exist here in this peace with the one who loved him.
Chapter 52

Mid-day found Edward finally leaving the bedroom.

In the kitchen he set the dirtied soup bowl and spoon in the sink for washing later, and then went to check on Hazel once again. The squirrel was no longer in the cracker box, nor was anything else, for that matter. So with some trepidation, but hoping that the rodent had just over stuffed himself and tired, Edward went on a search for him.

After several minutes of floating through the walls to search, he found the fluffy terror curled up on top of the bin that held the squirrel’s toys.

“You’ll need exercise to work off those crackers,” Edward agreed over the sleeping squirrel’s body, before adding hesitantly. “Roy’s going to be okay, so don’t you worry.”

He was floating back out towards the kitchen when he heard the knock on the door.

Instantly his guard went up.

The only people he might expect to be at the door for any good reason at all likely either already had a key, or knew that Roy wasn’t in any condition to be opening doors.

Edward darted a sharp look towards where he knew the bedroom lay as a second knock sounded. Without a second thought to it, he floated over to the knife block, pulling free the slim utility knife. The idea that he was jumping to conclusions didn’t cross his mind, all he knew was that Roy was in no condition to be fighting – though he suspected the man would anyway. And when Roy still had enemies as dangerous as Grand and the Fuhrer out there alive, he wasn’t taking any chances.

With the knife firmly in hand, Edward darted at nearly his fastest speed towards the door only to abruptly stop. There was no sense in flying through the door armed with a knife only to scare a bunch of schoolchildren, if this was something just as innocent. Instead, he poked his head through the front door.

Only to curse vividly and yank himself back.

Muttering angrily under his breath he stalked back to the kitchen to replace the knife with an enthusiastic slam before returning to the door.

Edward unlocked it and wrenched it open with a scowl the man on the other side couldn’t see.

“Hello, Edward.” Hohenheim congenially greeted the emptiness beyond the open door.

Edward scowled at him, crossing his arms over his chest and tapping one foot against the floor irritably.

Hohenheim shifted marginally, “may I come in then?” He broached, before holding out a second, smaller suitcase. “I brought you something you might find useful.”

Edward let his gaze drop to the indicated suitcase. “Little too late to be buying my love, daddy.” He snipped before taking the door in hand and slamming it shut only as loudly as he dared.

He didn’t want to wake Roy, after all.
“How the fuck did he even find us?” Edward snarled, before realizing with an unhappy groan that it was likely very easy for someone of his father’s intelligence to look up addresses of State Alchemists. He was about to turn away to go back upstairs when his father’s voice called through the wood.

“I know what happened yesterday!”

Edward paused in midair, before slowly his head turned and he was looking upon the front door once more. His gaze drifted away a moment, contemplation shadowing his gaze and narrowing his eyes before he let out a small sigh. Turning back around for the door he eased it open once again.

“Thanks.” And none of the heavy gratitude in the one word was faked, and Hohenheim tipped off his hat before crossing the threshold into the house.

With no other indication than normal, polite manners in someone else’s home to guide him, Hohenheim made his way into the living room as the front door closed once more and the bolt clicked. He took only a cursory glance around to briefly familiarize himself with the surroundings before setting his suitcases on the ground and placing his hat on the coffee table before taking a seat at the couch.

Yet he didn’t remain still for long.

Edward floated into the living room just as his father reached for the previously indicated suitcase. He watched, still hovering on the edge of uncertainty as to whether or not to wake Roy and tell him his father was here in the house, when the man in question reached into the open suitcase and pulled out a typewriter, setting it on the coffee table with its sheaf of papers and giving a hopeful glance around at the air of his general direction.

“I thought it might make it quicker for you this way? If I thought wrong you don’t have to use it. I have pens too… somewhere.” Hohenheim quickly began patting at his pockets.

Edward snorted, and giving a shake of his head floated down and picked up one of the papers to guide it into the typewriter while trying not to feel warmed by the gesture of the thoughtful gift, or the relief on his father’s face. “Don’t look too pleased,” he muttered as he wound the paper into position, “I’m going to use it to cave your skull in afterwards, see if you’re immortal from that. Roy can burn the body if it works.”

Hohenheim, having no idea of the threatening mutters being made, could only watch raptly as the keys began to press down with heavy snicks of noise.

“There.” Edward determined he was done typing for the moment, and turned the machine so that his father could read the words now printed upon the paper he’d scrolled upwards with several keystrokes: ‘Roy’s asleep, but he’s not the one you should be afraid of in this house. Philosopher’s Stone or not.’

Hohenheim tried not to smile as he read, and he coughed once to try and tamp down the urge. “I’m not here to make trouble. If you tell me to go, I’ll go.”

‘You don’t need my permission, if I remember correctly. You just up and leave whenever it’s convenient to you.’ Edward typed back scathingly, having shifted where he sat so that his father could read as he typed.

Hohenheim’s humor vanished instantly, and his expression fell with a sigh as he clasped his hands together. “I won’t try and make you understand why I’ve done the things I have. I know we’ll never
see it the same way, and I’ve made my peace with that. But the last time I left you, I did it expressly *for you.”*

Edward found himself taken aback, more startled and confused than angry. Yet when his fingers found the keys once more, he expected his father had predicted his reaction when his reply was immediately forthcoming.

“I went to speak to the Gate about your – ” Hohenheim paused a moment to search for the right word, recalling how Roy hadn’t appreciated him referring to Edward as unnatural, “ – existence.”

Edward found himself too stunned to do, or type, anything. All he could manage was to stare slack-jawed at his father. He’d gone to *speak* to the *Gate*?!

Hohenheim had paused again, this time searching for a diplomatic way to put how the encounter had gone. “It did not go well.” And while such words hardly sufficed given what he’d just revealed, it rather encompassed the entire meeting. “As far as it’s concerned, you’re this way because you’re my son. From what little else I did get it to say on the matter I am fairly certain that my original ideas about how you ended up this way were correct; you had to have had some sort of residual protection in your blood from what I am.”

Edward supposed that it really could make sense. Yet the thought of being angry with his father for it had left his mind almost as soon as it entered. Because although the years immediately following his death had been wrought with loneliness and strings of depression, every moment since Roy had come into his afterlife had washed that loneliness away. It was also the reason he’d never alluded to Roy that what his father had told him hadn’t been entirely the truth.

“As to why only Roy can see or hear you?” Hohenheim spread his hands apologetically. “It seemed to find that the funniest part of all during our chat.” And honestly, the memory of all those moments the Gate had begun to laugh still chilled him, but he tried to ignore it. “So you see? I left that last time because you were in good hands, you still are with Roy, and I wasn’t about to risk either of you trying to come along with me for such a visit – or see how to make the journey.”

“Like I’d ever willingly lay eyes on that monstrosity again.” Edward muttered angrily, then typed as much.

“For the best.” Hohenheim couldn’t help but approve. “Given how entertaining it finds you.”

Edward shuddered at the words, at the thought of being *entertaining* to the very thing that had ripped him apart.

“I was attempting to close in on a certain figurative ghost of my own past, you remember I mentioned before?” Hohenheim paused, but did not wait for a response as he forged ahead, “when yesterday afternoon your State Alchemist caused quite a disturbance.”

Edward was typing before he’d even fully formed the question in his mind, his brows knit together in confusion. ‘How do you even know it was him?’

“I didn’t, not at first. But when reports of firestorms in city parks start becoming rumor, and the entire city traffic system is suddenly shut down, there’s only one alchemist I think of when I think of such chaos. Roy Mustang is a cunning, ambitious man with a frightening talent at his chosen alchemy.” Hohenheim explained. “But I wouldn’t have paid it any mind had I not felt what I did when I assume the battle was ongoing.”

‘What do you mean, you felt?’ Edward quickly typed.
Hohenheim gave a small, sad quirk of his lips and raised a hand to tap at his chest with a solemn expression. “The ones in here, the souls, the stone, they felt the power that was used yesterday.”

Edward hadn’t realized, hadn’t even considered that philosopher stones would call to each other in any way. Upon knowing that now… he had to admit it gave him a bit of sadness that he couldn’t altogether define.

“Want to tell me what happened?” Hohenheim pressed, even as he found himself beginning to relax a fraction. Even as a little thrill sparked inside him to finally be saying words a father should say to his son.

Edward considered his father silently, unmoving, for several long moments before he felt the protective walls he had about Roy loosen. He may not ever forgive his father for abandoning them, whatever the reasons, but he was also not stupid. His father wasn’t viewed as the best alchemist alive for no reason, and the man was incredibly smart. Perhaps he could be of some assistance, though he wasn’t sure what or how.

Nevertheless, Edward began to type a paraphrased version of the events of yesterday.

Hohenheim waited patiently as the typewriter began working on its own once more, well, to his own perception at least. This time he didn’t read the words as they were typed, instead taking this moment to cast a second, more thorough gaze around this part of the house. Everything he saw on the bookcases he would expect to find in an alchemist’s home, advanced texts and leather-bound journals that were doubtlessly Roy’s own research; and while his fingers itched to take one up in curiosity, he suspected that if he tried he might end up with a new set of bruises. So he forced himself to look around at the rest of what he could see, and what he did see only reassured him that Edward had ended up in the home of a man who was able to provide well for himself.

“Hey, abandoner,” Edward scowled as he turned after typing to realize his father was just staring around the room curiously. It took him all of a moment to grab another piece of paper, fashion it into a hang glider, and pelt it at his father.

Hohenheim blinked and caught the paper before it fell to his knees, and turning back to the air just in front of the typewriter he offered an apologetic smile. “You have a nice home here.” And as he began to read he saw the words ‘some of the glass sculptures Roy made for me’ type out at the bottom of his current paragraph, and a warm smile crept across his lips.

He’d seen those glass sculptures in that locked case, and upon entering the room he’d seen the one of a pony too large to fit into the case, and to now realize that Roy had made them all, and some specifically for his son… in this house Edward was treated as if he was still a living person.

Edward watched as his father read through what he’d typed up, idly agreeing that his father was right. He did have a nice home. Here, with Roy, and Hazel of course. It was more than he ever would have guessed he’d receive in his afterlife… and really, it was more than he’d ever dreamed for himself before his death. He’d grown up thinking he’d stay in Risembool all his life, not once had he ever dreamed he’d end up as he was now, doing the things he was.

“Mustang is making a nuisance of himself then, to the Fuhrer.” Hohenheim mused as he rubbed at his chin with one hand and a contemplative expression. “Although I’m sure that’s what he wants.”

‘Roy wants to be Fuhrer.’ Edward added in agreement.

Hohenheim gave a slight smile and chuckle at the knowledge. “Doesn’t surprise me he’d have that ambition. For what it’s worth, I’ve been alive for centuries, seen many leaders rise and fall. I think,
especially with you beside him, that he’d be one of the great ones.” He brought his hands together then in a pensive gesture. “Yet the Fuhrer clearly knows the threat Roy has positioned himself as. Not unsurprising, given what Bradley is... but what does surprise me is the suddenly bold move of not only releasing Kimblee, but passing out fake philosopher stones to the participants.”

Edward watched with a subtle frown as his father cast a frown towards where his hat lay.

“Wrath must be feeling outside pressure from Dwarf.” Hohenheim mused, mostly to himself and his mouth pulled into a grim line. “That’s not good news for me, it means he’s either close, or getting impatient.”

“What do you mean? Who’s Dwarf? And Wrath?” Edward echoed worriedly, before remembering with a curse that his father couldn’t hear him and quickly turning back to his new typewriter.

“Dwarf in the Flask Homunculus.” Hohenheim explained with a low, regretful sigh. “I helped create him – albeit unknowingly. He gave me my name, taught me almost everything I know. With his help I was suddenly no longer just a slave. And then, he tricked us all. But he made certain I survived the massacre of Xerxes and became immortal in the process. He’s who I’ve been hunting, who is nothing but a threat to, well, Alphonse now.” And his expression fell even more at how the family he’d never believed he’d be privileged enough to have had come to this. He’d left to protect and safeguard them, to remove a building threat to them... and it wasn’t even Homunculus who’d taken his wife and eldest son from the world. Yet he shoved those thoughts aside for the moment, refocusing himself with purpose. “You know Wrath as Fuhrer Bradley. I know him as a surprisingly tame blight on society. If you think he’s dangerous, you don’t want to meet any of the others.”

‘What are they getting close to?’ Edward typed back after a few moments spent digesting everything he’d just learned, and knowing he’d need to remember it. These were things that Roy needed to know as well.

“You have enough to be concerned over without worrying about that.” Hohenheim shook his head, straightening from how he’d slumped forward as he relived some of his past. “I can handle Homunculus, we’ve known each other a long time. You worry about Wrath – Bradley, and the Brigadier General. Roy needs to focus on his goals of removing Bradley, and he needs all his focus to be on that, and not who has really been pulling Wrath’s strings. Amestris needs to fall into his control if it has any hope of surviving what it has been being brought towards.”

Edward wasn’t liking the sound of any of that. Just what was happening in this country? ‘Roy just has to kill him enough times in succession?’

“Yes.” Hohenheim reaffirmed, “easiest would be to locate his original bones, but Wrath has been a homunculus for an exceedingly long time now. I do not think that finding the bones would be easy, and Roy has enough skill to succeed the hard way. It still won’t be easy for him, but he has the strength.”

Edward had no doubt of that, he’d seen yesterday just what Roy could do when pushed to it. And he was hardly about to let Roy fight this fight alone either. Against the both of them, the Fuhrer was to fight a losing battle, but first, they had to remove Grand out of the way and the philosopher’s stone the man was attempting to finish. And based on everything he’d learned, this stone wasn’t going to be a fake – it was going to be a genuine finished product.

He shuddered to think of how the Fuhrer would use such a thing.

“How is he, by the way?” Hohenheim pressed then, concern filling his gaze, although not altogether for Roy Mustang. Despite the fact that his son wasn’t supposed to exist, he’d slowly been coming to
terms with the fact that Edward still did exist on some level, and he wasn’t naïve enough to believe that his son and Roy hadn’t become family in their own way.

Edward quickly typed out a rough analysis, before finding himself focusing on any sounds he might be able to hear from the bedroom, but the house was still peacefully quiet. Good. Roy needed to sleep.

“And the impure stones?” Hohenheim asked then, relieved of any concern that Roy was actually worse off than he’d previously imagined.

Edward actually had to pause to think back about that, a frown shadowing his face before he suddenly remembered. They were still in that box, and neither he, Roy, nor Maes, had bothered to move the box from where it had fallen in the shower. ‘We have them.’ Was all he put, uncertain just what his father was getting at.

“I know that.” Hohenheim chuckled a bit, before motioning a hand back to indicate himself. “I can still feel them, but they are impure and unfinished products, so I can’t pinpoint them.”

‘What do you want with them?’ Edward’s frown only grew.

“To destroy them.” Hohenheim admitted without hesitation. “Specifically, the only way they can safely be destroyed, which is for me to absorb them. They won’t do me any harm. If anything they’d affect me like caffeine until the potency wore off and they ceased to exist.”

Edward tried to find a bad side to that, purely on principle, but he had to admit in the end that it made the most sense. And while he knew that Roy wanted nothing to do with them, he still hesitated at the fact that he didn’t know what Roy intended to do with them, aside from likely wanting to keep them from falling into someone else’s hands. “Fuck it.” Edward finally decided, his expression becoming determined. ‘I’ll give them to you. I don’t want them in the house with Roy. I don’t like that look in his eyes when he thinks about the war.’

“I understand that,” Hohenheim breathed out heavily, a lopsided smile overtaking his lips. “No one should be forced to be around something that makes them remember more painful times. Especially given his apparent abject aversion to ever using them again.”

‘Stay here.’ Edward typed out, before giving his father a look that reprimanded any other course of action. Not that it could be seen, but it made him feel the better for it. And with that done he flew his way back up into the upstairs bathroom.

He wanted that evil he’d seen gone from this house. He wanted the evil that had aided Kimblee in hurting Roy gone from this house. There was no room for such things in the life they’d built together.

Kneeling on the shower floor in the darkened bathroom he picked the little wooden box back up. The side that had rested on the shower floor was still damp with water that stained the wood. But the distinct rattle of two objects inside let him know that both were still secure. Clenching the box in hand he floated out of the bathroom and back into the bedroom where instead of immediately making his way downstairs again, he went to hover at the bedside.

Roy was still fast asleep, and had Edward not known any better, he’d have thought that there was nothing wrong with him at all. His breathing was steady, his features calm in sleep, and his complexion didn’t speak of a fever.

“Sleep well, and I’ll be back up here with you just as soon as I kick him out of the house.” Edward
whispered over him, reaching out with his free hand to brush at Roy’s face. “But while I can still get
helpful information out of him, I’m going to. He’s opening up a lot more to me without you there.”

And turning from the bed, Edward hurriedly floated from the room to dart his way back down to
where he’d left his father.

Hohenheim hadn’t moved from the couch, he could sense that Edward’s soul had gone elsewhere,
but there was no telling when it would return and he wasn’t exactly keen to anger his son. Yet when
the disembodied box suddenly began floating his way, he did startle despite having sensed his son’s
soul return to the immediate area.

Edward lobbed the box at his father with a smirk.

Hohenheim deftly caught it, and easing the lid open he gazed down at the impure philosopher stones
in bitter contemplation. “These are old… the ones from the war, I’d imagine.” He spoke softly, and
let his other hand come to rest on top of them, closing his eyes as he reached out to the energy he
could feel with that part of him that was a true Philosopher’s Stone. “Not much power left in either of
them. Which means he’s done testing.”

Edward could only imagine that his father’s last words meant nothing good, but before he could
think to ask on it, the man was speaking again, this time in a low, regretful voice.

“You brave things.” Hohenheim whispered as he took both impure stones in hand, already reaching
out to the tattered, angry, and pained souls that screamed out at him. “I see… I see…” he murmured
then as he listened to their cries. “He had no right, I know.”

And then Edward was gasping as he watched his father press the stones against his chest, causing a
flash of red and white light to burst outwards from the place where his hand pressed. But nearly as
soon as it began, the light receded, and when his father drew his hand away, the stones were gone.

“It will be as close to peace as they’ll be able to come.” Hohenheim said with some regret. These had
been crudely made stones, rushed in process, and hardly stable or the true item. They were
surprisingly good forgeries, but forgeries nonetheless. Before they vanished entirely from existence,
they would never know the peace that the souls of his immaculately perfect and true Stone had
gained.

Yet even so, he could immediately feel the increased flow of power within him. To tell the truth, it
was unsettling. But it was better to live with this feeling for a few weeks, than to leave the stones
lying about to haunt a man who didn’t deserve it.

Edward found himself feeling an emotion he never thought he would, as he hovered there in the air
watching his father. “You really do regret what you’ve done. You actually care about those souls
that were lost.” And that, that startled him in a way that he hadn’t expected.

Technically, all of this, this entire mess, was likely all because of something his father had done. And
here the man was, centuries afterwards, still caring, and still attempting to fix it.

Hohenheim couldn’t see his son, but for the first time since he’d entered this house, he felt the shift in
Edward’s soul. “I’ve always taken responsibility for my actions, for who I am and what I became,
Edward. After all, responsibility was beaten into me rather solidly when I was only a slave and a
number.”

Edward couldn’t help but flinch at the reminder. No matter how a person felt about their parents, it
never settled well to know they’d once been a slave.
"But enough of that," Hohenheim decided with a thin smile, "I try not to think back to those days much. They were… unpleasant." And while that put it mildly, there were horrors in his past that he never wanted his sons to know.

Edward could only imagine, and he was more than willing to let the matter drop. He still bore anger against the man, but he wasn’t cruel. Yet even as he moved to query as to any more information his father could give them about either Grand or the Fuhrer, he suddenly remembered something.

Something only his father would be able to help him with. Because for as many times as he’d tried to figure it out, the mystery still remained.

‘Stay here.’

Hohenheim glanced at the words that typed across the paper, before feeling the soul of his son fade upwards past the ceiling once more. This time he didn’t have to wait nearly as long before he felt Edward’s soul returning, but when he saw what the ghost was returning with, his heart nearly stopped.

Edward took one look at his father’s stunned expression and found himself smirking. Settling back down onto the floor in front of his typewriter he set the crystal object on the coffee table between them and began typing. ‘Roy and I desecrated Xerxes a bit. We found this.’

Hohenheim felt only fainter of heart at the confession. “You desecrated – but of course you did.” And he swore several words of a language he’d not spoken in centuries, passing a hand over his face. “Luckily for the both of you, there’s not actually a curse on the land.”

‘I know what it is, it was in some of your old books, but I don’t know how to make it work. Or how to make it at all.’ Edward typed out for his father before glancing back at him. If anyone would know, it would be him. The man likely wouldn’t have become such a skilled alchemist in the country without encountering and using these.

Hohenheim’s expression grew pinched, and reaching out took the crystalline object with its pointed ends in hand. He hadn’t thought he’d ever see one of these again, much less hold one. “Making the vessel is no more complicated than finding an object, the only reason these ever looked fancy was because the Masters insisted.” And his expression briefly clouded with how he had felt about that.

“It’s the alchemy used on them that ever made them functional as storage devices for information.”

‘How do I access it to see what’s inside?’ Edward rapidly typed, his curiosity peaked.

Hohenheim twirled the crystal between his fingers before pointing one of the gleaming ends over his other palm. ‘You can’t, I can. Little known fact anymore, but Xerxes was rather fond of any sort of alchemy to do with blood.’

Edward realized what his father was about to do, but was too fascinated scientifically to even think of stopping him. So when his father stabbed the pointed end of the crystal down into his palm, opening a welling of blood, he barely flinched.

And as Hohenheim drew the crystal away, the skin was already knitting with a reddish-white glow. The crystal, on the other hand, had somehow absorbed the blood with a sudden burst of white light.

“Bit showy, too.” Hohenheim muttered, giving his previously wounded hand a light shake. He didn’t have too many fond memories of how the alchemists had flaunted themselves back then. Their arrogance had only emboldened the King at the time – he honestly couldn’t even remember his name – and that had only given Dwarf the opening he needed.
Edward hardly heard him, he was too busy staring wide-eyed at the crystal that now glowed with muted light in his father’s hand.

“Now this one’s crystal, of course, not obsidian.” Hohenheim set the crystal back onto the coffee table without much thought to the matter of what information it contained. “You’ll need to take it outside, let moonlight shine through it, and it will enlarge the text that was engraved and hidden. Rotate it towards you to turn pages. If you ever find an obsidian one, have Roy prick himself and use sunlight instead. The different lights work as a magnifier. However the alchemy only lasts an hour for the retrieval process.”

Edward knew his father wasn’t too fond of anything relating to Xerxes, especially anything alchemy related, but he had to admit – it was a very clever piece of alchemy. And he typed as much to his father.

Hohenheim regarded the glowing crystal with a bit of a wry smile upon reading the words typed to him. “Yes. There is much I had wanted to teach you, show you… before I left. Homunculus went back to Xerxes at one point and destroyed all the ruins, to keep anyone from discovering any bit of the truth of what had happened to us. In doing so he buried or destroyed much of the alchemic work that had happened there. I thought that perhaps if I could at least teach my sons… but time has changed that too.”

Edward didn’t even offer the idea of Alphonse in this, and he was glad that his father hadn’t either. In truth, he wasn’t even sure he wanted his father to ever find Alphonse again. His brother finally had a chance at a new life, their father suddenly appearing back into that life would only be a setback.

“I can at least show you the arrays to prime and transfer information to the vessels if you want, not that it’ll do you any good. But it might be good for you to teach Roy, given the chess board he’s attempting to walk across and his aspirations for Fuhrer.” Hohenheim decided and reached for one of the spare pieces of paper for the typewriter. “All things considered, it’s a good method to conceal information.”

He had to admit, his father had a point there, and Edward watched curiously as his father found a pen in one of his coat pockets and leaned forward to begin to sketch out the arrays. The movements of the pen across the paper were swift and steady, no hesitation despite likely never having even thought of the array for centuries.

“Remember, anything can be used, but it works best for retrieval if you use stones. Ones that have some sort of a shine to them initially for the reflective process.” Hohenheim placed his pen back into his coat pocket.

Edward nodded unseen, already studying and dissecting the arrays to determine how and why it worked, and the nuances that governed the alchemy.

“But now that I know that Roy’s going to be fine, and I’ve dealt with the matter of those stones,” Hohenheim began even as he reached for his hat, “I should keep moving. He’s here, somewhere, in Central, and if I stay in one place for too long I only risk him noticing.”

Edward found he was actually startled by the declaration that his father was leaving, and startled all the more to realize he actually didn’t like the idea, and not just because he hadn’t gotten to inflict physical injury on him like he’d sworn after their last encounter. And the moment his fingers took to the typewriter keys, he suddenly understood at least part of his distress. ‘So you only came to check on Roy and those fucking stones? I’m here too!’
“That’s not – no.” Hohenheim frowned, and gripping the brim of his hat a bit harder between both his hands, he cast his gaze down towards where he could sense the angry flare of Edward’s soul. “I wouldn’t have come to seek out Roy had you not been here. He’s too high profile a man for me to risk it normally, but he’s all you have now. I wanted to be sure that he was okay, so that I would know you would be.”

“Oh…” Edward hadn’t thought about it that way, already feeling inexplicably better as he let the words sink in.

“You are okay, aren’t you?” Hohenheim’s gaze suddenly narrowed in concern. He knew he still had his misgivings about Edward’s existence as a ghost, but he was trying to work through them for the sake of the son he hadn’t fully lost. He was trying to be a father, though he knew he wasn’t good at it. He’d barely been there for Edward’s childhood, and likely Alphonse didn’t even remember him, but he was trying to make an effort – likely a mess of one. But he was trying.

Edward wasn’t okay. He knew he wasn’t. He’d told Roy as much. He wouldn’t be okay until Roy was back to his usual self and activities. But while he’d admit to Roy these things, he was the only one. Even though in some deeper, hidden part of himself that still loved his father, he wanted to open up and spill all the things that he felt…the betrayal he still felt at his father abandoning them overrode everything else. And he didn’t know, and didn’t truly care if his father suspected he wasn’t being truthful as he began to type once more.

Hohenheim nodded in satisfaction as confirmation of Edward’s good health typed across the page – although he idly found himself wondering if ‘health’ was the proper term for the well being of a ghost. “No more encounters with the Fuhrer, then? With Wrath?”

“He’s lucky he hasn’t had.” Edward growled under his breath. He’d been disappointingly short on encounters with the Fuhrer, because despite the pain it caused him, he was now finding himself wholly willing to bear that pain just to do what he could to get back at the homunculus Fuhrer for everything he’d done, and was still trying to do. However his reply was sans all that, settling for a simple ‘no’.

“Good.” Hohenheim wasn’t entirely sure of the mechanics of being a ghost, but he did know that as a father, he didn’t want his son in distress. “Stay with Roy as much as you can whenever the Fuhrer is around. You both seem to do well at protecting each other, and homunculi are no foe to underestimate.”

“I’d like to see him try and leave me anywhere.” Edward muttered darkly, thinking back to how Roy had threatened that he’d leave him at the office yesterday if he didn’t hurry up and come along. What would have happened if he hadn’t? No. He had never had intentions of leaving Roy’s side, now or ever. That would hardly change.

“You recall I mentioned that I was closing in on my own target,” Hohenheim continued musingly, “he’s here in Central, somewhere. So I will be around, but I’ll be staying on the move. I thought, given the past, you might like to know where I am.”

In the past, before any of this had ever happened, Edward might have denied such a claim. But as he sat here now, he was beginning to realize he felt differently. How differently, he wasn’t sure, yet that was something he could ruminate on once Roy was recovered.

Hohenheim’s next words carried an undercurrent of the hesitation he felt in next saying, “I know that you and I may likely never have a good relationship again, but if you need me, or if Roy is in need, I’ll do everything I can to be there for you. I didn’t get a chance to tell you the last time, but I am here for you, Edward, if you want me to be there. I have no doubt that you would find a way to send
a message to me that I would not mistake.”

Edward snorted dismissively, yet the offer was already tucking itself into the recesses of his mind. He made no allusion to that, though, as his fingers took to the typewriter keys once again. ‘Did you think to ask the Gate if it could do for me what you can’t?’ He knew his father would read between the lines. He was under no illusion that Roy wouldn’t be interested in reading his half of this discussion, and this was a topic even now he still wanted to keep Roy from knowing.

Hohenheim bit against his upper lip as he read those words, and a tired breath left his body. There was no mistaking what his son meant, but he wished there was. “The Gate told me that becoming a ghost was of your own choosing. Though I’ve always known such a circumstance as yours to be impossible.”

“But I didn’t choose this!” Edward denied in a sudden, fervent outburst.

“It doesn’t seem inclined to offer you any aid, it seems far more inclined to enjoy your situation with worrying amusement.” Hohenheim continued on, unaware of his son’s outburst, although he had sensed the flare of his soul.

Edward promptly typed exactly what the Gate could go do, and ignored the uncertain amusement that lit his father’s features, as if his old man couldn’t decide whether or not to approve of him using such language.

“Accept what you have with Roy, for as long as you have it, and put your other wish from your mind. His life will pass quicker than you think. You’re potentially immortal, he is not.” Hohenheim added, well aware that his words were hardly the gentlest or likely the most welcome, but he took his prerogative as a father – as much of one as he’d been able to be in Edward’s time – to impart a dose of tough love to his son’s thoughts. “Time passes differently for those of us with a potentially limitless lifespan; blink, and he’ll be gone. You’ll come to understand this one day, but accept it now.”

“I refuse to believe I’d ever be without him.” Edward countered softly, voicing words similar to what had already passed between he and Roy. “Otherwise what was the point of him being able to see me at all?”

Hohenheim’s features pulled into a sad, but understanding expression when no answer was forthcoming on the typewriter. “Unless there’s anything else you need, I really should be on my way.”

Edward shook his head at his father, but not in answer, more in a display of disappointment as his fingers found the typewriter keys once more. ’If I did somehow choose to be this way, I’ll take my chances that I didn’t meet Roy just to have him be gone from me forever one day.’

“I hope you’re right.” Hohenheim replied honestly. From what little information and time he’d been able to gather, suspicions had no place, he knew his son was attached to Roy Mustang. He’d hate to see his son forced to live out an even lonelier existence than he himself was living, because at least he could be seen by and talk to other people.

‘I will be. You’re not the only smart one in the family.’ Edward typed back with adamant confidence.

A laugh huffed from Hohenheim, and he found himself smiling in his agreement, and more than a little pride. But it was the warmth he felt from the mention of them being family that lit his smile most of all, even though he was sure it was likely unintentional on his son’s part. “No. No, I’m not.” And
anything more on the matter he would have said, he felt would only anger his son, so he kept those thoughts to himself. Instead he reached for his suitcase, ignoring the one that had once held the typewriter. “I should go. The typewriter is yours to keep.”

Edward watched as his father stood up, and glanced down at the typewriter with a slight quirk to his lips. It might come in handy for Maes, now that the secret was out to him. Riza too, he had a feeling – or it soon would be.

“Stay safe, Ed.” Hohenheim continued as he turned for the door, “I’m sure we’ll run into each other again.”

Of that, Edward was beginning to have little doubt. The afterlife he’d chosen beside Roy had begun to run parallel to his father’s own goals. What he couldn’t quite decide was how he felt about that. There was anger towards his father, yes, and he suspected that there always would be, but much like how he’d felt in the alleyway when he’d first encountered the man again, there was that piece of him that still wanted to know his father loved him. That sought his love even after all the loss, and all the betrayal.

He supposed he should consider himself lucky that Roy was an alchemist and not a psychologist.

Casting a darkened look towards the coffee table, where the typewriter, a now empty wooden box, and a crystal lay still glowing with muted light, Edward closed his eyes briefly as he let out a slow breath. Then, he rose into the air and opening his eyes floated over to the front door, and as he hauled it open for his father, he told himself that the only reason his father was leaving unscathed was he didn’t want to risk waking Roy from his healing rest, or get blood on the floor.

Hohenheim looked to where he could sense the vague impression of his son’s soul and inclined his head in a nod and was about to step past the threshold when he hesitated and turned back to say one last thing, “for what it may be worth to you, I’m glad you’re happy here, with him. That you have a home again, and a family.”

“I wouldn’t trade him for anything,” Edward replied unheard in a fervent whisper, “but that doesn’t mean I’ve never looked back and wished you’d stayed.”

Hohenheim was forced to jump forward as the door suddenly swung at him, and narrowly avoided getting hit with it as it shut firmly behind him followed by the muffled sound of the deadbolt clicking into place. Letting out a worn breath he gave an experimental roll of his shoulders before gripping his suitcase a bit more firmly and stepping away from the house while tipping his hat back atop his head. He needed to get back to the city center and resume his search.

Inside the house Edward sank forward against the door with a bitter groan and a huff, and resting his forehead against the wood he closed his eyes as a wry smile twisted in the corner of his mouth. Roy was going to be properly annoyed that he’d missed Hohenheim stopping by.

Twisting away from the door he directed his gaze up towards where the bedroom lay, his smile becoming more easy, more true. And ignoring everything littering the coffee table, he made his way back up to their bedroom.

He found Roy exactly as he’d left him.

Edward twisted around in midair to alight onto his side of the bed, settling himself carefully so as to not jostle the bed overmuch. The book he’d been reading made it back into his hands, yet he didn’t continue right away, instead cradling it between his hands as he frowned down at the covers of their bed. “And to think my afterlife used to be boring.” He muttered to himself with dark amusement, his
lips quirking in his humor.

Giving a slight shake of his head, he let it fall back against the headboard as he closed his eyes, reflecting on everything that had just gone on and what all of it was about to mean for he and Roy.
Chapter 53

Chapter Fifty-Three

It was nearly dusk when Roy began to feel awareness come back to him, and the first thing he noticed was the sound of Edward speaking to him. No… reading to him. The realization made warmth bloom in his chest, and his heart clench fondly. Had the ghost stayed up here this whole time just reading to him? He was courting the idea of lying as still as possible to continue feigning sleep and being able to listen to Edward’s voice when the sudden return of pain made that impossible.

“Shit!” He growled in annoyance as his eyes shot open and his hands clenched into the sheet beneath him as he tried to rally through the spike of pain.

Edward dumped his book in an instant, darting for Roy’s bedside table where he snatched the bottle of painkillers that Maes had left out and snatched two of the pills out. Grabbing the glass of water he turned to pass first the pills into the one hand Roy had managed to untangle from the bed sheets, and then the water.

“Please tell me the military gives you all fast-acting stuff?” Edward implored as he knelt on the edge of the bed next to Roy, reaching a hand out to rest just through his heaving chest.

“Military pain meds,” Roy panted heavily as he tried to focus away from the pain, “are shit.”

Expression somewhere between concerned and amused, Edward tried not to worry his hands together as he watched Roy closely while the man swallowed the pills. “I feel like there’s a “but” coming…”

Roy huffed out a laugh through a tensed jaw and attempted a smile as best he could. “But,” he relented, “my mother sends me the good stuff."

“Next time we go see her, kiss her for me?” Edward requested adamantly.

Roy groaned, and he’d let Edward decide for himself whether it was from the pain or the thought of kissing his mother. Either way he knew he’d do what Edward wanted, he had the sneaking suspicion that somewhere along the line he’d become whipped to Edward’s every whim, but he was hardly of the mind to be otherwise.

“Is there anything more I can do?” Edward asked, unconsciously having shifted closer to him on the bed.

“I wouldn’t say no to some more of your soup.” Roy admitted hopefully, trying to relax into the bed as a fresh wave of pain skittered through him.

“Only if you stay lying down until I bring it back up. I don’t want you moving without supervision just yet.” Edward bargained with him with a furrowed brow and a stern look.

Roy snorted but attempted to shrug his shoulders in acquiescence, “whatever my sexy nurse commands.”

“Your sexy nurse is going to command another cold shower if you’re not careful.” Edward bantered back without pause, and just a hint of a smile before reaching out to place his hand just over Roy’s nearest arm. “Just lie still, let the medicine work.”
Roy grumbled at the mere thought of another cold shower, much less another one in front of Edward.

Edward chuckled behind a smirk, and satisfied that despite the fact Roy was clearly still in pain, the man was in good humor and spirits. “I’ll be right back.”

Roy watched as Edward dropped down through the bed and the floor in quick succession, and contented himself with the thought that soon he’d have more food. Between having missed dinner the night before, and his body trying to heal itself, he was starving again despite the pain. And it didn’t hurt that, for a ghost, Edward was actually quite good at cooking.

Letting out a breath that shook somewhat as he closed his eyes, and tried to focus away from the pain. Tried to focus on other things instead to distract himself, and wasn’t all too surprised at what his mind chose to focus on. It hadn’t escaped him how nice it was to have someone to care for him while he was laid up with an injury. In the past he’d just suffered through on his own, and it was incredibly humbling to realize he didn’t have to any more.

He’d have to do something nice for Edward… he just wasn’t sure what.

“Are you asleep?”

Roy wasn’t sure how long he’d been lost in his thoughts when Edward’s voice was suddenly there at his side, and he would debate later whether or not it was a good thing that sudden voices of people he hadn’t heard approach no longer affected him in any manner. “No,” it was more a tired grumble than a word, but when he opened his eyes again Edward was watching him with satisfaction.

“What?”

“Oh I’m just stupidly relieved you’re resting.” Edward remarked fondly, and settled back onto the bed with the tray of soup he had borne up the stairs.

“I actually do listen to you.” Roy felt it important to point out, and wondered at the domesticity of the defense.

Edward grinned at him and pointed at Roy’s legs with one hand as he balanced the tray in the other. “Come on, scoot up. Carefully.”

“By Gate,” Roy swore affectionately under his breath as he began to shift uncomfortably in the bed to do as instructed, “I do believe you’re worse than my mother.”

“I think she’d take that as a compliment on my behalf.” Edward countered smugly.

Roy grunted his reluctant agreement, and finished managing to hoist himself into a seated position once again. This time, being previously made more aware of his stitches, he managed to do it without pulling on any of them or truly overtaxing himself. But it didn’t mean that it didn’t still hurt.

“You should try and call her tonight.” Edward told him as he settled the tray onto Roy’s legs. “Is there a phone hookup in here anywhere? Or in the hallway? I can move the phone for you.”

“No need.” Roy waved off the query and reached for the spoon. “I have a spare phone in the second bedroom. On the rare occasion I have guests, should they need to make a call.”

Edward blinked a moment in open puzzlement before it dawned on him that there actually was a second bedroom. Vaguely he recalled Roy mentioning it back around the time they’d first met and were getting to know each other better, and he had seen the other door on the opposite end of the hallway, but he’d never actually paid attention to it. He’d never had reason to go in there, and Roy
never had.

Roy smiled around his spoon as he swallowed some of the soup. “At one point I thought to offer the room to you, but after that first morning I woke up with you here on the bed, I figured that you felt safer with me. Given how new being free to you was at the time.”

Edward could only be thankful he was unable to blush, given the smugly satisfied look on Roy’s face about the whole affair. “In my defense, I never actually intended to lose touch with this reality. Or for you to wake up and see me like that.”

“And now you have your own side of the bed.” Roy helpfully added mercilessly.

“You’re going to be just fine.” Edward grumbled through a slight glare, one that only intensified as Roy laughed through his next spoonful of soup.

Roy grinned at him unrepentantly as he dipped his spoon into the soup once more.

Edward shook his head and floating up he made his way over to his previously mentioned side of the bed and settled down, pulling his legs up to his chest and wrapping his arms around them and he leaned his cheek against his knees as he watched Roy closely. “I’m coming with you tomorrow, to see Kimblee.”

Roy glanced Edward’s way briefly before turning back to his soup, running the spoon through it to gather up the little tidbits of vegetables and meat in the broth. “I suspected you would. I shouldn’t need to torture him anyway, he’s, at the core, a logical sort of man. He’ll tell me what I want to know just for the sheer fact it’ll do him no good to conceal it, and he’s likely entertained at the thought of how this all will end, even after he’s gone.”

“And Maes will take us home right afterwards?” Edward queried then, worriedly.

Roy took one look at that expression, and felt a small part of him cave against his initial response. “Perhaps. I know I’m being closely monitored regardless, and while I can fool everyone else, the Brigadier General and Fuhrer both likely know why I stayed home today.”

Edward nodded in silent agreement. As much as he wished that weren’t true. The Fuhrer had blatantly thrown his hand into the brewing conflict between Roy and Grand, the involvement of Kimblee hadn’t been intended to be a secret, given how the man had readily admitted to it with nonchalance. He would have to be better next time, be quicker, to keep Roy from harm.

“Hey,” Roy set his spoon aside, abandoning all thoughts of continuing eating as he reached out for Edward with concern, “it’ll all be okay, I promise. I’m not about to abandon you because of them.”

Edward attempted a smile, and without much consideration to what he was doing, floated himself over to come to rest nearly up against Roy in response to the man’s reach for him. “You could be immortal and I’d still worry about you, like you do me.”

Roy chuckled quietly and reaching up, brushed his fingers through unresponsive strands of silvery hair. “We look out for each other.”

Roy was already picking the spoon back up obediently when he cast a curious look towards the ghost. “I thought I told you I wouldn’t believe you today if you told me you’re in love with me.”

Edward grinned despite himself, a measure of laughter escaping him as he cracked one eye open to
look at Roy amusedly. “It’s nothing like that. As it is I think I’ll just end up becoming that person you fear most to let into your house,” and at Roy’s devilishly curious look, laughed again before adding, “the kind that just steals Hazel and runs away.”

“You wouldn’t.” Roy denied with a grin.

Edward smirked at him and both eyes slipped closed once more. “Eat your soup, Roy.”

Roy chuckled and dunked his spoon back into the meal, and started once more on his dinner. As he ate Edward sat with him, a silent but comforting presence and mentally added Edward undeniably to the sparse list of people who he would ever trust to let see him in a state like this. Not that it surprised him. When it came to Edward… he was the exception to all his rules.

He had finished the soup and was just beginning to feel the painkillers start to work when Edward broke his silence.

“Do you need more sleep?” Edward queried in a mother hen tone he grudgingly suspected he’d learned from his mother.

Roy grimaced at the mere thought, and setting the tray on his bedside table approximated as best a stretch of his upper body and arms as the stitches and lingering pain allowed. “No. In fact, if I don’t get up at least for the bathroom and that phone call, I think I’m in danger of developing bed sores. I hate staying in bed this long.” And he cast a wickedly thoughtful glance Edward’s way before adding lewdly, “well…”

Edward promptly hit him with a pillow, being mindful he didn’t hit anything previously injured. “Whatever it is you’re imagining, stop!” He scolded quite passionately, trying to hide how flustered he’d actually gotten at that simple addendum.

Roy was laughing as he batted away the offending pillow, and managed to snag it from Edward’s grasp before hugging it to his chest and considering the ghost fondly. “You think too little of yourself if you believe it’s that easy for me to stop desiring you.”

Edward ducked his head, suddenly unable to keep meeting that dark-eyed gaze. “Shut up,” he murmured in a voice that only came out slightly embarrassed.

Roy’s smile only grew, but he knew that pressing Edward would only end with the ghost scurrying off somewhere and he rather selfishly enjoyed just the opposite. “You said you had some things to tell me?”

“Yes…” Edward hesitated a moment, briefly hoping that Roy wouldn’t be angry at him for allowing someone into the house, before continuing on firmly. “My father stopped by to see me this afternoon.”

Roy felt his entire body go rigid, felt all his focus shift with an almost dizzying acuteness onto the ghost at his side. “Are you okay?”

“I – what?” To say he was thrown was an understatement, but probably, he shouldn’t really be so surprised that his well being was the first thing Roy was concerned about.

“Are you okay.” Roy repeated firmly, his gaze not wavering from Edward’s face and the minitua flickers of emotions quickly cycling through.

“I’m okay.” Edward answered after a moment, a small smile appearing and slowly lighting with happiness.
“Good.” Roy stated with satisfaction, before tilting his head slightly in curiosity. “Why did he come to see you?”

Edward blinked at him a moment, before giving a short-lived laugh. “I thought you might not approve of my letting someone into the house.”

Roy frowned at the mere idea and gave a subtle shake of his head. “It’s your house too, don’t forget. And he’s your father. I’m hardly about to ban your family from our house, even if I’m still not pleased with a certain member of yours. Just like I’d hope you’d let my mother in if she came over, despite her annoying insanity.”

Edward gave him a reproachful look purely on principle before answering. “He came here because of you, actually.” And at Roy’s confused frown, he began to explain. “Apparently he sensed the stone Kimblee was using yesterday, and after what news he did hear he put it together that you’d been involved in the fight. He wanted to make sure you were fine… apparently he was concerned for me, should you not be.”

“How much did you tell him?” Roy asked with a slight frown, and reached for his glass of water once more.

Edward met his gaze calmly, “not much. Just that you had sustained some blood loss and were resting. I didn’t tell him how much blood you’d actually lost, that you’d needed a transfusion.”

Roy nodded slightly to himself before taking a long sip of water. “Well, I have to at least give the man credit for being worried about you because of it. Didn’t think he had it in him, to be honest. Not after how he left before.”

Edward grimaced somewhat and wrapped his arms a bit tighter about his legs. “He explained to me about that… we actually – ” he hesitated a moment before continuing on. “We actually communicated for a while. He opened up to me a bit more without you being there, and not because he wouldn’t want you to hear what he has to say, I mean, he pretty much gave me advice for you.”

“He has had some time to adjust to the idea of you still existing,” Roy pointed out as an option for Hohenheim’s sudden chattiness before refocusing on the other matter with a curious frown. “You said he explained about his leaving?”

Here, Edward gave a faint shudder, the mere thought of what his father had done was unpleasant to him to the extreme. He didn’t have good memories of the Gate, nor a good relationship with it. But it seemed that his father was familiar with it in a way he couldn’t imagine, nor how it could have possibly come about unless it had something to do with what his father had become. “He left because he went to confront the Gate about my existence.” And he was careful to leave out the other matters regarding the Gate, one in particular. There were just some things that he didn’t want or need Roy to know.

Roy blinked at him silently a few times as his grip on his water glass tightened. “Did he learn anything?”

“Just that I need to stay as far from it as I can.” Edward admitted in a worryingly quiet tone. “Apparently I amuse it. The way I am amuses it. According to the Gate, I chose to be this way.”

Roy considered Edward closely for several silent, long moments, before setting his glass of water aside and reaching out one hand to lay it just over the faint glow of Edward’s nearest knee. “You haven’t done that thing of yours, the way you lose touch with reality and sleep, in a long time.”
“I don’t sleep.” Edward corrected sourly.

“And the last time you did, did you dream of that night, of the Gate?” Roy pressed him, heart beating with concern for Edward and a measure of unsettlement about the sentient object of their discussion.

Edward hesitated, before giving Roy a faint, but thankful smile. “You know I didn’t.”

Roy nodded, “no, you didn’t. Being locked in that office was toxic for you. And as soon as we deal with the Fuhrer, you’ll be free of all the things that have made you see it again.”

“It’s just…” Edward paused a moment, his expression reflecting his inner turmoil, “even if I somehow chose to be this way, and just can’t recall it… and even if I was meant somehow to meet you, why was I trapped in that office for so long? Why wouldn’t I have just ended up beside you from the beginning?”

“Let’s blame that one on me.” Roy decided firmly, and at Edward’s surprised look, smiled. “I doubt I was ready to settle down all those years ago. Think of how fucked up you’d have made me. And all this stuff I need to accomplish would have faded against that onslaught of sudden psychological chaos.”

Edward couldn’t help the laughter that burst from him, as he shook his head in his amusement. “I pity the one who believes they can stop you from becoming Fuhrer. Even if that person is me.”

“I’ll become Fuhrer all the quicker because of you.” Roy had no doubt of that. His motivation had become something wholly unique from before, ever since Edward had entered his life. “Did your father come by just for that?”

Edward’s face twisted into something close to a grimace, “no. Well, not entirely? We spoke some more on the Fuhrer, and on Grand.” And here he looked at Roy sharply, “something is going on in Central, bigger than both of them. My father is trying to handle it, but he told me that you need to take control of the country as soon as possible if Amestris is going to survive.”

“Did he say what?” Roy frowned, feeling a flash of irritation that the man had decided to stop by with a sudden windfall of information when he was incapacitated.

“Yes, but he told me not to worry about it. By extension you.” Edward told him with a firm look. “He’s going after the one pulling the Fuhrer’s strings, the original homunculus. Apparently my father and he share quite the history.”

Roy grumbled several uncomplimentary words under his breath that had Edward giving him a reproachful look, something that only ended up making him smile. “Then we won’t worry about it, but that only makes my talk with Kimblee later on all the more crucial.”

Edward could only agree, yet he knew they couldn’t begin to do anything about that until the next morning. “He also showed me how to make that crystal we found in Xerxes work.” And at Roy’s surprised look of remembrance, added, “he also showed me how you could make your own. For secrecy reasons. And I think, if you give me enough time with the array, I could key it to your blood solely.”

“Blood?” Roy frowned even as he filed away the realization that he could now have impenetrable files, ones that likely only he, Edward, and Edward’s father would know how to operate in the first place. Well… and perhaps this original homunculus.

“Xerxes was apparently big on blood alchemy.” Edward explained with a half shrug. “And despite the morbidity, I can understand why they would use it as a medium.”
“Then we will experiment with your variations.” Roy allowed without concern. If anyone else had been talking about doing a bit of blood-letting in the name of alchemy, he would have been rather concerned indeed. However this was Edward, and aside from Hohenheim himself, there was likely none better to attempt this – and there was no fucking way that Roy was about to let Hohenheim stick him with a knife in the name of alchemy. “But,” he felt he really should put a rule on this, “not until I’m healed.”

Edward glared at him for the implication, “I would never try otherwise, you ass. After all the worry I went through when they were getting blood back in you? I’m not about to let you even have a nosebleed until I’m satisfied that you’re healed.”

“You make so many demands of me.” Roy couldn’t help but tease, just to see Edward’s answering scowl.

“I couldn’t have ended up being seen by someone unmotivated and without enemies.” Edward grumbled to himself, ignoring Roy’s weak laughter.

“Nice to hear that you only stay with me because you have no other options.” Roy failed at not sounding entirely too amused about it, and as Edward shot him a quick smirk he grinned back. “All right, my overprotective nurse, I think I’m good to try making that phone call.”

Edward immediately floated over to the floor to alight just as Roy finished pushing back the covers. “Well, your stitches still seem to be holding.” He remarked, casting his gaze quickly but with care over the multiple wounds stretching over Roy’s body.

“I’m not quite sure how to feel about the fact that I’m still naked and you’re just looking at my stitches.” Roy grumbled through a smirk he was having trouble hiding, scooting himself carefully and with bitten-back groans to guide his legs over the edge of the bed.

“I wasn’t aware there was anything else to look at.” Edward shot back with an evil grin, his eyes dancing in mirth and absolutely not looking down from Roy’s face.

Roy glared to the sound of Edward’s laughter and carefully got to his feet, finding that the second time was much easier, if easier meant that he didn’t almost break into a cold sweat this time. His legs seemed to be steadier as well, although he estimated he has less than half an hour remaining before the painkillers he’d taken would start making him drowsy. His current rest would only get him so far.

“Carefully now.” Edward urged as Roy began walking, and hovered anxiously next to the man the entire way out of the room and down the hallway.

Upon reaching the door to the spare bedroom, Roy had to lean up against it to catch his breath. “Might punch Kimblee anyway tomorrow.”

“You nearly melted his flesh and you amputated his arms and you think he still deserves a punch?” Edward queried in some disbelief. “A bit… tame, after everything else, don’t you think?”

Roy grumbled under his breath but didn’t vocalize a true answer, instead straightening as best he was able and grabbing the door handle to let them in.

Edward was momentarily distracted by the new sights, so much so that Roy had made it halfway across the room when he finally noticed the man had moved at all. So he quickly hurried after, head still on a swivel.

“Dare I ask what you were expecting?” Roy asked with humor as he carefully lowered himself onto the chair near the telephone.
Edward looked away from the sparse furnishings of bed, wardrobe, and a few tables back to Roy. “It just seems rather bare in here compared to the rest of the house. You really don’t come in here all that much.”

“I’ve not been in here since you came to stay with me, and it was nearly a year before that the last time I did.” Roy picked the receiver up and began to dial. “I don’t have guests much any more. After the war it wasn’t a safe idea for mom to come visit me, so if this bedroom gets used at all it’s usually by Maes if he’s had too much to drink.”

“Remind me to wash that chair then before the next time he has need of it.” Edward grinned and settled himself onto the bed.

Roy glared at him, as potent a glare as he could manage given that he was still completely without a stitch of clothing.

Edward merely beamed back at him beatifically.

Roy was saved the trouble of trying to get revenge on the smug little terror who’d run off with his heart, as he heard his mother finally pick up the call. “You know, Edward is nearly as incessantly annoying about nursing someone as you are.”

“Oh thank goodness!”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Don’t worry.” Roy reassured her as warmth at her concern filled his chest.

“I was talking about Edward, not you, you reckless, callous, horrible beast of a man!”

Roy couldn’t even form words, all that made it from him was an affronted strangling sound of a high-pitched nature.

“I’m glad he’s taking care of you properly. You never liked my mother-henning. If he’s as bad as me maybe you’ll go through another dry spell of not scaring either of us half to death!”

Edward was watching him from the bed with a curiously humored expression, and Roy had to fight against the childish urge to make a face at the ghost. “Believe me, mom,” he began instead with solemn honesty, “I never want to see him look that scared over me again.”

Edward suddenly couldn’t keep his eyes on Roy, his gaze lowering with abrupt and aggravating shyness onto the bedspread.

“*I’ll take it.*” Her tone was approving, and there was a slight pause before she continued in a softer voice than before, “*you’re recovering well then?*”

“Well enough to go back to work in a few days, at least, official in-Headquarters work.” Roy supplied as he took a visual inventory of his stitches. “The worst of the injuries… I should be able to get rid of those stitches in a few weeks. So far no infection, no complications.”

“Thank goodness.” The sigh of relief was audible, and then she took a breath. “Now maybe you want to tell me just what the fuck happened? Maes only said it was an alchemy fight between you and someone that if I recall correctly, should have been executed by now?”

“I’ll execute him myself tomorrow.” Roy assured her with a cold finality. “The Fuhrer let him loose on me, although it does remain in my best interests for the moment to not confront him about it. I won’t have a sufficiently good backing to stand at until I kill the Brigadier General and take the position for myself.”
“You had better be ready for that fight when it comes then, because if this is the condition you end up in after fighting a man who’s been imprisoned for the better part of a decade…”

She left it hanging, and truly, Roy didn’t need her to finish. He knew, and he bowed his head. “I will be.” He promised in a softer, more reflective voice. “He used one of the stones to strengthen his power above his usual level. I won’t go in against Grand under the illusion he’d fight any fairer.”

“Then don’t fight fair either, Edward wants to protect you. I can tell that much. And I think that ghost of yours would fight downright dirty to protect you.”

“I’m pretty sure he caused collateral damage in the interest of just that. Among other things.” Roy smiled into the phone even as he cast his gaze to where Edward now watched him with a warm expression.

“You found yourself a fine match in him.”

“I know.” A faint hint of laughter suffusing his voice as he continued to rest his gaze on Edward, who now looked rather more curious than before. “He’s the best thing to ever happen to me.”

“It’s good that you know it.”

Edward couldn’t help the smile that slipped onto his face, and did not fight the warmth building in his chest as he drew his own conclusions. Not worried for a moment that he was wrong, not with the way that Roy watched him. Although he did have to admit, the whole thing was muddled somewhat with Roy looking like someone had been practicing needlework on him.

“I should get going, I just wanted to let you know I was okay. But I really should be in bed. Today is my last day for bed rest and if I don’t make full use of it, Edward will only scold me again.”

“Oh I’ll scold you for using me as an excuse to hang up on your mother.” Edward corrected him promptly, and only narrowed his eyes when Roy shot him a quick grin.

“Take care of yourself, kid, and give Edward my love.”

“What about me?” Roy immediately shot back in mock offense.

“I suppose you’re not so bad.” Her laughter came over the line clear and bright, “love you too.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Roy tried his best to sound disbelieving, but to his own ears, failed horribly. “Love you.”

And for a moment, he hesitated at placing the receiver back onto the hook, but in the end dropped it down. There was still much he wanted to tell his mother, but not all of it he wanted Edward to overhear, though it wouldn’t be the first time the ghost would have heard it.

“I do believe my mother might love you more than me.” Roy remarked as he steeled himself to stand back up.

Edward grinned outright and floated up off the spare bed to hover nearer to Roy as the man worked on standing himself with the aid of the chair. “Well she has good taste.”

“If I weren’t so determined to have you for a wife I have a feeling she’d want to adopt you.” Roy’s groan was purely from the exertion of getting back on his feet, he was certain of it.

“I believe the term you’re searching for is husband. Maybe I should ask Maes to check you for any
blows to the head.” Edward commented lightly, doing his best to ignore the warm stirrings inside him.

“You will do no such thing.” Roy grumbled and began to lead them back out of the spare room. “I did not hit my head and that man is as far from a qualified nurse as an executioner is.”

Edward smiled and trailed after Roy, “I don’t know, he did a fairly adept job of patching you back up again. I was rather grateful for his lack of hesitation about any of it.”

Roy grunted out a reminiscent noise as he shut the door behind them both before making his way back towards his own room. “During war times everyone eventually gets basic training on that due to necessity, but none of us are qualified even remotely for it. But needs must. Most of us learned on sheer guess and panic.”

“Well I have no intention of letting you get hurt like this again.” Edward replied softly as he kept half an eye on Roy and the other on their destination. “My pranks resume as soon as we’re back at Headquarters full time. You’ll just have to forgive me if I increase the violence of them. I have to ensure that even with you like this, he remains worse off than you.”

After everything that had just happened in the past twenty-four hours, Roy knew better than to even attempt a token argument. He knew he’d lose, and he did know that Edward had every right to do as he wanted in an attempt to keep him safe. So instead all he said was a lightly humored, “remind me never to make you angry.”

“Funny,” Edward began drily, “I believe you attempt to do just that at least twice a week.”

“Then what do you call this towards Grand?” Roy pressed with sudden curiosity.

“Revenge.” Edward confirmed with stiff certainty and a gleam in his eye. “For daring to be a threat to you, and for all the lives he’s ruined.”

Roy accepted the answer with a slow nod and a pensive look, and they’d made it all the way back into their own bedroom when he broached something else. “Just promise me that you won’t try anything against the Fuhrer. Even I could be hard pressed to get into his office to rescue you if you collapse in there. He’d be on intensive guard.”

Edward didn’t even have to think about it, and it was more than his father’s warning words about them staying together around the Fuhrer homunculus. All it took was remembering what happened to him those previous times when he’d been overcome by tearing pain, to know that he didn’t want to suffer it long not knowing when Roy could retrieve him, help him. “I promise.”

Roy shot the ghost a quick look to determine the truth of that, before looking away with satisfaction as he turned himself into the bathroom. “Well that’s one less thing for me to worry over.”

“I don’t intend to distract you when it could risk your life.” Edward assured him quietly and came to rest against the bathroom door, his gaze resting on the wall just beside Roy to give the man some semblance of privacy but still allow him to keep watch.

Not long after they both made it back to the bed.

“When all this is over, when you’re Fuhrer, I’m not sure that I’ll know what to do with myself.” Edward smiled at the admittance as he stretched out atop the blanket next to Roy.

“How do you mean?” Roy questioned as he let the soreness of his previous moving around relax out of his body, into the softness of his bed, chasing that shadow of sleep.
“I feel like I’ve been trying to protect you from both Grand and the Fuhrer since I met you. It’ll be odd, not having that any longer. Good, welcome even, don’t misunderstand… but odd.” Edward explained as he turned his head towards Roy.

Roy gave a huffed laugh and his lips quirked into a wry smile. “They’re not the only enemies I have, but they are the worst.”

“Yes,” Edward drawled with dry amusement, “whatever will I do when I only have minor nuisances to protect you from? If I weren’t already dead I’d claim it enough to bore me to death.”

“I daresay that you’ll find a way to be creative about it. You’re rather inventive when the mood strikes you.” Roy commented with a fond smile.

“I had to be.” Edward admitted slowly after a moment, and shifted to lay on his side, propping his head up on one hand to peer down at Roy although his gaze wasn’t wholly focused. “After my dad left, my mother was withdrawn, sad, although she did try and hide it from us. It didn’t take me long to learn that the more creative I got with my alchemy, the more accomplished, that she’d smile normally again.”

“I know.” And Roy did know, he had gone through a similar time with his own mother, despite not even really remembering his father. “I think parents, more than anything, like to see that their children are thriving.”

Edward smiled faintly and focused down on the man who was looking aside at him. “You’d have made a good parent.”

Roy burst out laughing before he could help himself, nor could he help the yawn it disintegrated into. “I’d make a terrible parent.” And he considered Edward thoughtfully a moment before he closed his eyes tiredly. “Besides, I’ve my heart rather set on someone that would make even adopting a kid impossible.”

“I guess you’ll just have to settle for Hazel.” Edward told him with a light amusement, basking in the warmth glowing inside him once more.

“I thought you were going to steal Hazel from me and run off together.” Roy muttered before another yawn stole his voice.

Edward laughed quietly and lay fully back on the bed once more. “Go to sleep. It’ll be easier to rob you blind of your manly idea of a pet if you’re unawares.”

“Rescuing that waterlogged bottlebrush was manly. And dirty.” Roy defended, his voice trailing off quieter with every syllable until all that came from him were deep breaths.

Edward smiled as he watched Roy fall asleep, a content warmth of relief inside him that the man was resting and seemed to be recovering well. He needed the rest, especially considering the day that would come tomorrow. It would not be an easy day for either of them, he had no illusions of that.

But it needed to be done, they needed whatever information Kimblee would be able to provide, and they needed to remove him from the picture altogether.

He just hoped that there weren’t any more dangers hiding just off frame.
Chapter 54

Early the next morning Hazel, finally recovered from his gluttonous coma, scampered into the bedroom and onto the bed in order to begin pawing through his human’s hair fastidiously with several looks of darting rodent quickness towards where he could sense the other human he could not see.

“He does look a bit scruffy.” Edward agreed with warm humor in answer to the looks. “He hasn’t preened himself for some time now.”

Hazel seemed to agree, for his paws did not pause in their attempt to comb through the unruly sleep-mussed hair.

Edward chuckled lightly and reached out to run his fingers through the disheveled locks himself, and found himself smiling when the strands didn’t respond to his touch, because the more he looked at it, the more he found the look rather charming on the man. It was a strange realization, to be sure.

It took several minutes of Hazel’s grooming attentions before Roy began to rouse from his sleep, and he did so with halfhearted swats with his good arm towards his pet, and a petulant groan.

Hazel darted each swat with indifferent ease before scampering onto Roy’s forehead and twitching his tail back and forth across the man’s face as he continued his work from this new vantage point.

“Fuckin – Hazel!” Roy was now fully awake and squinting his eyes against the fur plaguing his vision as he attempted to snatch the menace from his face, only for the tyrannical beast to dart one way or the other on his forehead to avoid his admittedly less than coordinated efforts.

Edward was in the middle of a fully fledged snickering fit.

“Edward!” Roy accused, having given up for the moment trying to snatch Hazel away. “I thought you were going to steal him last night and run away! What are you both still doing here?”

Edward grinned at the question, then promptly ignored it. “Trust me, Roy, you should let the master hairstylist work. He’s turning your hair into a very stylish mess that’s standing straight up at the moment.”

Roy swore vividly, listening to Edward’s increased laughter with a smile mostly hidden by Hazel’s tail continuously twitching across his face. Heaving a great sighing breath he closed his eyes once more and for the moment let Hazel continue fussing with his hair as he shored up his strength and awareness.

“How are you feeling?” Edward asked as he turned fully to face the prone man. He hadn’t noticed anything but Roy peacefully sleeping, no fits or fever sweats, but he knew that wasn’t everything.

“I’m going to need another pain killer, I can feel it coming on.” Roy admitted with a resigned exhale. “But I don’t feel so flattened.”

Edward was already moving to get the bottle of pills, “good,” he breathed in relief as he turned back towards the man, “let’s try and get you sorted before Maes gets here.”

“Right.” It likely wasn’t what Edward ideally wanted to say, but they both knew that other matters
came first today over his continued recovery, and Roy was grateful enough for the unspoken support not to even make light-hearted comments about preferring to stay in bed.

Edward watched with an amused smirk as Roy finally managed to snare Hazel away from his hair, the squirrel soon being carefully cradled in Roy’s bandaged arm as he propped himself into a seated position with his good one. “You should let him do your hair every day.”

“You two would be perfect for each other.” Roy muttered as he swallowed two more painkillers dry and then reached for the glass of water Edward was passing him.

“We’d somehow end up becoming criminals.” Edward suspected with a quirk of a smile as he looked down to where Hazel was now nuzzling fiercely into the crook of Roy’s arm as if sniffing out the tastiest acorn in the world.

“I don’t doubt that.” Roy passed the glass back into Edward’s waiting hand, and caught himself wondering when it had stopped being weird to him to see an incorporeal being handling his things and not worrying that anything would drop.

Edward had set the glass aside and now turned an assessing gaze onto the man at his side, eyeing him critically and with no small amount of worry he tried his best to keep concealed. To all outward accounts, Roy seemed to be doing well after the injuries he’d suffered, but he knew Roy… he’d have to keep a close eye on the man during today’s excursion.

Roy took one look at Edward’s face to know exactly what to do, and as he began to gently pet and rub at Hazel’s back, sending the squirrel into a boneless pile of delighted rodent fluff, he began with, “do you think you could go into my closet and get some of my clothes out?”

“Not a spare uniform?” Edward asked him with a narrowed gaze.

Roy smiled with a content happiness that was all the apparition’s fault, he’d never felt this fucking tame before. The Roy of only a month ago would have demanded a uniform and given zero fucks about any protests to it. “I’m not going in today. Whatever you like will be just fine.”

Edward waited just a moment, still not entirely believing that he wasn’t needing to argue Roy into making this decision, before bursting into a wide grin and whirling off the bed towards the closet.

“After all,” Roy began as he adjusted to scratching at Hazel’s belly as the squirrel rolled over in boneless bliss underneath his ministrations, “I believe I promised to take you to the zoo over the weekend. Another half day of bed rest should allow me to keep that promise.”

Edward’s hands fell still against the clothes he’d been rummaging through at the words, twisting into the light woolen sweater they’d landed on, and not because of the reminder of their plans, but for the sheer fact that despite everything, everything, that was currently happening in their lives, still being able to take him to the zoo mattered more to Roy. “Roy… I—” don’t deserve you. But he couldn’t say that. Where did ridiculous thoughts like that even come from?

“You are not going to talk me out of the zoo.” Roy insisted from the bed as sternly as a man stark naked and cuddling with a squirrel could insist.

“That’s not—” Edward cut himself off again, because really, he wasn’t sure what it was. Shaking his head he freed the sweater from the hanger and snatched up a pair of trousers as well before turning to gather up socks and then paused as an odd crisis came over him as he stared down at the shelving unit built into the closet. “Uh,” he began intelligently, “you want the boxers or the briefs?”

A wicked, and entirely evil grin of delighted enjoyment broke onto Roy’s face as he replied
cheerfully, “I believe I said to pick out whatever you like for me.”

Edward was completely certain that were he flesh and blood still, he’d have turned a shade of red never yet before seen. “You, Roy Mustang, are impossible.” He hissed and steeled his nerves as he reached forward. “I positively hate you.”

Roy’s grin didn’t falter at the response, if anything, it only grew more cemented onto his face.

Edward had landed onto the bedroom floor just for the sheer fact that he could then properly march across it, and dumped the selected clothes onto the foot of the bed. “Up!”

Roy tried to keep his laughter at bay, but failed miserably as he dissolved into snickers that pulled uncomfortably at his stitches. Setting Hazel down so that he could safely get out of the bed he then took two steps to peer down at the selected clothing before remarking quite neutrally, “I can see I’ll be getting rid of all my boxers then.”

Edward promptly fled the room as Roy’s laughter rang out clearly throughout the house.

Down in the kitchen Edward grumbled to himself as he began to work on putting together some breakfast for Roy. He wasn’t about to let the man go off to kill Kimblee without eating first. And as he considered, he threw several more pieces of bread onto the pile to be toasted. If Maes hadn’t eaten yet, or Riza hadn’t, they would need to. They were in charge of helping keep Roy safe.

He had put together an entire breakfast of toast, pancakes, fruit, and sausages when Roy finally came into the kitchen looking a little more wobbly than either of them would like.

“Stairs.” Roy exhaled loudly in relief as he finally collapsed into one of the chairs around the dining table. “When we move and get a place that has room for a pony, remind me to make sure it’s a single story house. No more stairs.”

“Planning on getting injured a lot, are you?” Edward frowned at him suspiciously as he brought the last of the food over with a plate. “Or are you just getting weak in your old age?”

“Evil spirit, I should figure out how to banish you.” Roy muttered without conviction as he began to dish food onto his plate whilst casting a pointed look around at it all. “Do you expect me to eat all this?”

Hazel promptly leapt onto the table and stole a strawberry.

“And Hazel.” Roy amended without pause, reaching out to scratch at the squirrel’s head.

Edward settled into his own chair at the table, “I made extra in case Maes and Riza haven’t eaten yet.”

“I fell in love with a housewife.” Roy grinned, pouring maple syrup over his pancakes in ever-widening circles.

“Husband.” Edward corrected before he even really thought about what he was saying, before instantly freezing as Roy turned a predatorily-interested look on him. “Don’t even start…” he warned.

“Start what, dear?” Roy asked back sweetly, setting the bottle of syrup aside.

“That!” Edward accused as Roy burst into laughter. “Oh, you’re impossible.”
Roy winked at him as he finally managed to get control over his laughter and turn to his breakfast feeling only a little winded still. “I’m glad you’re still here with me despite it.”

Edward smiled before he could even think to help it, and he shook his head with a soft chuckle. “Idiot man, eat your breakfast.” And rising up from his chair he slipped Hazel another berry while whispering, “I’ll never leave you, Roy.”

Roy looked up quickly, only to see that Edward was busy watching Hazel. It wasn’t so much the words, for Edward had said their like before, no… it was something in Edward’s voice. Some strange fragileness… and when he realized why, he felt his chest seize. “I really scared you, didn’t I.”

“Eat.” Edward repeated and turned a firm look on Roy, and a tremulous smile. “I’m fine.”

Roy didn’t eat, and didn’t believe him. He’d seen shock before in others, experienced it himself, and while it was handy for emergency situations, the fallout was never enjoyable. But he knew better than to press Edward, not in this. “Yes, dear.”

Edward smiled a bit stronger at the endearment, a bit wryly to be sure, but all the same it made him feel a bit better. “Impossible.” He repeated fondly with a shake of his head and turned to go back to his chair.

“I love you, too.” Roy answered softly, and with a content smile as he made to turn back to his breakfast.

Edward paused as he was about to resume his seat, hand on the back of the chair as he looked back over at Roy. The man was busy cutting up his pancakes and totally unaware of his gaze. His smile turning into something far softer, far happier, he looked away to finish taking his seat.

Roy looked up after a moment, having suspected some form of flustered remark from Edward, only to see the ghost busy watching Hazel with a deeply thoughtful look on his face. “Oh…” he whispered, barely audible even to himself, stunned.

Edward looked back over at Roy after several minutes of not hearing any sort of eating going on to see the man watching him with an expression he’d never seen before, and he frowned in sudden worry. “Are you okay?”

Roy couldn’t help the slight laugh that escaped him, and he nodded with a reassuring smile. “Fine. I promise.”

Edward watched as Roy turned back to his breakfast with an energy he’d not thought the man had in him, and the corners of his mouth twitched up in a quick, amused smile before he turned back to watching Hazel scamper about the table after more food.

Hazel had consumed six berries, two sausages, and a third of a pancake when there was a knock at the front door.

“You’re making my squirrel fat.” Roy remarked as he watched Edward roll another berry Hazel’s way.

“Thought he was my squirrel now.” Edward grinned and looked up at the man. “Going to get the door?”

“I probably should.” Roy gave in and heaved a sigh before shoving himself up from his chair. “Maes wouldn’t be freaked out if you opened the door, but Riza still doesn’t have an explanation and I
Edward watched him go with some amusement, despite the uncertainty that had lit inside him when the knock had come. He knew that it was time for Roy to come clean to Riza about his existence, and yes, Maes already knew about him… but he’d been alone for so long that it was strange for people to know about him. He could still count their numbers on both his hands.

He could hear talking out in the hallway and Maes’s laughter.

Not long later Roy walked back into view, and gave Edward a reassuring smile.

“Good morning, Edward!” Maes called out cheerfully, figuring the ghost was around nearby somewhere.

Edward couldn’t help but smile at the welcome, and a bit at the confused look on Riza’s face. “Roy?”

“Yes, yes.” Roy accepted with a mock put-upon look and turned to Maes. “He’s quite happy to see you too.”

“So, Roy says you made us all breakfast.” Maes began as he walked over to the table, “where can I sit?”

From beside Roy, Riza had adopted a look of intense concern for the sanity of her comrade and friend as she watched Maes talk with animated happiness to thin air. “Sir,” she began in a carefully hushed voice, “is he –”

Edward chose that moment to kick a chair on the far side of the table out for Maes. “I’ll get plates.” Before turning to Riza herself and meeting her harried expression. “Riza, I’m guessing you noticed some odd things during my fight with Kimblee? That was Edward. He’s a ghost.”

Riza was staring now, her whole body rigid, as she watched a cabinet open and two plates be taken out, the cabinet door closing and the plates making their way seemingly on their own to the table. “So I see.” She managed to get out in a strained voice.

“He’s already met Maes and my mother, and if you give me a moment I’ll get him some paper so you can meet him too.” Roy told her, still watching her closely, noting that the color was beginning to slowly return to her face.

And suddenly it all began to come together for her, to make sense. All the strange happenings at Headquarters, all the strange happenings with Roy, the comments she’d overheard from the cleaning staff late at night when she’d stayed late to practice at the firing range. “And you can see him?”

“I can see him.” Roy agreed with a slow smile.

“Roy, my typewriter is still on the coffee table in the front room.” Edward popped his head up from where he had settled in back at the table.

“Typewriter?” Roy echoed in confusion, ignoring for the moment Riza’s darting looks between him and the spot at the table he was looking at.
Edward nodded, “my father brought it for me.”

“Of course he did.” Roy grumbled and looked over at Maes, “pull out the chair on your right,” before looking at Riza, “go ahead and sit. Get some breakfast. I’m going to get his typewriter so he can introduce himself.”

Maes waved her over as Roy left the room, “come on, Hawkeye. He’s perfectly safe unless you have aspirations to kill Mustang.”

Edward couldn’t find it in himself to even try to feel offended by the description.

“I’ll be perfectly clear then,” Riza began in a still strained sounding voice, but she managed to get her feet to move her forward regardless of the lingering chill of fear that had settled in her spine at Edward’s initial… appearance, “I have no aspirations but to see him alive and healthy.”

“I know.” Edward smiled at her unseen and looked over as Roy’s footsteps sounded nearby once more.

“And he’s turned Roy into a mature adult finally.” Maes remarked, perfectly aware of Roy’s nearing proximity. “We owe a lot to him.”

“I’m going to turn you into a mature corpse if you’re not careful.” Roy threatened his best friend good naturedly and set the typewriter he’d been sent to fetch in front of Edward along with the sheaf of paper. “Need anything else, darling?”

Edward fumbled getting his first paper inserted into the typewriter, and his fingers trembled slightly as he corrected it and steadfastly he did not look up to Roy. “This will be fine.”

Roy sat back down in his chair feeling more than a little giddy, but he fought hard to keep it from showing, though if the suspicious look Maes shot him was any indication, his best friend knew he was concealing something.

“How are you feeling?” Maes asked when he realized that Riza was wide-eyed and utterly beyond noticing anything else as the typewriter keys began clicking away seemingly on their own power.

Roy gave a noncommittal shrug as he too watched Edward type while Hazel crawled up onto his shoulder to nap off his latest gluttonous venture. “Took a few more painkillers this morning, but by tomorrow I don’t think I’ll need them. I always healed fast.”

“And now you have your wife to take care of you.” Maes teased mercilessly.

“Husband.” Edward and Roy both corrected at the same time, only for Edward to instantly go perfectly still and Roy to grin wickedly.

Riza took one look at the expression on her commander’s face and the sudden absence of any typing to formulate a theory, and she looked over at Maes. “I get the feeling we’re missing something.”

“Yes…” Maes agreed with voracious interest as he looked over at his best friend who was apparently watching Edward with a positively soppy look on his face. “Are you tormenting the poor thing again with your unwanted affections?”

Roy turned his attention from Edward, not that the ghost noticed, to smile sweetly at Maes and give him a rude hand gesture.

“It should strike me as weirder that you apparently love a ghost.” Riza deadpanned in a low mutter.
Edward was finally typing again as the butterflies inside his chest continued to flutter spastically, chancing a quick glance up towards Roy only to see the man busy looking over at his friends. Just as quickly he ducked his head again as a shy smile slipped onto his lips and forced himself to focus back on his task of introducing himself to Roy’s lieutenant. There would be time later for self-reflection.

Riza had just begun to start eating, despite her stomach still feeling a little queasy after her scare of moments ago, when the paper that had been in the typewriter was slid across the table to her. It took her several moments to make her fingers reach out and take it, but she managed, and began to read.

Edward watched Riza, a pleased expression making its way onto his face as he saw the tenseness that had lingered in her posture begin to ease as she read.

“Well then,” Riza finally lifted her gaze, looking towards where the apparition seemed to be sat, “I do believe I owe you a long overdue welcome. But I have to ask, are you really married to Mustang?”

Maes burst into howls of laughter at the question.

Edward was spluttering wordlessly, the only noise seemingly able to come from him was a high-pitched strangling sound as Roy watched him with a gentle chuckle and a fond smile.

“We’re not married.” Roy denied, though his gaze never left Edward and the silver eyes that now watched him with a hesitant nervousness that he could only smile at reassuringly.

“They’re not even together,” Maes provided helpfully.

“I see.” Riza cast a dark look at her commander and friend. “Don’t harass him,” she waved the paper about, “he seems sweet and you can be bullheaded.” She then promptly looked over towards where Edward seemed to be. “I have no doubts that you can handle him, but if you ever want blackmail stories from his childhood that even his mother doesn’t know, you write me a note.”

“That’s low!” Roy protested with an offended glare.

“Apparently you were a hellion as a child.” Edward theorized, given everything, and shot Roy a smile. “Don’t worry, your mother has given me plenty, and I hardly need blackmail to get you to do anything.”

“Eat your breakfasts!” Roy demanded of his friends, and ignored their laughter as they obeyed the order.

Edward shook his head with a quiet laugh, his gaze catching Roy’s dark eyes and a smile slipped onto his lips. “Each person you tell about me gets easier for you, doesn’t it.”

Roy huffed but didn’t comment, settling for a roll of his eyes and reaching up to readjust Hazel when the squirrel almost slipped from his shoulder in sleep.

Breakfast was finished within the hour, and the table cleared completely of the food and the dishes into the sink to the tune of Riza and Maes thanking Edward for cooking for them as well.

Then the mood turned somber, serious.

“I’ll drive.” Riza announced to them all as they made their way as a group into the main hallway near the front door. “If we let you drive, Maes,” she said as she relieved him of the car keys, “we’ll all lose our breakfasts. Which would be a real shame, because Edward’s cooking is fantastic.”
Edward preened happily at the praise.

“I am not that bad a driver!” Maes protested in words only, following after her as she let herself out.

Roy didn’t follow them immediately, instead turning to Edward with a serious expression as he pulled on his ignition-cloth gloves that had been in a back pocket of his trousers. “I am going to kill him…”

Edward gave him a reproachful glare, “good. So don’t you dare make one of your idiotic pleas for me to stay behind.”

A quick smile lit Roy’s face as he ducked his head in a short series of nods before looking back up to meet Edward’s silver gaze. “You’ll always have my back, won’t you.”

“And your front, on occasion.” Edward smirked at him and after a moment’s hesitation, drifted forward to reach a hand up to Roy’s face. “Now let’s go be done with this.”

“Yes, he is rather overdue for his execution.” Roy determined with a flare of irritation that he mustered aside as best he could. When dealing with Kimblee in any condition, it was always best to have a clear head and emotions.

The two of them made their way out of the house, Roy locking it up behind them before making his way down to the waiting car with Edward. The front seat had been left free, and one in the back which Edward took to sit next to Maes while Roy carefully lowered himself into the front seat.

“I’m guessing you’re taking the rest of the day off, sir?” Riza asked as she guided the car from the curb.

“Edward’s orders.” Roy agreed to the background noise of Edward’s continued approval. “You may have noticed through past events, but he’s rather protective of me. If not for needing to deal with Kimblee before he dies from the injuries he sustained, I’d be on another full day of bed rest.”

Riza nodded slowly, as much as she wanted to comment about the work piling up for him, she didn’t think it wise considering there was an apparition somewhere in the vehicle that could be dangerously vengeful when it came to Roy.

“I’ll be back tomorrow.” Roy assured her, having a feeling what was waiting for him. “Both to make sure the paperwork doesn’t get backlogged, and because I don’t like not being able to keep an eye on certain individuals right now.”

“The Fuhrer has been a bit sedentary, holed up in his office more than usual.” Maes reported as he lounged in his seat while making sure he only invaded the space of his seat – he wasn’t sure where Edward was, just that it was very unlikely that the ghost had been left behind.

“I wish I could get into his office…” Edward whispered through a frown, adding even as Roy shot an alarmed look back through the rearview mirror, “I’d love to prank him in ways I can’t with the Brigadier General.”

“The Brigadier General, according to Armstrong’s reports,” Maes continued, unaware of the side commentary by Edward, “hasn’t been showing up as much to Headquarters, ends up spending near entire days in that laboratory I was staking out when the Fuhrer caught up with me.”

“Fuck.” Roy muttered with an unsettled twisting sensation in his chest, worrying at his mouth with one hand.
“We’re running out of time.” Edward whispered into the quiet that had settled into the car, before directing a sharp look up at Roy. “What are you still waiting for?”

“I was waiting to be sure.” Roy replied, and to their credit, neither Riza nor Maes questioned the conversation they couldn’t hear the other side of. Twisting his body as best he was able to look into the rear of the car, he caught Edward’s irritated gaze. “We’d never actually caught Grand, before now, going in there. I had to be sure I was breaking into the right facility, otherwise instead of a promotion for killing the treasonous bastard, I get a murder charge and a prison cell. That’s why I left Kimblee alive, because that little bird is going to fucking sing so that I make sure I bring down the correct facility.”

Edward sat back into his seat, his irritation beginning to ebb from him as he began to understand. “You know, if you’d let me fight for you from the beginning you’d have never gotten hurt as badly and we could have had this conversation when you made the decision about Kimblee initially.”

“Believe me, Edward,” Roy turned back around with a grunt of discomfort, “I’ve learned my lesson about a lot of things since then.”

“I’d never let you stay locked in a prison cell.” Edward remarked after several silent moments in the car – neither Maes nor Riza knowing if the previous conversation was over between he and Roy. “I’ve been locked up… it’s not something I’d let you sit through, and there’s no fucking way I’m doing it again myself since I wouldn’t leave you.”

Roy cracked a grin, trying to hide how touched he actually was by the promise, “that’s my rebellious Edward.”

“It was really unfair for Mustang to keep Edward all to himself for so long,” Maes whispered up to Riza.

It didn’t take them long to pull off the main road down a clearly little-used side street, the main traffic rush of the early morning was over, and Fuery had long since fixed whatever he’d done to bring all the systems down. Several more minutes of driving and several more kilometers covered saw Riza guiding the car onto another side road and up to the locked gates of an abandoned estate home.

“I’ve got the gates.” Maes announced as he exited the car quickly and jogged up to them.

Inside the vehicle, Edward watched in fascination as Maes got the padlock opened and pushed one of the heavy gates inward to allow the car passage onto a clearly derelict property. The estate home itself was two stories, but impossible to tell the sprawl of thanks to the dense overgrowth of the many trees and shrubberies. The sign they passed by midway down the short driveway announced it as the ‘Central Convent’ – clearly long since out of use.

“By the way, Edward,” Roy began as the vehicle stopped and Riza cut the engine, “it is a safe house. You can always come here if you need to, or if, Gate forbid, something happens to me and you need to get me somewhere that isn’t the house. I keep it well stocked.”

Edward didn’t question the information, but filed it away with a studious attention, as well as the route they’d taken to get here. He didn’t have much in the way of driving experience, true, but he imagined he’d get fantastic at it in the case of an emergency such as one Roy was suggesting. “I understand.”

The three of them got out of the car as Maes jogged up to join them, having locked the gates once more.
“I put him down in the basement level.” Maes reported, “even without his hands and his condition I didn’t trust the bastard to not try and get to a window.”

“Perfect.” Roy carefully slipped his hands into the pockets of his trousers, well aware of not wanting to pull at the stitches underneath the material of his sweater. He’d hate to get blood on it, after all, Edward had chosen it as a favorite.

“You’re sure this place is safe?” Edward couldn’t help but ask as he followed the group up to the front door of the abandoned convent.

Roy half turned as he let Riza unlock the front door to nod at Edward reassuringly. “It may not look like much, but believe me, it’s quite safe here.”

With that, the front doors were unlocked, and Riza let them in through one such door before locking it behind them once more. Maes was already moving to get the light switch, causing the building to flare into illumination all around them.

The main foyer was a complete opposite from the world outside the convent. There was a fine layer of dust, yes, but nothing more troublesome. It looked only as if it hadn’t been given a thorough wipe-down in a year. It was also entirely empty.

Yet as Edward followed after the group again down one of the hallways, he began to spy various rooms filled with boxes he knew to be emergency military supplies. Apparently Roy, or one of his team, had somewhere along the line repurposed some of those supplies for his own potential emergency situations.

After passing four doors and another hallway that branched off to another section of the convent, they stopped at one of the doors. Upon swinging it open they were faced with a flight of stairs that descended into darkness, a darkness quickly driven away as Roy reached out to flick on the light switch.

“Let the information party begin.” Maes declared grimly as he pulled free one of his blades and gave it an experimental twirl before leading the way down the stairwell.

Riza pulled free her sidearm, checking the weapon with expert swiftness before giving Roy a quick nod of decisiveness. “To be honest I’m hoping he gives me an opening to shoot him this time.”

Roy couldn’t argue with that, and watched for a moment as Riza descended after Maes before turning to Edward. “Watch my back?”

“And your front.” Edward agreed warmly, matching Roy’s amused but tense smile with one of his own.

With that, they made their way down into the basement.

Edward immediately took stock of their surroundings as they reached the landing, spotted Riza with her weapon leveled calmly towards the center of the room, and spotted Maes standing off to one side rather closer than her and flipping his knife with a calculating gaze as he watched over their current guest of honor.

Kimblee himself looked rather the same as Edward had last seen him, if not worse. The burns that ran along the remainder of his body were festering, the stumps where his hands had been fared no better and in some parts, pieces of wrist or arm bone were clearly visible – a stark white against the festering black. And yet, despite the pain the former alchemist must have been in, his eyes flicked open, bloodshot and disoriented from pain, but not wholly unaware.
“Kimblee.” Roy gave the figure that was strapped to a chair a perfunctory nod.

A rattling breath shook Kimblee’s entire frame in a tremor, the voice that had once sounded arrogantly cultured now reedy and broken. “I’d s-sh-s-shake yo-ou-r ha-a-a-nd,” he forced out, “b-b-ut I seem… see-em to ha-a-ave misplaced mi-ine.”

“Strange how they just run off.” Roy remarked casually as he walked over to grab another chair and then come sit in front of Kimblee, but well back. He really didn’t want to ruin his sweater.

Kimblee merely twisted his lips into a smile, but it was bloody and cracked.

“No,now,” Roy began as he motioned towards Maes, “I really don’t have time to sit and listen to you stumble over your words like a toddler. So I’m going to have Maes give you a little something to help block the pain, unfortunately it does have that nasty side-effect of occasional paralysis, but I think we can manage.”

Maes had instantly slipped his knife away into some hidden pocket and was getting the syringe and the correct vial. Without preamble or ceremony, he filled the syringe and stalked up to Kimblee to jab it in with a complete opposite of the careful bedside manner he’d shown Roy. He then turned to deal with the dirtied needle before resuming his previous position with his favorite knife in hand.

Roy waited several minutes as Kimblee’s breath grew markedly easier, but no less whistling in sound. “Right to it then? I only have one question, and we both know you’ve not got long.”

A bark of a laugh attempted to make it out of Kimblee, but the only thing that resulted was a wet choking sound. “You’ve not either, Mustang.”

“Perhaps.” Roy remarked noncommittally and unconcernedly, he already knew what he was facing, but despite what Kimblee thought, he wouldn’t be in this alone.

“I knew you were coming.” Kimblee finally said as his eyes closed once more. “After so many years in Bradley’s dungeons, you start to get a sixth sense for when your normal routine is about to go pear-shaped.”

“And how did yours go pear-shaped?” Roy queried lightly, “I doubt getting released makes the cut, you seemed rather eager about your freedom.”

Kimblee’s charred mouth pulled into a grisly smirk, “just ask your question, Mustang. You’re a man of action, I’m a man of words, and it sickens me to have to sit through your flowery nonsense when we both know you came here for a one word answer. I know that and I’m pretty sure that the smell of my own burnt flesh is making me hungry.”

“Very well.” Roy shrugged, ignoring that last rather disturbing comment. “Are Grand and the Fuhrer trying to recreate Marcoh’s work in Laboratory Five?”

“Why?” Kimblee hissed with rattling laughs that sounded as if his ribs were shaking around free in his body cavity. “Is damaged little Flame Alchemist going to stop them with his pathetic morals and irrational fears of little red rocks?”

Roy snapped.

The shriek that pierced the air echoed about the basement hauntingly, and Kimblee had ended up on his side, writhing in agony at the sudden pain erupting from where one of his legs used to be and the trauma of landing hard on an arm with a recent amputation.
“What was that, Kimblee?” Roy asked lightly as he leaned forward on his forearms to watch the man dispassionately. “I didn’t quite catch your answer.”

“Yes!” Kimblee snapped before a dry heave left him shuddering on the floor.

“Yes, what?” Roy frowned at the man, “come now, Kimblee. You’re usually more specific than this.”

A wet snarl slipped from between charred lips, “fucking pyro bastard,” was wheezed out before being followed by, “turns out I’d really enjoy you getting destroyed by him – either of them – so yes, and fuck you, they are.”

“Better.” Roy praised levelly and entirely unaffected by Kimblee’s opinions, they were rather to be expected, after all.

“You being killed by the stones… poetry. I’d have loved to have managed it.” Kimblee wheezed into more wet laughter.

Roy’s gaze hardened and he gave a slight shake of his head, “you never would have. Edward is determined not to let me die, and really, you should have realized this, but they sent you out not caring if you’d come back.”

“Edward?” Kimblee focused on the unfamiliar name with a panicking feeling he wasn’t accustomed to, one of the sensation that he’d missed something, somewhere.

“Well it’s been good to catch up, Kimblee,” Roy stood up from his chair, “but let’s not do it again.”

“Not going to kill me yourself?” Kimblee spat as he began to twitch uncontrollably in his bindings.

Roy had finished walking the chair he’d been using back to where it belonged and turned a dispassionate look back towards the other alchemist. Former alchemist. “I was planning on it.” He admitted and looked towards where Riza still stood, unmoving, her sidearm still pointed at Kimblee unwaveringly. “Yet I got to thinking on the way here, and it seems to me that it would be an honorable way to go for an alchemist – by alchemy.”

Hawkeye didn’t have to look at her Colonel to know his eyes were on her, and she gave a short nod. “I will shoot him gladly if that’s your order, sir.”

Roy glanced away from her to where Edward hovered, face impassive, off along the wall opposite Maes. The silvery gaze of the ghost had been resting on Kimblee, but now it flicked up to him in question.

“Tell her to shoot him, or I will finish him off myself.” Edward informed Roy with an edge of steel to his voice, rage bubbling just below the surface of his control was threatening to break free. He didn’t normally consider himself a violent spirit, but when his family was threatened and attacked, all bets were off.

Roy nodded at the ghost and then turned back to Riza. “I believe you mentioned wanting an opportunity to shoot him, Lieutenant.” And he began moving away, back towards the stairs, motioning to Edward to follow him. “Make it quick. If the paralysis is going to set in at all, it’ll be soon, and I’d rather him have the full experience.”

“Yes, sir.” Riza agreed readily, and drew the hammer back.
Edward had followed Roy up to the first floor of the convent as a gunshot rang out behind them, down below in the basement. He set his feet to the floor, giving up hovering in order to walk over to where Roy was leaning against the wall of the hallway breathing a bit heavily. “Are you okay?”

Roy quirked a small smile at the ghost and let his head flop back against the wall as he continued to drag air into his lungs. “Stairs.” He explained, not for the first time today. “Going up them is a bitch right now.”

“You want me to make up the couch at home?” Edward questioned as he came to settle in next to Roy against the wall.

“I think I can make it one more flight, given I’ll have the drive back to shore up some strength again.” Roy reassured him and let his eyes fall closed as he tried to relegate his breathing towards something more normal again.

Edward grunted in displeasure at Roy’s condition, casting a frown up at him. “I always thought you were in better physical condition than this. Are your injuries really this bad?”

“It’s a mix between the painkillers sapping my energy and the past blood loss. But another half day of bed rest and a night of sleep and I should be doing better. Especially if I lay off the painkillers.” Roy explained wearily and his lips twitched into a wry smirk. “You’d not be doubting my usual physical condition if you’d bothered to look at anything aside from my stitches.”

Edward snickered at the remembrance and his eyes danced with mirth as he looked back towards the basement door. “Oh believe me, Roy, I saw plenty. Cold water or not.”

Roy grudgingly had accepted that there was no way he was ever escaping that. “You’re the best thing ever to happen to my ego.”

“Your ego is beyond help, Roy Mustang.” Edward informed him amusedly before glancing back up at him. “What are they still doing down there?”

“Clean up.” Roy explained through still-closed eyes. “There’s an incinerator in the basement. I’d have offered to help them but neither would have allowed it given my stitches, and I dare not think what you’d have said.”

“Why not just burn the remains yourself?” Edward frowned, “aren’t you supposed to be the Flame Alchemist?”

“Because humans burning is a far from pleasant aroma, and at least with the incinerator they can shut the door on the smell. I’ve learned to deal with it, for obvious reasons, but there’s no reason for them to suffer the stench.”

“I never really thought about that…” Edward trailed off, frown still in place. “Though I suppose humans being lit on fire wasn’t a common thing for me when I was a kid.”

Roy snorted at the mention, “I should hope not. I’m actually a bit annoyed your childhood was anything but happiness and ponies.”
“Well next time my father shows up, you can say as much to him.” Edward offered out as a consolation, knowing it would only be a matter of time before his father made a reappearance, however brief.

“Edward, the next time your father shows his face to me, I’m punching it.” Roy informed him quite pleasantly. “Just on principle.”

Edward gave a quick chuckle and shook his head, but said nothing against the plan. It wasn’t a thought he particularly minded, and if his father was half as intelligent as he believed the man was, his father really should expect it to happen.

They waited upstairs alone for nearly ten minutes before the sound of footsteps on the stairs began, and one by one Maes and Riza filed back out into the hallway looking reasonably pleased with their work.

“Mopped the floor good too.” Maes offered out as he and Riza walked over to where their colonel and friend was resting. “Apparently Riza fitted some interesting rounds, quite the blood spray on that one.”

Riza shrugged at the questioning look that Roy gave her. “They explode on impact. You’re hardly telling any of us anything, and I don’t like it, so one day I started tinkering with the shell casings. Figured it couldn’t hurt.”

“I am beginning to like her.” Edward informed Roy after a moment of shocked silence. “I’ve been a bit impartial to her in the past, but I’m genuinely beginning to like her right now.”

Roy knew it was mostly his fault that Edward didn’t really know or care about the others of his team outside of Maes, but it was becoming clear to him that those times were quickly changing. Whether he had wanted them to or not. Either way, however, he was glad that Edward was beginning to like Riza more, she was invaluable to him and one of his oldest friends.

“So,” Maes brought up as he nudged his glasses further up his nose, “back to your place, oh fearless leader?”

“Yes, but not right away.” Roy denied and turned his gaze onto Edward who looked about two seconds away from berating him in confusion. “There’s something in the second library branch I need, and I need you to get it out for me. It’s not something that is technically supposed to be removed.”

“You want me to steal a book for you?” Edward queried with a frown, although oddly enough his morals weren’t balking at thieving books for Roy.

“I need you to steal a blueprint for me.” Roy corrected, hearing but ignoring the sounds of dawning realization from Maes and Riza. “The second branch contains all the items not deemed valuable enough to be put in the first branch. City blueprints being one of those items. I need the blueprint for Laboratory Five.”

Edward didn’t even feel any hesitation, instead he grinned conspiratorially. “Get me in there and I’ll not only get you your blueprint, but I’ll make sure that no one even notices that it’s missing.”

Roy grinned back and though his gaze never left Edward’s face, he called over to the others. “Second branch then, if you please. Edward and I have a bit of robbing to do in the name of progress.”

The foursome left the convent summarily after that announcement and loaded back into the car save
for Maes who went to go man the gates so the vehicle could exit before locking the property back up and retaking his seat in the sedan.

From there Riza took a circuitous route to the second branch of the libraries belonging to the government, and for the better half of those library branches, belonging only to State Alchemists. It was not a path borne of a necessity to try and shake off anyone tailing them, for there wasn’t any pursuit of their vehicle, but Roy had instructed it. Something about letting Edward see more of the area that he hadn’t already yet seen, leading her to believe that there was still much about Edward’s existence that she hadn’t been told.

She was planning on getting answers to these questions, but not now. Without a doubt she’d have plenty of time to get to know the ghost who haunted Roy’s life when Roy came back to work.

When the car finally turned into the nearest spot free along the busy street the only shuffles of movement were from Roy and Edward.

“We should only be gone a few minutes.” Roy glanced aside at Riza as he reached for the door handle. “If anything goes wrong though, you’ll know.”

Riza glanced past him towards where the armed security officials ensured only State Alchemists entered the building, a derisive smirk flitting briefly on her lips. “Two men lounging about not even at parade rest,” and her gaze dipped lower, “with inferior pistols. Don’t worry, Roy, if shit goes south, men like that will hardly give me any pause in getting to you.”

Maes gave a well-intentioned and teasingly put-upon groan and said, “must you women always judge a man by the quality of his pistol?”

“Are you telling me you wouldn’t judge another man by the quality of his knife?” Riza countered back smoothly, but with an eyebrow cocked in teasing interest as she looked back at Maes through the rearview mirror.

“I’ll just leave you two to it then, shall I?” Roy bantered lightly and shot a look back at Edward who looked equal parts highly entertained and disbelieving that this conversation was happening at all. “Edward? Ready?”

“Let’s.” Edward gave a nervous laugh and darted up through the roof of the vehicle and into open air to float down to meet Roy as he exited onto the sidewalk and shut the door on the other two.

“All right, my perfect little thief, let’s go steal my future.” Roy announced cheerfully under his breath and started towards the library.

Edward shot him a glare for the descriptive commentary on his size, but nevertheless followed after. Only once doing so did he notice the short flight of stairs they were approaching. “Roy, more stairs.”

Roy knew, had known, but internally he still groaned in despair. But there was nothing for it, and if war had taught him anything, it was how to conceal the fact that you were injured when the occasion called for it. And until both the Brigadier General and the Fuhrer were dead and out of his way, the occasion called for it.

It took him a monumental effort to glide up the stairs as if they didn’t exist, and he was well aware of Edward’s intense and worried gaze on him as he did so.

The two men guarding the library spared him a second glance, likely only for the surprise of seeing the Flame Alchemist about sans uniform. But then, they weren’t high ranking or highly paid enough to question him about it and merely gave twin salutes that he was sure even Riza would have to
admit were expertly executed.

“Are you okay?” Edward whispered as they entered the library, even though logically he knew only Roy could hear him.

Roy glanced over at the apparition with a quick, reassuringly fond smile, before steering their path into the inner recesses of the aged building.

It was much like the first branch that they’d already visited. Bookcases everywhere that were neatly arranged with varying works, some with varying amounts of dust. At intervals there were tables, some of which were occupied by State Alchemists deep in their work – Edward noted that Roy steered clear of going anywhere near any of the others, and had to wonder how much of that was to keep his presence here relatively unnoticed, and how much was Roy purely not wanting to associate with them.

He had noticed that for as many State Alchemists as he knew there were, Roy mentioned few and was friendly with only one – Armstrong.

“Do you not like them?” Edward asked as he dutifully followed after Roy, suddenly unable to help himself from knowing, and when he received a confused look in response, he elaborated, “the other State Alchemists?”

Roy’s face twisted into a wry smile and he shook his head, which was the truth, but it hardly explained it. Not hesitating in leading them to where the city records were kept, he glanced around quickly before his visual check and the war instincts he was currently employing to keep him from limping around like an invalid assured him that there weren’t any others in the immediate area. Still he kept his voice lowered to a perfect library whisper, “I’m not exactly the most trusting person, especially right now. Aside from that, State Alchemists are a strange bunch, we oddly prefer to be solitary from one another, you’ll rarely find us working together.”

“So the camaraderie between you and Armstrong is rare?” Edward put together.

“Exceedingly.” Roy agreed before falling silent again and turning down another aisle.

It took three more turns before they reached an area filled with sturdy black filing cabinets instead of bookcases. There, Roy took another quick glance about before easing one of the drawers open, the track only giving a slight squeal of protest.

Edward let Roy rummage through the contents of the drawer, instead his focus was on the surrounding area with a calculating expression. He took in the position of the filing cabinets to the position of the nearest bookcases, and the position of where he could recall seeing the next nearest State Alchemist. “Roy, is there a back way out of here?” He asked with deceptive lightness in his tone.

Roy, however, wasn’t fooled, and he looked up at Edward sharply as he pulled free the folder he had been looking for. “Yes?”

“Good.” Edward determined and looked over at the folder in Roy’s hands. “Is that the one you need?”

Roy quickly flipped it open and glanced through it, barely needing ten seconds to tell, and shut it again. “Just need one more.” He determined and sidestepped over to another filing cabinet and began rummaging once again.

“For where?” Edward asked as he peered over Roy’s shoulder, practically merging into the man’s
body he was so close.

Despite the situation of his not wanting to be discovered over here messing around with the city blueprints, Roy couldn’t help but smile and take a moment to enjoy the sight of Edward’s silvery hair hanging just over his shoulder as the ghost tried to get a better view, and the sheer closeness between them. “The prison.” He explained in a quiet hush as he sharply put his focus back on his search. “If they’re swiping prisoners for fuel I need to find where the buildings are likely connected to allow it. The easiest way to gain that passage. I need to disable it so that any escape attempts can’t be made and I’m left there alone having broken into a place I guarantee you I don’t have clearance for.”

“Are you going to leave anything for me to think about?” Edward tried to grumble the words, but he feared that the praise won out in the end, especially if the slight, pleased smile that twitched Roy’s lips was anything to go by.

“Only how grateful you are that I’m trying to think of everything possible to ensure I stay alive.” Roy offered out in a humored but still hushed library whisper, before he pulled free the folder he was searching for, gave it a cursory examination, and snapped it shut to stuff it into the first file folder.

Edward hummed thoughtfully, not entirely sure if Roy was being wholly honest, or just trying to ease his mind. Circling around to come to rest against this latest file cabinet, he leaned back against the open drawer to shut it then rested against the cabinet itself as he cocked his head slightly in consideration of Roy. “I’m sure some other pressing detail will come to me, it always does where you’re concerned. I’m still amazed you managed to stay alive long enough for us to meet.”

Roy looked up from his new acquisition and met Edward’s teasing gaze, and slowly, watchful of Edward’s reaction, he stepped forward to brace one hand on the filing cabinet behind Edward and in the process, closed the distance between them to next to nothing. “Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere until you admit that you’re in love with me. And then there’ll still be no getting rid of me.”

Edward bowed his head with a slight huff of laughter, but he didn’t move away, instead he lifted his gaze once more, the humor sparkling in his eyes masking the shaky anticipation he felt most keenly. “You speak as if I currently do.”

Roy chuckled quietly, they were still in a library after all, and he lifted his hand from the filing cabinet to tangle his fingers in the silvery light of Edward’s hair, his eyes never leaving the silver ones that watched him with an amusement and fondness that only ever served to give him hope. “And I’ll be here when you realize it.”

Edward had reached his hand forward, unseen by Roy, and in an instant had swiped the file folders out of Roy’s hand and with a sudden smirk brought it around to whack him on the side of the head. “Try to seduce me when I’m not about to steal your future for you.”

Roy laughed as quietly as he dared in the near silence of the library, but backed away obediently. “Oh, Edward,” he grinned as he stepped aside, towards the back exit of the library which was an unsettling distance along another wall, “you’ve already stolen my future.”

Edward tried to keep from smiling at the ridiculous statement that left him feeling rather pleased anyway, and instead of following Roy, he shook his head and floated up to investigate the bookcases a bit closer, grabbing the top of one and giving it an experimental tug.

Roy paused his backwards walking as he looked up at where Edward had gone, asking as loudly as he dared, “what are you doing?”

“Eventually the Fuhrer is going to realize you were here, you know he will. He’ll want to know
what you were looking for, so I may as well make it difficult for him and keep him wondering, scared, about what you took.” Edward told him with an almost indifferent sounding decisiveness. “Get out the back way. I’ll meet you at the car in about five minutes, and whatever you hear,” he looked down at Roy sternly, “don’t try and linger. I’m about to go a bit poltergeist on this place, and I don’t need you getting hurt.”

“You, desecrating a library?” Roy offered out with more amusement than he was sure the situation called for, in truth he should probably be talking Edward out of whatever destruction he was about to commit, but he couldn’t seem to convince himself to try. Not after the talk they’d had when he’d regained consciousness.

“I’m just reorganizing it.” Edward grinned at him cheerfully, before his expression sobered. “Get going, I’m going to play around a bit.”

Roy hesitated a moment, but logically he knew nothing could happen to Edward, and this was hardly the first time they’d been apart even briefly, and turned to make his way towards the back exit.

“And Roy?” Edward called after him, a worried frown lining his brow as the man hesitated, looking back. “You’ll be careful?”

Roy turned again, giving Edward a long look before a smile slipped back onto his face and he nodded. Then he was hurrying away as quickly as his flagging strength – to say nothing of the stitches – would allow.

He was halfway down the service hallway that would lead him to the alleyway behind the library when the first echoing crash caused the floor underneath his feet to shake and the first of the screams began.

Edward was surveying the wreckage with the delighted interest of one who had made this rather his profession as of late. The filing cabinets that had held the blueprints he now carefully clutched under one arm were buried utterly in an avalanche of books, scrolls, and bookcases that had been pushed over in a gloriously messy chain reaction.

It seemed to be a usual go-to method for destruction in a library, so it seemed a good idea to stick to a classic method. After all, he didn’t want to rouse any suspicions when the Fuhrer eventually heard of the commotion, because he knew better than to think the homunculus Fuhrer wouldn’t hear about this in some fashion. His attacks on the Brigadier General inside Headquarters were common knowledge to the Fuhrer, and it settled easier on his mind that the Fuhrer might believe the culprit was still only operating inside Headquarters itself.

Likely part of the reason the Fuhrer had suddenly moved the Brigadier General mostly into that laboratory after the encounter with Maes. The Fuhrer would know the hide and seek game was up with Roy, but he was still an unknown player. Letting the Fuhrer know that he was causing destruction outside of Headquarters as well might cause the Fuhrer to decide to move the operation and the Brigadier General both in order to keep the man from coming under attack again. Then they’d not only be back to where they started, but this time even further behind.

Horrified, wordless wailing jerked him from his thoughts, and Edward looked over the edge of the nearby bookcase he’d floated up to perch on top of to see someone he could only assume was the librarian having an absolute kitten over the mess. Several others had run over as well, State Alchemists more than likely, and were gaping unhelpfully in wide-eyed surprise.

“Oh, good, you’re all here.” Edward murmured to himself and floated up again, taking care to maneuver the long way around so they wouldn’t see the floating folders.
Reaching the next section of bookcases that really needed to be sideways, Edward gave a mighty shove. Now that he suspected that everyone had gone running for the initial disaster, he felt better about tipping bookcases elsewhere – some of those places ones still covered by the impenetrable whiteness of his world without Roy. He didn’t want to hurt any of them, after all.

The next line of bookcases folded and caved over onto each other with another series of echoing crashes, heavy clouds of dust erupting from the chaos as fresh startled yells and screams rose into the air.

“I do love feeling like a proper ghost.” Edward commented in a very self-satisfied voice, before noticing the crowd heading his way and with a noise borne of being caught off guard by their swiftness, darted away.

They couldn’t see him, but he didn’t want them to see the file folder he was carrying either. It would have been better if Roy had been able to take it, but they both knew it was better for him to be seen exiting empty-handed, should any of the guards see him exiting at all.

The next bookcase took a bit more effort to push over, being weighed down with heavier texts, but with dedication he managed to get it into a decent but subtle rocking motion, then pushed.

A fresh volley of startled yelling, now suffused heavily by fervent cursing, rang through the air.

Edward snickered delightedly, although a small portion of him did feel badly for the librarian.

Now as he looked around, he could see the two security guards he’d seen at the entrance clambering over piles of books and broken bookcases to find the culprit of the commotion. As he watched them they slipped several times when a book had been on top of a scroll, and sniggered each time they face-planted into a bookcase, or a table – but his favorite was admittedly when they fell straight into a pile of books, and the force of the fall caused the books to ricochet upwards and cascade back down around them in a bruising rain.

“Have fun!” Edward declared to them, and with one last cackling look around at the chaos he’d created, he shot up through the library roof.

Back in the car, Maes and Riza were watching the clouds of dust rolling out of the open library doors with a kind of fearful amazement – rather similar to what the gathering crowds of citizenry looked like.

Roy was the only one watching with a sort of pained amusement, because in truth he’d have really loved to stick around to watch Edward work.

The car abruptly jerked backwards and towards the left.

Riza pulled her sidearm and had it aimed into the back of the car in one swift and seamless twist of her body. Maes’s knife had appeared back into his hand almost by magic.

Roy remained the only one unaffected. He was rather accustomed to Edward suddenly appearing, after all.

Edward immediately edged out of the sight of the gun, and with a smug smirk he passed the file folders up to Roy. “I learned some new curse words while I was in there.”

“I’ll bet you did.” Roy snorted and set the folders on his thighs before turning to Riza who was staring wide-eyed at the backseat and slowly lowering her gun. “Edward’s back,” he relayed needlessly, “time to go.”
“I could have shot him.” Riza said slowly as she finished turning back around in her seat, slipping her sidearm back into the holster at her hip.

“You could have shot the car.” Roy corrected as said car rumbled to life under them. “Edward wouldn’t stay his version of solid for a bullet.”

“You could have shot me!” Maes declared, his knife already away.

“She makes fancy bullets, I’m not sure I want to test it.” Edward remarked wryly and settled back into his seat instead of almost being sat on Maes’s lap.

“I wouldn’t shoot you, Maes!” Riza rolled her eyes as she guided the sedan back into traffic. “I’m abstaining to let Gracia have the honor.”

“Why you think she’d want to shoot me, I’ve no idea.” Maes scoffed and folded his arms across his chest petulantly.

“Trust me,” Riza muttered, “she’s considered it.”

Edward burst out laughing as Maes made a deeply offended noise, and settled back happily into his seat to watch and listen to the two of them bicker back and forth in a way that only convinced him that this was hardly the first time they’d had this argument.

Roy, for his part, groaned as he settled in for a long drive back home.

When the car pulled up against the curb in front of Roy’s front-yard fence neither Riza nor Maes moved save to look over or up to Roy with a silent question in their eyes.

“Back to work as usual, I’ll be in tomorrow morning.” Roy told them as he unfastened his seat belt and glanced around the quiet neighborhood. “Get this car returned before they’ve much more time to wonder where it’s gone.”

“You sure you’re okay to walk it?” Maes frowned as he cast a brief up-and-down look over his friend’s torso. “Those weren’t superficial wounds I stitched closed.”

Roy waved a hand about dismissively then reached down for the door handle in order to let himself out. “I’ll be fine. Maybe Edward will let me take the motorcycle. It’s been a while since we’ve been out on it anyway.”

“We will discuss that tomorrow.” Edward told him sternly and with a narrow-eyed look.

“Yes, dear.” Roy replied immediately and with a grin he was unable to help.

“Just call a taxi if it comes to it.” Riza sighed and turned her focus to the rearview mirror, looking to where Edward supposedly was. “Take care of him for us, Edward.”

“What does she think I’ve been trying to do all this time?” Edward commented with a long-suffering sigh and shook his head. “You’re not an easy man to keep safe.”

Roy wasn’t sure if he was supposed to be proud or offended by that statement.

“Pleasure as always, Edward,” Maes grinned towards the other side of the backseat. “If you see me around feel free to pop by and make yourself known.”

“Undoubtedly. I’d like to try and get you to scream like a little girl in the middle of a hallway.” Edward replied back with a wicked smirk not at all helped by Roy’s sudden snicker.
“What is it?” Riza asked Roy curiously.

Quickly followed by, “what’d he say?”

Roy only shook his head, trying not to grin too much. “It’s nothing.” Yet he did sober as he eased the sedan door open and swinging his legs out he shifted so that he could catch the eyes of both his subordinates. “Neither of you are to tell the others about Edward. Is that quite clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Riza immediately answered, the clear designation of Roy being her boss in this moment quite clear to her.

Maes gave a huff of a sigh before he relented and nodded in answer to Roy’s sharp look, “fine. But I want front row seats when they do find out.”

Roy gave a sharp nod of satisfaction and carefully got out of the sedan and straightened up, tucking the file folder bundle under one arm and stepped away as Maes got out to assume the front seat from him. But before Maes had done more than swing one leg inside, he reached out with his free hand to grasp his friend’s arm, and as a curious look was turned on him said quietly, “If you happen to see Hohenheim, in all your sneaking about, do tell him I’d like a chat.”

“What, so you can punch him again?” Maes queried teasingly, before instantly shifting back into seriousness and giving a short and rather slapdash salute. “Your wish is my command, Colonel.”

Roy stepped away and Maes got into the car, the door closing after him. Slowly he walked around the back of the car, and carefully stepped up onto the sidewalk as Edward drifted in beside him to hover anxiously. “I’m fine.”

“Keep telling yourself that, maybe next week I’ll believe you.” Edward retorted softly and went to open the fence gate as Roy gingerly made his way along. To an outsider, Roy would have seemed fine, but he knew better, had lived with the man long enough to see that Roy was not himself.

Roy shot him a grateful look and continued up to the house as Edward shut the gate and he heard the sedan pull away from the curb. “I’m fine if you’re here with me.”

Edward snorted at the ridiculous comment, but it didn’t stop him from feeling absurdly pleased. “I’m not sure flattery will help get you to bed, Roy.”

“Hasn’t hurt me before.” Roy grinned wickedly, before wincing as he drug himself up the few short stairs to the front door.

Edward shot him a withering look and went to get the front door open. “Ro-o-o-y!” Edward was in front of him in an instant, panic rising rapidly in his throat as he tried to frantically think of what to do.

Roy smiled weakly and closed his eyes. “Easy, sorry.” He groaned shallowly and gave himself a mental shake before prying his eyes open again to take in the sight of a highly anxious ghost who didn’t look at all convinced by his words. So he tried again, “I just needed – it’s helping to rest here a moment.”
Fairly certain that Roy was delusional if he thought *that* explanation would soothe him any, Edward only felt the worry gripping him multiply. “Couch, now.”

“I can make it to the bed.” It had *definitely* not come out as pathetically as it sounded, Roy was certain.

“Tonight you can.” Edward offered out as an olive branch, his gaze hardening. “Right now, though, you are marching yourself right over to our very lovely couch and sitting down.”

Knowing that it was probably a smart idea, and not entirely wanting to embarrass himself trying to climb up the stairs via hands and the upward scooting of buttocks, Roy gave in to the compromise. Easing himself away from the wall he wavered for a moment in which Edward reached out to steady him despite not actually being able to touch him, and that moment right there remained the warmth and strength that got him over to the couch.

Edward had hovered, literally, the entire time Roy had been moving, and now that the man had flopped down onto the couch he settled himself on the coffee table in front of him. “Lie down.”

Roy groaned, but it was more from the state of his body than any protest to the order. Carefully he arranged himself on his back, head propped up by one of the throw pillows. “I feel like a dog, the way you’re ordering me around.”

A smile crept onto Edward’s lips, “if you were a dog I’d go rub your nose in that mess you made of the blueprints I stole for you.”

Roy laughed quietly, softly, before falling quiet save for a deep breath as his eyes slipped closed. “I’ll get them in the morning.”

“Want me to get you anything now?” Edward asked as he continued to watch Roy, his anxiety having faded by now into something less prominent.

“Water, and maybe a blanket.” Roy tilted his head towards the sound of Edward’s voice, but didn’t open his eyes. “Will you read to me again?”

A chuckle escaped Edward at the request, but he didn’t answer. Instead he drifted from his perch to go collect the water and the blanket, and as an afterthought something else as well, before coming back down to Roy.

He was in the exact same position he’d been left in.

He set his collected items down before snatching the folded blanket back up and giving it a good snap to open it. Draping it over Roy he then turned for the water, “sit up a moment?”

Roy did so after a moment spent convincing his body on the idea, and opening his eyes he took the glass of water offered to him with a grateful smile before downing over half of it. After handing the glass back to Edward he laid back down again, obedient without being told. His eyes closed almost the instant his head hit the pillow.

Edward looked back to see Roy already relaxing again and smiled, it likely wouldn’t be long before the man was asleep. So picking up the other item he’d snatched from upstairs, he only hoped it would stay solid for Roy long enough as he floated over to land on the arm of the couch just next to Roy’s head. “Stay still, I’m not sure how long this will last.” He whispered, and didn’t give Roy any time to question his words as he began to carefully ease the wooden comb through Roy’s hair.

If Roy hadn’t been boneless before in relief to be lying down, he was *melting* now.
Edward smiled unseen at the near-whimper of noise that escaped Roy, and he leaned sideways and back against the couch to almost curl in around Roy as he lightly stroked the comb through the dark locks. “Glad I’m not the only one with a weakness for something like this,” before amending softly, “well, I did.”

Roy laid there in silent bliss for nearly a minute before he managed to actually speak instead of just trying to fight down garbled noises. “No one’s done this for me since I was a kid.”

“I’m having trouble believing that no one’s played with your hair since then. What about all those one-night stands you had?” Edward asked quietly as he slid the comb around to what he could reach of the far side of Roy’s hair.

“Tugged on it, yes.” Roy corrected just before a luxuriating sigh slipped past his lips and he felt the dark edges of sleep creep further towards him. “I never stuck around long enough for more.”

Edward’s gaze was caught on following the path of the comb, watching the black hair sweep back as if it were hypnotizing him. “I’m glad you didn’t.” He found himself admitting. He’d quickly grown to not enjoy those times Roy had spent with others, and in this moment he couldn’t find it in himself to feel guilty over his greed.

Roy knew that, knew it well. He’d started actively noticing, caring that something might be wrong that night Edward had helped him haul that ridiculous cake back home. And knowing what he now knew he felt for Edward, he could have kicked himself back then for continuing the one-night stands as long as he had. In the end, he’d only hurt Edward in trying to run from and deny what he felt for the ghost.

In the peaceful quiet that had fallen over them, the comb eventually began to pass through Roy’s hair without making contact.

Edward was surprised it had held out as long as it did, grateful, but surprised. Yet he didn’t move from his position of still being sat behind Roy’s head and practically curled up around him as he still leaned into the couch. The hand that had held the comb dropped it onto the cushion near Roy’s face before retreating to rest through Roy’s hair, the black strands glowing slightly where his hand had merged into them.

“You know,” Roy began after so much time had passed in silence between them that he actually felt the couch move as Edward startled at his unexpected words, “earlier, at the library, you didn’t exactly tell me to stop trying to seduce you.”

“No, I didn’t.” Edward agreed lightly, a hint of a smile tugging at his lips.

“That moment when you told me to be careful…” Roy trailed off a moment, trying to keep the wistfulness he felt out of his voice. “If I could have, I would have grabbed you down and kissed you.”

Several emotions ran through Edward just then, and he could only be glad that Roy’s eyes remained closed as he tried to steady himself once more out of the flustered state he’d just been sent into, although his smile remained. “That’s hardly proper conduct for a library.”

“And whatever you did to it was?” Roy chuckled as he recalled the clouds of dust rolling out onto the street, the echoing crashes that had rattled the floor beneath his feet. “Besides, you’ve not been in a proper library as an adult except for with me. How do you know if kissing is proper or not?”

“Kissing is all well and fine, I’m sure.” Edward conceded with a wry smile and a shake of his head.
“Kissing someone with your apparent sex drive is likely to escalate and that is not proper for a library.”

“Fair point.” Roy couldn’t help but agree with an amused smile as he pointedly added ‘ravishing Edward in a library’ to his ever-growing collection of fantasies.

“I know you too well.” Edward mused with a faint smile as he continued to watch Roy peacefully. “And I know that right now you should be sleeping. No more talking for you.”

“Oh no, not like that.” Roy grumbled and opened his eyes to give Edward a disgruntled look. “I rarely get hurt like this and I’m going to milk having you as my nurse. I am not going to sleep without being read to again.”

“What are you, five?” Edward chastised him through an amused grin.

“For right now, yes.” Roy agreed flippantly, determined to get what he wanted.

Edward rolled his eyes, and only the fact that Roy had stitches kept him from truly contemplating how he could dump the man off the couch. He didn’t rise again though in search of the book he’d been reading earlier. “Close your eyes, Roy.” And the pointed look he gave the man sent Roy’s eyes closed again without argument. “I’m going to tell you a story.”

“I’m not three.” Roy protested just for the fun of it.

“Shut up, yes you are.” Edward grinned and his gaze on Roy turned unfocused as he thought for a moment, then slowly began: “In a little house in a big city, there lived a squirrel who was the most innocent, charming squirrel to ever live. Unfortunately, the squirrel had been captured by a wicked fire sorcerer.”

Roy burst out laughing so hard he nearly ripped one of his stitches.

Edward smirked but otherwise ignored him, instead continuing on with his story. “The poor little squirrel slaved day and night – ” and perhaps, it wasn’t the best story to put Roy to sleep, but it was amusing them both, and that, in itself, was a comfort.

And though Roy hadn’t fallen asleep during the story, he did soon afterwards with a smile still on his face, while Edward readjusted the blanket in around him.
Chapter 56

“Bowl of pudding.”

Edward startled from his thoughts at the sudden words, looking over at Roy from where he’d taken up reading while hovering at the nearest window. “What?” He closed the book and dropped to the floor so he could walk over to the couch with a confused frown.

Roy huffed as if an explanation was unneeded, and he tilted his head to find Edward. “Your favorite dessert.”

Edward stopped there in front of him, staring at him blankly a moment before snorting and falling to his knees in order to pin him with a surprised look. “You’re thinking of that again when you’re like this?”

“It’s circular!” Roy defended quite promptly, ignoring the look of growing amusement on Edward’s face, and the laugh tugging at his lips but not ever quite escaping.

“So it is.” Edward granted even as he shook his head in resignation that Roy was the weirdest patient ever. “Is this what painkiller withdrawals do to you? Make you ponder silly things like my favorite dessert?”

“Nothing you claim as a favorite could ever be silly.” Roy defended firmly, and immediately followed that noble statement with, “that’s why I’m still planning on getting rid of all the boxers and restocking with briefs.”

Edward instantly walloped him on the head with the book he still held, smirking as Roy yelped and ducked away from further such treatment.

“I’m injured!” Roy protested in dismay, even though secretly he knew he’d rather had that coming to him.

“You’d best hope I don’t injure you further, Roy Mustang.” Edward told him firmly despite the smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

Roy grumbled under his breath and earned himself a raised eyebrow, before he relented and fixed the silvery apparition with a determined look. “Am I right?”

A laugh escaped Edward before he could try and maintain his general attitude of disapproval, and he ended up smiling as he shook his head. “Not even close. You’ve been closer before, you know.”

“Wait, what?” Roy exclaimed, sending Edward into another fit of laughter. “Why didn’t you tell me then?”

“So I could have the enjoyment of telling you now.” Edward pointed out, it was only logical, after all. Someone needed to torture Roy a bit, and as a ghost, he felt his existence in definition meant he was allowed a little torture in the search of amusement.

“And what, exactly, was I closer on?” Roy knew he was scowling, yet all it was doing was making Edward all the happier.
Appearing to think about it for a moment, Edward tapped a finger to his chin. “Strange, I’m having trouble recalling.” He grinned as his response earned him a growl. “Now, now, Roy, you’ve made around what, ten guesses so far? It shouldn’t be too hard for you to go back and guess on some variations, right?”

“You, Edward Elric, are a wicked and evil spirit.” Roy determined, only to earn himself a pleased laugh.

“Oddly, Roy Mustang,” Edward began with a smug expression, “I’ve only become this wicked and evil since meeting you. Now stay here, I’m going to go see about some food for you. You were asleep almost six hours, you’ll be hungry soon if you aren’t now.”

“I’ll have whatever your favorite dessert is!” Roy called after Edward as the silvery apparition vanished from his view, and couldn’t help but smile at the laughter that answered him before delving into deep thought about the matter.

Within minutes Edward had delivered Roy another bowl of the soup he’d previously made, and if the way the man immediately began shoveling it into his mouth like a greedy child with no table manners was any indication, Roy didn’t mind the leftovers. There was no dessert.

Afterwards Edward left Roy alone again briefly so that he could tidy up the kitchen. He was just finishing the last of the dishes when he heard the sound of the man moving about, and quickly finishing emptying the sink of dirtied water, went to investigate.

“Oh, good.” Roy breathed as he spotted a flash of silvery light in the corner of his eye, but didn’t take his focus from the stairs he was carefully mounting while holding firmly to the banister. “A witness for my tragically lame death falling up a staircase.”

Edward snorted and came around his other side to hover slightly in front of the man as he continued to make progress. “You’re doing fine.”

“I’m going too slow.” Roy attempted to state with annoyance, but feared it just came out petulant.

“Well forgive me for saying this, but you’re not exactly as young as you used to be.” Edward told him frankly, but with a slight smile that only grew as Roy shot him a dirty look. “Oh come on now, it’s true! When’s the last time you got hurt like this?”

“Shut up.” Roy decided on.

“That’s what I thought.” Edward’s smile turned rather smug, but compassionate all the same. “I believe you when you say that you’ll be mostly recovered by tomorrow, and you wouldn’t have dared make me a promise like that if you believed anything otherwise. I need you better. So take it slow tonight.”

Roy couldn’t help but grin, and although it was mostly directed at the stairs he was focusing on, he knew Edward still caught it. “I will, love.”

“And you’re calling for a taxi in the morning.” Edward determined as he shadowed Roy up the stairs, trying to keep from showing how flattered the sentiment actually made him feel, and casting Roy a glare for it.

Not even bothering to try for a token protest, Roy nodded obediently. It was probably for the best anyway, all the jostling from the engine likely wouldn’t feel good on his stitches. “Maybe I’ll just requisition a car until Monday.”
“That too.” Edward approved with a bit of a grin.

When they reached the bedroom, Roy immediately collapsed into a sitting heap on the bed while Edward hovered in closer with a stern expression as he held out a hand insistently.

“What?” Roy asked in confusion as he fought the urge to flop backwards right here and now, and only the knowledge that doing so in this position would put unneeded and painful strain on several of his wounds kept him from it.

Inwardly, Edward braced himself for the teasing and the looks he’d get for what he was about to say, but there was nothing for it. “Your clothes, now. Take them off.”

Roy cracked a grin at the firm request, and delightedly watched a flash of flustered annoyance cross Edward’s features. “We really need to work on your bedroom talk.” He stated and slowly eased himself back to his feet with a groan.

Edward eyed the man dubiously a moment before stating in an utterly deadpan tone, “I desperately need you naked, Roy.”

Roy gave a hum of consideration, before shaking his head. “No, you’d never admit desperation.”

Edward couldn’t help but slip a smile and a slight chuckle, giving a shake of his head as he motioned with his fingers once more for the clothes. “And this is the sort of argument you think would ever help win me to your bed?”

“You’re already in my bed, Edward.” Roy smirked at him fondly as he slowly stripped off his sweater – equal parts in care of his stitches and in wanting to give Edward a show.

Edward’s fingers wrapped into the woolen sweater as it was laid across his hand, his gaze casting down onto it. “But not in the way you truly want. And even if I… your bed is still empty when all is said and done, Roy.”

For all Roy could have told himself that he’d thought they were through with this argument already, that he’d already made it clear to Edward how he felt about such matters, deep down he knew that Edward would likely always have some lingering doubt. Some lingering regret. “Then let it be empty,” and he didn’t look away as Edward’s gaze jerked back to his, “I’d rather it be empty with you, than full with anyone else.”

Edward wasn’t quite sure if that was the sweetest thing he’d ever heard, or the most ridiculous, but a sheltering warmth filled him all the same. “Roy, you…” and he cut himself off with a quick laugh and a shake of his head before holding out his other hand, “just hand over your trousers, you love-struck idiot.”

That request was slightly more difficult to attain, given his current state of exhaustion, but it could never be said that he would not deliver when the one person he loved most in this world demanded he strip. By the time he managed it, the effort he’d expended doing so might have made him tremble, if not for the fact that he was genuinely too exhausted to do so. Yet he still managed to ask, “you want my briefs off, too?” with a suggestive smile, instead of a yawn.

“Sit down before you collapse, Roy.” Edward told him sternly, but not unkindly, as he floated over to dump the dirtied clothes in the hamper. “I’ll be collecting the rest of your clothes in the morning.”

Roy felt that he’d rather lie down, to be quite honest, and did so as Edward made to return to his side. “Then I have time to rest and plan a perfect strip tease.”
“Out of your underwear and socks?” Edward arched an amused eyebrow as he shook out Roy’s side of the blanket and drew it up over the man. “I don’t think my virgin sensibilities could take such a wildly sensual display as sock removal.”

“You’ve never seen a man strip out of his socks until you’ve seen me strip out of mine, Edward Elric.” Roy laughed despite the discomfort it caused, and raised his head when motioned so that Edward could fluff his pillow.

Edward snorted, “I’m fairly sure I’ve been privy to that before, and yet strangely enough I don’t recall it being anything even close to erotic.”

“After tomorrow, you’ll never be able to look at me remove my socks without getting flustered.” Roy promised him through a smirk before burrowing happily into the bed.

“Be still my heart. I’d always dreamed I’d have a man of impeccable sock strip tease skills trying to seduce me.” Edward muttered dryly as he floated over to his side of the bed, intending to pick up his book again.

The laughter consumed Roy again for a brief while in which Edward settled onto the bed with his latest book, and after he’d managed to stave off the chuckling he tried to crane his head to see which one the ghost was reading this time. “Advanced metallurgy? Don’t you already know everything in there?”

Edward chuckled quietly a moment, “I’m flattered that just because of who I am, and my whole Gate experience, you believe that I know everything.” And he paused for a moment before smirking, “but yes, I do know everything in here already. Doesn’t mean I don’t still enjoy reading the books.”

“How old were you when you started skiving off with your father’s books and research?” Roy wondered as he carefully worked on adjusting himself so that he could lay on his side to better see the ghost.

“Much too young.” Edward admitted frankly, casting him a lopsided smile. “Always felt it pulling to me though, alchemy. I guess now I understand why, what with my father not being exactly human. Not quite sure how Alphonse manages to resist the pull of it.”

“Trauma can do that and more to a person.” After all, Roy well remembered what had almost made him commit suicide.

“Yeah.” Edward pursed his lips in thought before slowly shutting the book and looking over at Roy. “Do you keep an eye on him?”

Roy smiled faintly and curled his arm carefully underneath his head. “Of course. Don’t worry, I’ll tell you if he’s ever anything but fine.”

Edward nodded and eased himself down to lay as well, trying to keep Roy from straining his neck. “Thank you, for everything you’ve done for me. And him. Especially the stuff I still don’t know about.”

Roy quirked an eyebrow at that, and barely managed to keep from chuckling. “You believe I’m still hiding stuff from you regarding your brother?”

“Yes.” Edward agreed without even needing to consider it. “Not on purpose, or because you don’t want to tell me. But yes.”

“I promise to always tell you if something major ever happens to him. But keeping an eye on
people… that is who I am. It’s how I’ve gotten as far as I have.” Roy told him as he reached out with his other hand to lay it just through one of Edward’s.

“You know,” Edward began with a relaxed sigh of contentment, “time was I would have been angry about you keeping even the little things about his life from me, but now? I’m not sure what it is… but it’s more than how much I trust you.”

“I’m glad, I hate it when you’re angry with me.” Roy admitted with subdued honesty.

Edward chuckled quietly and scooted himself a bit closer across the bed, close enough that his folded knees nearly touched Roy’s. “I don’t like being angry with you, so it’s a good thing you’ve only brought it out in me a few times.”

“I’ve no doubt that I’ll manage to do so again.” Roy realized wryly, his face pulling into something of a grimace.

Edward couldn’t help but laugh, silently agreeing.

They lay there together, conversation and laughter ebbing and flowing between them until well after darkness fell outside their bedroom window. At some point Hazel joined them, snuggling into the hollow formed between the respective pillows of Roy and Edward before falling asleep looking far too satisfied with himself.

Edward was smiling as he tilted his head to watch the sleeping rodent. “He rarely sleeps with us. Is he worried about you?”

“Probably.” Roy admitted with a wry expression, “in his own strange, selfish way.”

“He needs to go on a diet.” Edward reached a hand up to poke through the slight swell of the squirrel’s stomach. “He’s been on an uncontrolled binge for a few days now.”

Tilting his head back enough to glance at Hazel, Roy chuckled quietly and readjusted himself back to watching Edward. “He has to stock up, because once you run off with him he won’t have a constant food source any longer.”

“I could steal food.” Edward argued, briefly entertaining the idea of just how he’d go about stealing the squirrel.

“I’d have denied that back before I saw you try and fracture Grand’s skull with my coat rack. In that moment I truly began to realize that the ghost I’d adopted into my life wasn’t wholly kind and gentle.” But Roy did love that memory.

“You never gave me a reason to be unkind to you.” Edward pointed out as he stopped watching Hazel, tilting his head back down to meet Roy’s amused gaze. “You could have. But from the moment you realized I wasn’t a hallucination, you…” he trailed off a moment, watching Roy closely as he reminisced, a certain sadness entering his eyes as his gaze drifted onto the bedspread between them, “you’ve treated me like I’m still alive. And I’m not sure you’ll ever be able to understand how grateful I am to you for that.”

Roy was silent for a long moment, choosing his words carefully before he even said them, and reaching his hand further up to brush at silvery intangible hair as he spoke. “It’s because to me, you are alive. And clearly none of us, even the Gate, could have ever predicted your existence… and maybe ‘ghost’ is the closest we’ll ever come to naming it, but I’ve seen death. I’ve caused it. But when I look at you? It’s not death I see.”
Edward had lifted his gaze back to Roy’s midway through a speech that had made him feel if only for a fleeting moment, that he still had a beating heart. That it could stall, that the lungs he did not have could suddenly cease working… and how? How could Roy make him feel if even for an instant, that he was alive? “Roy…”

Roy smiled when all Edward could manage to do was stare at him, speechless, and with an expression that only warmed him inside. “Your free pass expired, you know. I’ll believe you if you tell me you’re in love with me.”

“Will you.” Edward whispered with a faint return smile, contentment stealing over him at the reminder. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Roy huffed a quiet laugh but didn’t press further, “what were we talking about?”

“Alphonse.” Edward couldn’t help but crack a grin at the fact that it had taken him far longer than it should have to come up with that answer. “Trauma and secrets and the strangeness of my fate.”

“Well, you’ve a right to know who I’ve got keeping an eye on him.” Roy refocused himself as he fought back a yawn. “My father had a lot of contacts, a lot of friends, in his line of work. Quite a few of them owed him favors. One such person happens to live only minutes outside the town Alphonse is in.”

Initially, Edward was pleased to hear that his brother was under such close watch, until he reflected more on Roy’s words with building confusion and a hint of suspicion. “Just what did your father do for a living? The way you put it makes him sound like an assassin.”

“No, a schoolteacher.” Roy revealed with a snort of laughter, and only smirked at Edward’s confused expression. “The blame on how I made it sound lies entirely with me. I’m not sure my dad could have even shot a gun, much less killed someone.”

“How exactly did your mother end up marrying a schoolteacher?” Edward couldn’t help but pry in fascinated confusion. The woman he knew to be Roy’s mother just seemed like she’d have found a schoolteacher far too tame to be of any romantic interest.

“She’s never told me the details, only that they were both young and he had just moved to take a job at the local school.” Roy admitted as an ember of regret lit inside him at the thought of his dad. “Sometimes I wonder how I’d have turned out, what I’d have become, if he hadn’t died.”

“Well I may have certainly had a more peaceful afterlife in a vineyard.” Edward remarked dryly, and as he saw the hint of a yawn underneath the chuckle that made it out of Roy, he gave the man a firm look. “Time to sleep. You’ve another big day ahead of you.”

“You are definitely worse than my mother.” Roy grumbled good naturedly but closed his eyes, breathing in deeply for several long moments before saying wearily. “My mother won’t be around forever… maybe when I’m old and have retired, and she’s passed on, we can go there. To the vineyard. We’ll both have peace there.”

“I can see it,” Edward told him in a soft, fondly amused voice. “You toddling along through the grapevines with your cane, me having to turn you back around because you keep getting lost.”

Roy breathed out something akin to a laugh, his eyes flicking open with sleepy amusement to gaze at Edward. “I’ll have a cane, will I?”

Edward hummed in agreement, before adding, “and glasses.” He raised a hand towards Roy’s face as if to trace them there, a thoughtful look on his face. “Definitely glasses.”
“You just liked my father in glasses.” Roy recalled suspiciously, before a devilish brightness sparked to life in his eyes and he offered teasingly, “I can always get them now if you’d like. Just some frames… I can ask Maes where he gets his… wait,” and Roy’s expression turned appalled, “do you think Maes is attractive?”

Edward burst into laughter.

“You do!”

“Roy, for the love of – oh stop,” he insisted with more laughter as the man turned the most overdramatic look of emotional wounding on him that he’d ever witnessed, “both your father and Maes look good in glasses, they do. But I’m not attracted to Maes, and I’m certainly not attracted to your dead father either.”

“Are you attracted to me?” Roy asked without hesitation, his expression having cleared to merely a simple smile.

Edward lost himself in Roy’s gaze for a moment, before he turned away to lay on his back, blindly grasping for his abandoned book and upon finding it, flipping it back open. “Get some sleep, Roy.” He insisted as steadily as he could against the conflict inside him.

Roy’s smile flickered wider for all of a brief second before he closed his eyes again. As tempting as it was to pursue this, he knew when to stop. When to let Edward have time to his thoughts. “Good night.”

After a time, Edward heard Roy’s breaths even out into sleep.

Slowly he set his book down. He wasn’t reading it anyway, couldn’t focus on it. Instead he hovered up off the bed to set his book on his bedside table and get the lights. Once their bedroom was bathed in darkness he settled himself into sitting back on the bed.

Reaching out he grabbed his pillow, hugging it to him before leaning down to bury his face in it. He had come too close to the reality that Roy was mortal, that there were people out there who could hurt him. Yes, he’d always known that there were, he’d always known Roy was mortal, but knowing was wholly different from the fear that had gripped him that afternoon as reality slammed in harshly.

It didn’t matter that he believed that they’d not be parted, even with Roy’s eventual death. That they’d be brought together to stay together. Strangely, in the scope of all the fear, it didn’t matter. Because right now, Roy was alive… and he valued that life.

He valued the life of this brave and ridiculous man who had charmed him from the start, who had fallen in love with him unconditionally. A man who meant the world to him, who he had never wanted to be without.

How long had he spent questioning how he felt for Roy? How what he felt meant?

When really he should have known all along.

Fear of losing Roy hadn’t made him choose anything, but it had made him realize something instead that he’d been blind to for a long time.

“Get better, you idiot.” Edward whispered at last with something of a bittersweet smile.

After a time, Edward laid back down on the bed, curling himself around his pillow to help prop up the book he had been reading. Yet as the hours passed by, no pages turned, and Edward continued to
stare hypnotized out the window, lost in his own thoughts and in the dance of memories.

The night passed by in welcome quietness, only to be broken come morning when the first dawn light began to encroach onto the bedspread.

Edward watched with a faint smile, hugging his pillow to him as he hovered slightly off the bed, as Hazel stirred awake and focused in on the still-slumbering Roy with a keen gleam in his rodent eyes. Making himself comfortable, he settled in to watch the squirrel begin the process of waking Roy.

Hazel began by scurrying underneath Roy’s chin, twitching his tail just behind the man’s ear.

Roy squirmed with a low noise of discontent, his nose wrinkling at the ticklish feeling.

Hazel chittered devilishly and darted forward across his human’s neck to stick his cold nose straight into Roy’s ear.

Roy flailed awake under the covers with a hearty curse, swearing more under his breath and hissing in pain as his stitches pulled from his actions. “Hazel, so help me I will skin you for mittens!” He snarled blearily, blinking against the spots of pain in his eyes.

“He’s far too small for a pair,” Edward felt he should mention as he cast a concerned look on the man, “did you hurt yourself?”

Roy carefully extracted his unwounded arm from underneath the blanket and plucked Hazel up, only for the squirrel to twist out of his grip and wind his body around his forearm and begin nuzzling inquisitively at the inside of his wrist. “I don’t think anything ripped.” He reassured, and grimaced as he began to push himself up in bed, inspecting the series of stitches with a careful, but still sleepy eye. “I’m fine.”

Edward smiled softly and gave a barely perceptible nod, his own eyes tracking over the lines of black stitches against the pale white of Roy’s skin and was pleased to see no blood or redness of infection. “I’m glad they look so good.”

“I might actually be able to remove them sooner than I thought.” Roy assessed, ignoring for the moment Hazel now licking at his wrist in order to trace careful touches along a relatively shallow wound on the side of his chest with his other hand.

Edward would be relieved for the day where they could bandage the gashes as normal, because he knew that a full recovery on that front would then be only days away. Yet there was something far more concerning to him, and he lifted his gaze back to Roy’s face. “How are you feeling otherwise?”

“Better.” Roy admitted with honesty as he sank into assessing his own body internally, and while he felt some lingering weariness, he actually was sure that it had more to do with being on bed rest for so long instead of up and moving about as he was accustomed to. There was such a thing as too much rest to make oneself still feel tired. Otherwise? He felt like himself again, he felt strong, and rather annoyed that he’d been on bed rest in the first place. “They’re both going to suffer for this.”

Edward didn’t have to ask who, and he silently agreed. “We’ll make sure of it.”

Roy shared a look with Edward, and was unable to help still feeling worried about putting Edward in danger, but there was also relief that the ghost would stay beside him in this. Edward had probably saved his life in this latest confrontation – either by his direct help, or his medical aid afterwards.

“What?” Edward asked with a slight frown as Roy continued to look at him with an unreadable expression that nevertheless was making him feel absurdly self-conscious.
“Just… feeling grateful that my pride hasn’t cost me you.” Roy told him with a small smile, one almost apologetic.

Edward snorted at the idiocy of the idea, a smile quirking his lips as he shook his head briefly. “You’d have better luck trying to find an exorcist to attempt getting rid of me, than anything you could possibly manage on your own.” And his gaze on Roy gentled, a content warmth settling inside him where his heart would have once been. “Come on, you should get ready for work.”

“I think I’d sooner kill someone who was attempting to exorcise you.” Roy stated quite firmly before turning to the task of extracting his arm from Hazel’s grip. It wasn’t something easily managed, but soon enough the squirrel was scampering off into the bathroom to destroy who only knew what.

Edward watched, as Roy carefully slipped out of the bed, before floating over to the recently vacated area of the bed to immediately track his gaze down Roy’s leg to the stitches on his calf. “Good,” he all but breathed out the word when he saw no sign of infection or tearing of the skin, “that one was bad.”

“Hurt like a bitch, too.” Roy added dryly, eyeing it as well before shifting his glance over to Edward deviously. “It’s nice, having my strength and balance back.”

The words were said in such a way that Edward became immediately suspicious, and he darted his gaze up to look at Roy narrowly.

“Oh no!” Roy declared with exuberance as he stared down at himself. “I forgot to remove my socks!”

Edward burst into uncontrollable laughter as he realized where this was going. “No!” He hadn’t thought Roy would actually do this, he’d thought the man was just teasing him as usual!

“But I did.” Roy informed him as nonchalantly as if he were describing the weather.

“You’re going to fall on your ass.” Edward tried to warn him around a grin he couldn’t seem to get rid of, especially not when more laughter soon followed his words.

Roy snorted at the ludicrous statement and promptly kicked one socked foot back up on the bed, not too far from where Edward was sat, and leaning his forearms on his knee he fixed his attention on the amused ghost. “If you want me sprawled on the floor for you, all you have to do is ask.”

Edward gaped at him wide-eyed, his laughter suddenly gone. Yet before he could find his voice, Roy had disentangled from his position in order to back up a few steps with far more swaying of the hips than Edward felt was entirely necessary but also wasn’t about to complain about.

Roy didn’t give Edward any time to recover himself, instead he sashayed back towards the bed with deliberately prowling steps as his hands trailed down his hips and to the outside of his thighs, coming within one pace of the bed before kicking his right leg up to land his foot right next to Edward.

Edward couldn’t help but be overcome with sheer giggles as he watched Roy flex forward to slip his hands down to where his sock began, only to shoot them back up to his knee as he raised momentarily from his prone position. “I can’t believe you are seriously doing this.”

“I promised a sock strip tease, and that is precisely what you are getting.” Roy informed him through a grin, barely keeping hold of his own laughter as he bent back over his leg again to finally hook his fingers in the cuff of the sock and swiftly hook the cuff down underneath the heel of his foot. Then sliding one hand down further he pinched the material at the toe of the sock between his fingers and promptly whipped it off with a successful, smug twirl of the sock which soon flew behind him to
land on the floor.

Edward clapped his hands, smirking through his continued quiet laughter. “Very nice.” And then jumped as Roy suddenly spun to sit right next to him, falling backwards until the man’s shoulders were almost touching the bedspread, and kicking his left leg and its still socked foot up into the air jauntily while all the while looking at him with devilish enjoyment as he ran his hands up his other calf.

Roy was careful to avoid the stitches on his calf, careful not to strain any of his other stitches as he bent his leg back towards him just enough that he was able to catch the cuff of the sock in his fingers. Bending his knee he was able to hook the cuff of the sock down around his heel all the while watching Edward with wicked amusement. He twitched the material up and down his foot a moment before whipping it off with both hands only to immediately fling it back behind him with a flippant twirl.

Then he was kicking his leg back upwards then down, as much for the effect as to get him leverage and speed in getting back to his feet.

Edward’s laughter had subsided into a fond smile, and he shook his head in amusement as Roy turned back towards him.

“I can’t shower with these on either.” Roy grinned coyly as he hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his briefs.

“Oh no!” Edward protested through another quick burst of laughter, that only doubled as Roy twisted the fabric this way and that with teasing movements that only enhanced what those briefs were failing to leave to the imagination.

“You’re right, I can’t.” Roy chuckled and dipped the waistband a slight amount, just enough to watch Edward bury his face in his hands in renewed laughter.

“Oh, are you going to pretend not to peek?” Roy teased.

“I’ve already seen what you have to offer.” Edward reminded him, lowering his hands to give the man as best a reproachful look as he could when he was smiling.

Roy chuckled and drew his hands away only to walk back up to Edward, and leaned down, placing his hands on either side of the ghost’s knees to bring them face to face. “And?”

Edward’s smile softened, “and you hardly need me to feed your ego, Roy Mustang.”

Roy drew back and shooting Edward a knowing look and brief smile, turned to begin walking towards the bathroom. “You can join me if you like.”

Edward watched him disappear with a faint smile still on his face, and he waited until he heard the water turn on before he drifted up off the bed and floated slowly towards the bathroom doorway. He didn’t go in though, hesitating there beside it until he heard the deluge of the shower break against the entry of a body. Only then did he dare float forward to come to rest against the doorframe, his smile gone as instead his thoughts took a wistful turn as he watched the vague form of Roy from behind the shower curtain.

His hand against the doorframe curled into a fist as he bowed his head with a silent curse and pushed away.

From behind the curtain, Roy watched out of the corner of his eye as Edward left, and cast his gaze
down as he tried to squash the disappointment in his chest.

Edward had made it two steps out their bedroom door before he stopped, whipping around to gaze back into the bedroom with a torn expression. He stood there motionless for several long moments in which his mind raced and an emotion almost like panic settled inside him, and glancing once towards the stairs behind him, he shook his head with another curse.

He walked back into the bedroom before he’d even registered moving in the first place.

He let his gaze drift once towards the open bathroom door, and Roy beyond it a vague shape behind the shower curtain. A small smile slipped onto his face, and mind made up, he went to sit back on the bed.

After a while the shower turned off, and soon enough Roy reentered their bedroom, giving him a surprised look he couldn’t quite discern before turning to go to the closet. He waited until Roy had at least put on his uniform trousers before speaking.

“How long have you known?”

Roy stopped dead in his reach for a shirt, his fingers curling in on air as his heart quickened at the question. A question they both knew he couldn’t wouldn’t play dumb to… this was too important to them, and the only thing between them such a question could reference. “For certain? Not long.”

“I’m sorry.” Edward whispered, and when Roy abruptly turned to him he held up a hasty hand as he floated up off the bed to hurry to the floor. “No, it’s not – I just – I’m sorry I’ve put you through this.”

“You’ve not put me through anything.” Roy denied as he slowly walked up to where Edward had landed on the floor halfway between he and the bed, “loving you is not a trial. Trying not to love you? That was a trial. That was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.”

Edward bowed his head a moment before stepping forward to close the last of the remaining distance that Roy had left between them, and lifted his gaze to Roy’s once more. “I didn’t realize until last night.” He admitted quietly into the small space still between them, “and I spent most of the night debating when to tell you. Whether or not I should wait for some perfect moment to come along... but they don’t exist, do they.”

Roy gave him a lopsided smile, “no. No, they don’t. We make them perfect.”

Edward laughed quietly and glanced aside towards the floor. “Yes, I suppose we do.” And a grin split his face as he shook his head at his own ridiculousness. “I know this doesn’t make sense, but this is actually absurdly difficult when you’re not wearing a shirt.”

Roy burst into laughter, “I’ll take that as a compliment!” And holding up a finger to Edward he began to move backwards. “Okay, stay there.”

Edward couldn’t help but echo Roy’s laughter and shaking his head he looked back to watch the man rifle through his closet. “That white one,” he offered out as he saw Roy’s hand about to graze that hanger next.

Roy cast a devilishly coy look over his shoulder at the suggestion, and slipped the thin white sweater free of the hanger. “And this shirt will make it easier, will it?” He asked as he began to shrug it on.

“Shut up, Roy.” Edward chuckled through his wide grin.
Roy sent him a teasing look, and if he adjusted the sleeves so that his muscles filled them out rather nicer than before, he couldn’t really be blamed. That done, he walked back over to where Edward was waiting where he’d been told to wait, an amused smile now on the ghost’s face and laughter glittering in those silver eyes.

Edward swept an appraising, appreciative eye over him before deciding that Roy was right, the shirt really didn’t help all that much. Roy was still unfairly distracting. Yet despite that, he still stepped forward to rest his hands just slightly through the man’s chest as he bowed his head. “For a long time I’ve kept telling you that you have me.” And after a moment’s hesitation lifted his gaze back to Roy’s eyes as he continued softly, “that I’m yours. You’re everything to me, everything that makes me feel as if my heart might beat again just one last time. I’ve never wanted to be without you. And I’m just sorry it took me so long to truly understand why.”

“It wasn’t a simple process for me either.” Roy couldn’t help but remind Edward gently and with a fond smile as he reached his hands up to rest them just over where Edward’s hands against him would be, just enough to mute their silvery glow.

Edward huffed out a short laugh and shook his head at the memory of all the uncertain torment he’d undergone while Roy had been, unknown to him, figuring out his own feelings. Still when he caught Roy’s gaze again, it was with a hopelessly affectionate look. “You’re the most ridiculous, wonderful man I’ve ever known... and I love you.”

Roy’s grin was blinding, and he couldn’t help but chuckle at Edward’s answering but somewhat shyer smile. “Say it again.”

“What?” Edward fairly squawked at the question indignantly, “granted I’ve never done this before but I’m pretty sure I’m supposed to hear something a bit more romantic than ‘say it again’ after confessing that I love you.”

“You said it again.” Roy couldn’t help but state smugly, and as Edward shot him a dirty look he laughed but caved instantly as he suddenly wrapped his arms around Edward as best as he was able to approximate, and resting his hand in the air where Edward’s head was, he continued softly. “I love you, Edward.”

Edward couldn’t help but close his eyes in amused resignation at the sheer way Roy made him want to clobber the man sometimes, but he was smiling as he let himself believe he could feel Roy’s arms around him. “I love you too.”
Chapter Fifty-Seven

When Roy and Edward reached the man’s office complex inside Headquarters, everyone was already there, even Breda, who usually wasn’t required to show for another hour at least. At the sight of their commander strolling in through the doorway, relief broke out onto many of the faces.

Yet Roy went instantly to one person in particular, “Fuery,” he began as he laid a hand on the small man’s shoulder, “fucking good job.”

Fuery seemed to instantly glow from the inside out, pride seeming to give him height as he beamed at the praise. “Thank you, sir.”

Edward watched the entire interaction with a feeling of prideful approval, shooting a fond smile at Roy.

Roy nodded, and clapped the man’s shoulder before stepping away and towards his private office.

Riza and Maes instantly followed him in, shutting the door behind them.

Edward had floated in with them, and now moved to settle in his usual spot on his usual couch as he keenly watched Roy move a bit slower towards his desk chair, now that they were out of public view. “You okay?” He had forced Roy to take the elevator this time, and they’d taken a taxi here from their home, yet he still worried.

“Fine, dearest.” Roy reassured him with a smile, as he turned to settle into his chair. His gaze not leaving Edward, as he met the worried look on the ghost’s face. “The uniform is just a bit tight on the stitches is all.”

“That answers that, then.” Maes declared cheerfully, and followed the direction of Roy’s eyes to where he could only assume Edward rested on the nearby sofa. “Good morning, Edward.”

“How come he gets a ‘good morning’ and I get stuck with only salutes?” Roy complained as he began to take in the mountain of paperwork that had piled up on his desk with a look of growing distaste on his face.

Riza ignored him, while Maes merely laughed.

Edward shot Roy a reproving look that went unseen even as he responded to the welcomes of the two, despite the fact he went unheard by them.

“Armstrong is out keeping tabs on Grand currently.” Maes began before Riza could speak, venturing over to where Roy sat. “I’m relieving him later this afternoon, since the girls are gone.” And though he tried to keep the tightness of the loss he felt at his wife and daughter having been sent into safe keeping out of his voice, he wasn’t altogether sure he succeeded when out of the corner of his eye he caught the sympathetic look Riza sent him. “His last phone call to check in reassured me that the Brigadier General has still not left the laboratory.”

“Perfect. Just where I want the treacherous snake.” Roy stated airily. “We’ll need to put someone to
watching the prison side of things as well. Not that I believe he’d dare step foot in the place, far too beneath him to be seen exiting it, but it’d due to be overly cautious.”

“I’d suggest Falman.” Maes offered out as he perched on the edge of the sofa he believed didn’t contain Edward. “He’d be calmer than Havoc if suddenly surprised, and that one bakery he likes isn’t too far. Easy enough if spotted for him to claim he was just enjoying a walk before putting away another fattening pastry. He’s getting to that age where he doesn’t keep his figure by sheer metabolism.”

Riza gave a nod of agreement, but remained silent.

Roy had nothing against the suggestion, he well knew Falman’s temperament and capabilities, but he knew that this wasn’t solely his decision any more, and he looked to Edward. “My dear?”

Edward tried not to smile, and likely would have flushed if he were able to. As it was, however, he looked at Roy with a softness in his gaze. “You all know him better than I, and you’re right, the prison does need to be watched. If you believe Falman is the right choice for the task, then I approve.”

“It’s settled.” Roy sat back in his chair with a thoughtful slip of a smile. “I’ll speak to him shortly about it.”

Maes was beginning to smirk as he glanced between the other couch and Roy a few times, but he kept his suspicions to himself for the moment as he turned his attention to other matters first. “Want me to keep an eye on the Fuhrer? With the girls gone, he has nothing left to threaten me with.”

“No!” The quick denial coming not only from Roy, but from Edward as well.

Roy caught Edward’s panicked look, and held a hand up towards the ghost before turning to his surprised best friend. “Bradley is far more dangerous than you realize.”

“My father all but warned me that you and I shouldn’t be apart when he’s around.” Edward added in with unsettled quietness.

Roy wasn’t wholly unsurprised by the knowledge, yet he hardly needed Hohenheim’s opinion to have settled his mind about the matter. He’d face Bradley with Edward at his side, because he knew Edward would allow no other scenario. Yet he still was more than happy to volunteer the information for Edward’s peace of mind. “And when Van Hohenheim warns you about the Fuhrer, you take the warning to heart. Even I won’t face him, knowing what I know now, without Edward there to aid me.”

“More things you won’t tell us?” Riza asked sharply, her expression barely concealing the aggravation she still felt at it.

“More things to keep you safe.” Roy corrected just as sharply, sending a narrow-eyed look of warning her way. “When you finally are privy to the why, I daresay you’ll thank me for keeping you at a distance.”

Maes shook his head, but not in disagreement. “If you tell me no, at this point? I’m willing to keep going with you on faith here. Now this is something involving Hohenheim and his ghost son, too. I’ll admit to being fine with just accepting that this is probably more fucking weird and dangerous than I could ever imagine.”

Edward felt relief settle inside him at Maes’s acquiescence, yet couldn’t help but nervously agree. Everything had gotten incredibly dangerous the moment his father had come back into the picture,
informing them what they were really up against.

Riza let out a small sigh, before dipping her head in a subtle nod. “Well, if you won’t allow us to go sneaking about, given the fact the Fuhrer is watching you like a hawk, might I suggest you employ someone he’d never suspect?”

“If you think I’d be able to sway any of his personal staff, you can save it.” Roy knew there was no way that would ever work out in his favor. He doubted a homunculus would surround himself with anyone who might compromise him, and for all he knew, some of them might be homunculi as well.

“Roy, we’re not the only ones who know about Edward.” Riza revealed, and at the look that came swiftly to her superior’s face, held up a hand with a growing smile. “It seems that in the years before you met him, Edward would try and interact with the cleaning staff. It never made sense to me, before I met Edward, what they were whispering about when they thought I couldn’t hear. But now?”

Edward grinned, although it did falter when he realized he hadn’t actually seen any of them in a long time. Being able to leave this office had changed all of that.

Roy momentarily set aside the subtle worry he felt that the Fuhrer might overhear such things too and begin to make associations. Back when he and Edward had first met, the ghost had mentioned something about interacting to a point with the cleaning staff, but he’d not thought until now the potential ramifications. Or, the benefits. If there was one thing he knew with certainty, it was that most people paid no mind at all to cleaning staff. They could go anywhere, everywhere, and no one in the Military would think twice on their presence.

Except him.

Slowly, a smile began to form, answering the one Riza was confidently sporting. She was right, the Fuhrer would never suspect a member of the cleaning staff of Headquarters of keeping tabs on his whereabouts. “I think I should meet with some of them. Wouldn’t you say?”

Maes however, cleared his throat to signal his impending interjection. “And how can we be assured that they won’t just go running to the Fuhrer, thinking it’d be safer for them?”

“They’d never betray me.” Edward denied the thought of any of them doing such a thing. “It might be hard to understand, but they respect me. Fear me, in their own way. They’ve never wanted to do anything to antagonize me, and if they know that Roy is under my protection, they won’t double-cross him.”

Waiting until Edward was done, Roy then retold the words so that Maes and Riza could hear them as well. “I think they’re a lot more intimidated by the thought of making an enemy of the spirit world, than the living world.”

“I can honestly say I share their feelings on that.” Riza admitted tersely, but not unkindly. Half turning where she stood in order to partially face where she believed Edward to still be, she spoke again. “Are there any you… interacted with more frequently in the past?”

“Any of them would do, really.” Edward admitted to her, unheard, but knew Roy was listening and turned to look at him next. “Although you may be well served in asking Greg up here. Last I was privy to any of their happenings, he was head of the cleaning staff.”

Roy nodded and met Riza’s waiting expression promptly. “Call down to their offices, ask if Greg is available to come up here. Make something up. Edward and I will meet with him, see what we can
“Will that be all then?” Riza asked, having hesitated in her move to turn and leave.

“For now.” Roy agreed, “time to get this day on a normal track. Just because things need to move faster now is no excuse for us to get behind on other matters. We’ll all only have more to do after I make my move.”

Riza nodded and turned crisply on her heel to leave, but cast a smile down towards where she believed Edward to be as she left.

Maes looked after her departure, waiting until the door closed behind her before looking towards the opposite couch with a knowing smile. “Congratulations, Edward. When’s the wedding?”

Edward spluttered in a strangled-sounding way.

Roy burst into laughter, but sent a reproving look towards his best friend. “Maes, please don’t break him. Or my bank account. I’m a bit low on funds after buying his old house to be buying a ring.”

“That wouldn’t be the case if you weren’t so cheap as to not dip into your share of the winery.” Maes pointed out wickedly.

Roy jabbed a finger towards his office door. “Out!”

Maes practically skipped from the office, but not before calling out another congratulations to them.

Edward had his face buried in his hands as the door shut behind Maes, and a low groan of embarrassment escaped him along with a bit of resigned laughter.

Roy chuckled quietly and stood from his desk to come around it and walk over to join Edward on the couch. “I’m afraid that he might be rather relentless about that. He’s waited a long time to see me even fall in love with anyone.”

Edward drew his hands away from his face as he shook his head, smiling at Roy. “Setting aside for the moment that it is far too soon to be considering such things, I don’t want a ring. What would I even do with one? I can’t wear one, it’d fall off in minutes.”

“Then maybe you should propose to me.” Roy winked and as he stood from the sofa reached out a hand to brush at the silver, incorporeal hair. “I might even say yes.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Roy Mustang.” Edward told him while trying to fight back a smile and swatting at Roy’s hand. “As far as I’m concerned you still owe me a first date.”

“Then I shall have to remedy that.” Roy determined with a grin at the mere idea of finally taking Edward on a date. Granted, it wouldn’t be the sort of date he’d become familiar with orchestrating, it would be better. This time, he genuinely cared for and loved the person.

Edward couldn’t keep the smile back any more, not once he was faced with Roy’s clear delight at the prospect. That he could make Roy so happy, with something so simple… it was as humbling as it was flattering. “Well we’re not doing any such thing until you’ve finished going through all those files.”

“Will you help me again?” Roy solicited as he moved back to his desk, darting a look over towards the ghost.
It was a near miss that Edward didn’t roll his eyes, but his smile nevertheless remained as he nodded and floated up from his spot on the couch. “Pass me a stack and a pen.” He requested as he came to rest at a corner of Roy’s desk, settling himself into hovering at it with his legs folded up underneath him.

Roy quickly rummaged through several of them, and finding them not beyond what knowledge Edward would have to make judgment calls on, he slid them over along with a pen. “Your relationship with the cleaning staff here... are you certain you’re okay with my trying to involve them in things?”

For a time, Edward didn’t answer, instead busying himself with uncapping his pen in an overly precise motion as his silver eyes stared hard down at the first of the files now waiting for him. Past that, he didn’t move, and nor did Roy, until at length he said quietly. “Everyone is correct in thinking that they could keep an eye on the Fuhrer for us without attracting undue attention. But it doesn’t keep me from worrying. The Fuhrer isn’t exactly human, and the situation facing us isn’t ideal on any front. I can’t balk at you doing what you must to stay alive.” And he raised his gaze to Roy’s, “but understand that they’re not Maes, or any of the others. They may not go running to him to tell him your plans, but if caught, they’d likely give you up. And die at his hands anyway.”

“I’m aware of the risk.” Roy admitted somberly, “that’s why, before I ask them anything, I wanted your permission first. Just between us, with none of the others here to have an opinion on whatever you might say. If they fear you in their own way, am I in truth really giving them a choice? So what is your choice.”

“Ask them.” There was no hesitation, no pause in Edward’s mind. “I’m willing to try for a bit of hope that the Fuhrer believes you’re far too noble, or far too cocky, to ask for anyone’s help but those of your own team. And besides,” the corner of his mouth pulled downwards in the coming admission, “they’re far more likely to stay alive if you’re in power.”

“We all are.” Roy couldn’t help but mutter darkly, giving an absent nod and turning to begin sorting through more files. “If your father is to be believed.”

Edward’s mouth thinned into a narrow line, and gave the pen in his grasp a quick twirl between his fingers before setting it on the desk. There were things he hadn’t told Roy yet, couldn’t tell him yet... Roy had enough to focus on without being burdened with things that could wait.“My father may conceal the whole truth at times, but he’d not outright deceive me. Despite how I feel about him, I at least know that to be true.”

“And how much are you concealing from me?” Roy aptly asked, though with a distinct lack of anger, merely concerned curiosity as he watched Edward.

Edward met his gaze levelly, and wholly without regret as he replied, “perhaps not enough.”

“Because you’re trying to protect me?” Roy guessed with the same, unassuming curiosity.

“Because I don’t want to burden you with things you can do nothing about.” Edward corrected and as a knock sounded on the office door, he gave Roy a thin smile. “Not right now, not when the Fuhrer wants you dead.”

An answering, bracing smile slipped onto Roy’s lips as he gave a short nod and reached a hand out to brush his fingers through the subtle glow of the back of Edward’s incorporeal hand. “Just remember that you mean everything to me. I’ll always take on more burdens for you, no matter what I’m already facing.”
“I know.” Edward told him with immeasurable fondness weighting his voice, yet he didn’t back down, and nor did Roy press him to. Instead the man’s hand drew away, and after a last shared smile between them Roy looked away to call out for Falman to enter.

“Sir.” Falman had approached the desk with a salute, but still cast a concerned look onto his colonel, professionalism be damned.

Roy met the look with only a faint twitch of humor, because in truth, he’d always be glad he’d done so well by his team that they would worry over him. “I’m fine now.” He answered the unsaid question, before turning to the matter at hand. “But I didn’t have Lieutenant Hawkeye send you in here for that.”

“No, sir.” Falman agreed readily, though was grateful for the reassurance anyway.

“I need you to begin surveillance on the prison.” Roy stated without preamble, voice and expression serious. “If the Brigadier General is seen entering or exiting it, you’re to observe and report it back to me, but under no circumstances are you to interfere with anything.”

Falman nodded in understanding. “Yes, sir. It’s been some time since I’ve done surveillance, but you can rely on me.”

“Doubt never crossed my mind.” Roy offered a faint smile of approval before following up with, “this should go without saying that what I am asking of you is not without potential danger.”

“No offense, Colonel,” Falman began in smiling rejoinder, “but when is anything you ever get us involved in considered safe?” And as a slightly amused, but reprimanding scowl crossed his commander’s face, he saluted. “Consider this mission in good hands, sir.”

“Good luck.” Roy dismissed, and with that, Falman left the office, one more chess piece in play.

Edward, who had observed the whole thing silently, now gave Roy a piercing stare. “Do I want to know what sort of dangerous things you got them up to in the past?”

Roy cleared his throat a touch nervously and promptly picked his pen back up while turning back to his paperwork as if it were the most fascinating thing to ever cross his desk. “He was exaggerating, dearest.”

Edward gave him a look of deadpan disbelief before shaking his head slightly and turning back to his own stack. “Keep telling yourself that.”

They were left alone to work through the accumulated paperwork for almost an hour before another knock sounded at the closed office door. This time when Roy called out for the person to enter, it was a man he didn’t recognize.

“Greg!”

Edward, however, seemingly did know this man.

Greg was a stout-looking man with a slight stoop to his posture, brown hair that was cropped short against a receding hairline, and beetle black eyes that glinted a touch nervously as he stepped fully into the office.

“Close the door, please.” Roy requested, already having laid his pen down and steepling his fingers before him on the desk as he took stock of this man.
Greg was quick to comply, before turning back to face Colonel Mustang. If he was being entirely honest with himself, he couldn’t quite place what he was more nervous of, the Colonel, or the being he knew to haunt these four walls. “How may I be of assistance, Colonel?” He managed to ask in a steady enough voice. “I’m afraid your Lieutenant was sparse on the details.”

Edward was already up and drifting through the air to begin circling around Greg with a cheerful smile. “I haven’t seen this guy in almost a year. He’s starting to lose his hair!”

Roy gave the ghost a torturously amused look before focusing in on Greg. “My lieutenant tells me we have a mutual acquaintance.” And he didn’t wait for the confusion to fully settle onto the man’s expression before continuing, “his name is Edward, and you know him as the ghost that haunted this office.”

The effect was instant.

Greg paled significantly, unconsciously backing a step. “I’m sure I have no idea wha – ”

“Denial won’t work.” Roy quickly cut in, a faint smile crossing his lips. “I consider myself an honest man, I hope you consider yourself the same, so let’s forego the denial and be frank with each other. I didn’t bring you up here to deny what the ghost has already told me. You see, I need something done, and he’s assured me that you and your staff might be the ones to do it.”

“You…” Greg trailed off as he peered intently at the Colonel sitting behind the desk, “you’ve spoken to him?”

“Unfortunately.” Roy acknowledged firmly, his expression pulling tightly a moment before he smoothed it out. The days where he naïvely believed he could keep Edward a secret all to himself, save maybe his mother and perhaps Maes, had passed.

“What do you mean, unfortunately?!” Edward squawked as he whirled in midair to glare at Roy. “Some boyfriend you’re turning out to be.”

Roy couldn’t help but laugh, and shot a grin at Edward. “Sorry, couldn’t help myself.”

Edward gave him a level scowl that promised there would be retribution for this later, yet he let the matter drop when Greg suddenly spoke up again.

“He’s here now? You can hear him?” Greg nearly stumbled over the words in his haste to speak them, and took a step towards the desk without entirely intending to.

Not caring to allude to the fact that he could see Edward, not just yet, Roy nodded slightly. “He’s rather loud at times, especially when he’s annoyed with me.”

“Just you wait.” Edward muttered lowly.

Greg began to feel his nerves settle a fraction, and he hesitantly walked further into the office, although apprehension was still visible in the set of his shoulders. “Is he the one who attacked the Brigadier General in his office? Or does Headquarters have more than one ghost.”

“Oh that was him.” Roy confirmed with more than a little humor at the fact. “He’s not too fond of the man, and in the interest of continuing honesty, neither am I.”

“But why now has he started attacking anyone?” Greg couldn’t help but ask in his confusion about the matter, for it had honestly unsettled all of his staff.
“Because of me.” Roy answered quite simply, and as he saw the man pale, he quickly continued in an effort to head off any outlandish suppositions that could be drawn from his words. “He’s protecting me, that’s all. But that isn’t why the ghost, Edward, and I asked you to come up here.”

“Then what is, Colonel?” Greg had begun to frown.

At this, Roy leaned back in his chair, linking his hands across his stomach as he considered Greg closely. “We need you and your staff to, shall we say, linger more often than not wherever the Fuhrer might go while here at Headquarters. Just that.”

Greg considered himself a simple man, although hardly a fool, and his eyes narrowed at the request as a cold chill snaking down his spine and settling in his gut. “You want us to spy on the Fuhrer.”

It wasn’t a question, but it wasn’t an accusation either.

“You may decline, of course.” Roy told him levelly, expression serious. “However, it would be in your best interests to assist. And I do not mean that as a threat. You’ll receive no backlash from me, nor the ghost, if you decline.”

Greg considered the matter, and the man sitting in front of him in silence for a time before saying softly, “and if I go to the Fuhrer about this?”

“Then you do.” Roy wasn’t entirely worried about that though. After all, Edward had assured him that Greg and the others of the cleaning staff would never double cross him. Not if it would mean bringing down ghostly wrath from beyond. But it did give him an opening to impress his desires in all this subterfuge without coming right out and saying it bluntly. “At this point I doubt it’s a secret to him that I’d delight in burning him alive.”

Edward huffed with displeasure, “you’re not the only one.”

Not entirely certain whether or not he’d gone pale, Greg felt the nerves grip tightly at his chest again. He’d not forgotten who he was speaking to, but for a moment he had forgotten that the Flame Alchemist should terrify him and any other sane human being. “I can’t order my staff to put their lives at risk.”

“What I make to you is an offer, not an order. Courtesy dictates that your staff receive the same.” Roy countered lightly, but tone firm all the same.

“And what then do we get for sticking our necks out for you?” Greg couldn’t help but wonder, and wonder just what he was seeing the beginnings of… although it wasn’t the beginning at all, was it.

Roy gave a thin smile, good, he wasn’t dealing with an idiot. So he’d not treat him as such. “What is it, precisely, that you want? Negotiations aren’t uncommon in this sort of thing.”

Greg sucked in a quiet, bracing breath, trying not to let his nerves get the better of his body as he cast a darting look about the office before centering back in on the Flame Alchemist. “If we do this, you give any of us who participate overtime pay. You want us to play informants, we’ll need more than our usual salary. And if you succeed with this treasonous plan I don’t want to know the details of, you keep our involvement a secret. I won’t be looking over my back for the rest of my days.”

Edward couldn’t help the slight smile that came over his face as he settled on the edge of the desk, just to the side of Roy’s line of vision, but able to see Greg clearly all the same. “Am I naïve for thinking he’d just ask for the money?”

Roy didn’t answer Edward, but he did answer the demand put on the table for him. Truthfully,
though he’d keep this between Edward and himself, it was refreshing to just deal with someone wanting money. And the silence? That was already a given. No, he may not be dealing with an idiot, but he was dealing with someone who’d never done anything close to negotiating at this level of danger before. Yet, negotiations were negotiations, and as much as he’d be fine accepting Greg’s terms, that wasn’t how things were done. “Consider the secret kept. However you’ll only receive eight more cenz per hour.”

Edward whipped around to level a somewhat impressed look at Roy. “Should I be surprised that you apparently know everyone’s pay rate?”

Roy’s eyes as they flicked to Edward twinkled briefly in amusement, but his face smoothed out just as quickly when he shifted his full attention back to Greg who was looking a little shocked. And not happily so. Inwardly, he sighed. Even Edward seemed to know the basics of this sort of thing. “Your answer?”

“No! I won’t, we won’t! Not for – !” Greg blustered, growing a touch purple in the cheeks. “Twelve more cenz at the minimum.”

Roy kept himself from both smiling and giving a sigh of relief. Finally. It wasn’t quite a full negotiation, but it was something. He’d take it. After all, he didn’t want to frustrate the man into leaving. Edward would probably find something to hit him with for that, and he’d lose extra assistance. There would perhaps be time later to continue working on Greg’s negotiation skills. “That will be fine. Take the offer to your crew, along with my regards.” He paused for a moment before adding with a slight tilt of his head and a thin smile. “And the ghost’s, of course.”

The reminder of the ghost caused Greg to draw himself in a bit straighter, a cold frisson shooting up his spine and causing the short hairs on the back of his neck to stand straight. As much as he knew that crossing Colonel Mustang was a deadly idea, crossing something supernatural and aligned with Colonel Mustang? There’d be no prayer that he felt would be able to save his soul then. “Yes, Colonel Mustang.”

Edward floated from the desk to land on the floor just in front of it, only paces from where Greg had been as the man turned and hurried from the office. “How do you know how much money everyone makes?”

Roy waited until his office door had closed before he spoke. “It pays to be well informed about who I might be paying in the future.” He merely said and looked Edward’s way to meet the silver gaze that was turned on him. “Now we wait.”

Edward gave a slight nod and moved to settle back along the side of the desk where a stack of paperwork waited for him still. “Out of curiosity, if things had been different and I’d ended up working for you somehow, how much would you pay me?”

Roy cracked a grin and picked up his pen again as Edward did similar. “How could you ever ask me to put a price on you, dearest?”

Edward rolled his eyes, a smile slipping through all the same against the expressionless façade he had tried to maintain. “So immediate demands to move in with you then?”

“At the very least.” Roy agreed softly as he looked down, unseeing, at his current file. “Circumstances are irrelevant, if it’s within my power you’ll never want for anything.”

Edward’s smile turned lopsided in affection. This ridiculous, love-struck idiot. But it was his ridiculous and love-struck idiot. “Pony.” He reminded the man in good humor, and as a laugh
escaped Roy he grinned and turned to his own share of the paperwork. “But I’ll settle for a first
date.”

Roy knew it wasn’t entirely ridiculous that he was growing nervous about the thought of taking
Edward out on a first date. Because despite knowing that Edward would very likely still love him
even if they just sat at home and chatted all night, it was still the first date he’d ever approached
where it was with someone he loved. He wanted to get it right. “Maybe I’ll get you a pony when I
retire.”

Edward laughed quietly, but didn’t respond. Instead he focused in utterly on getting through the files
that Roy had passed off to him. If it would help in getting Roy out of here any earlier tonight, he was
all for it. Both for the fact that he wanted that date, and for the fact that despite Roy’s reassurances
that he was fine to return to work, he’d prefer if Roy’s time here was kept as short as possible for his
recovering health.

Together they began to power through the files on the desk. Working together at it so seamlessly that
by the time Riza popped into the office after a brief knock to the door, the stack of papers and folders
had nearly halved.

“Edward’s been helping you?” Riza stopped dead in the center of the room, surprise and
understanding crossing her face as she saw the clear delineation of two stacks of paperwork. “That’s
how you’ve been getting your paperwork done so quickly all this time?”

Roy had set aside his pen, and now he looked up at her with an amused expression. “Not the entire
time, it’s only been lately that I’ve been able to trick him into helping me.”

Edward shot him a withering look, but smiled and kept working with a shake of his head and a
muttered, “actually I’m pretty sure it was something closer to pity that made me start helping.”

Roy ignored him, “he’s actually quite good at military matters. Have you had any issues with any of
it coming back?” And as Hawkeye shook her head, he smirked. “See? He’s pretty good for an
unpaid assistant.”

“Oh see if I sleep in your bed tonight.” Edward remarked idly, a smile playing across his lips as he
finally looked up at Roy with amusement glittering in his silver eyes.

Roy shot him a horrified look, only to realize that Edward was playing with him and his expression
quickly melted into relief and then delight. “You think I’ll want you in my bed tonight, do you?”

“Sir,” Riza broke in with a look equal parts scandalized and amused resignation, “if you could stop
harassing Edward and focus a moment, please.”

A laugh escaped Edward, and he passed over the latest file he’d been working on into the hand Roy
reached out.

Roy glanced Riza’s way with a bit of a smirk before casting his gaze down to find the signature line
on the report given him. “What is it you need, Lieutenant Hawkeye?”

“Since you’re working so hard,” she raised an eyebrow sharply at him, not too sure of the validity of
that now that she knew he’d been having help, “the boys and I were all going to go out to grab some
lunch and I thought we’d bring you something back.”

Roy glanced at the clock, blinking in surprise as he saw it was almost noon and he’d not even
noticed. “Yes, thank you.” He looked back at her to give her a genuine smile. “I hadn’t even thought
about food.”
“Doubtless you had other things on your mind.” Riza remarked blandly, though the corners of her mouth quirked upward momentarily. “Did your meeting go well with that Greg character?”

“I expect to know the result before my day is out, but it did not go poorly.” Roy admitted with a slight shrug and sat back in his chair to consider the far wall with a slight frown. “But either way, I do believe Edward is right, they won’t go running to tattle on me. Not now knowing that Edward is on my side.”

“Out of curiosity,” Riza began with a bit of a frown, “what will you do if the Fuhrer finds out and comes after you sooner than you expect him to?”

Roy’s expression pulled grimly, and he sat forward again with a bitter expression as he met her gaze. “The thing is, Lieutenant, I always expect him to come after me every moment of every day. But right now there are matters he is attending to that are more important to him than me. Right now, someone like me doesn’t even register as a threat, no matter what I get up to.” And it was true, what threat could a homunculus possibly feel a mere human presented? Even one who is an alchemist. But he’d relieve the Fuhrer of that oversight. Violently. As many times as necessary. “He won’t come after me just yet.”

“What could possibly be more important to him than you preparing to overthrow him and seize the country?” Riza frowned sharply, and while she doubted she’d get an answer to her question, she still had to ask it. She felt better for asking it.

“I’ll take whatever the largest sandwich is on the menu of the place you all end up going to.” Roy redirected calmly, but with a note of finality ringing clear in his tone. “And a drink. Surprise me.”

“Yes, sir.” Riza acquiesced, a resigned smile pulling at her lips as she saluted, then turned to leave. Roy waited until she reached the door before calling after her, “Riza…” and as she looked back at him, he offered a thin smile, “I promise you’ll understand when this is all over.”

Edward had watched her leave, but when he felt Roy’s gaze on him, he looked over to meet the man’s eyes.

“I know,” Roy answered the unsaid remark, and smiled as Edward rolled his eyes. “But that does bring up the thing I still need to talk to you about. I’d planned on talking to you this morning, except I might have gotten a bit distracted.”

Edward couldn’t help the grin that cracked onto his face before he managed to stuff it behind an almost shyly happy smile, fairly sure that he’d be blushing right now were he flesh and blood. “I can’t imagine by what.”

“Oh, just some unfairly attractive young man confessing undying love for me.” Roy waved a hand as if it were a matter completely benign and unimportant.

“Well,” Edward’s eyes twinkled, “the undying part I’m not sure I can claim, being dead and all.”

Roy snorted but didn’t launch any protests regarding his opinion on Edward’s state of being. “Tomorrow morning will you go over the blueprints with me, help me draw up a plan of entry? As soon as these stitches are gone…”

Edward nodded, not needing it to be said. He knew what Roy intended to do, and as much as there’d
been a time where in the back of his mind he’d always wondered why Roy had been waiting so long to make his move, now that he realized just how close the moment was… the nerves were a solid ball in the pit of his being. “You wouldn’t be able to stop me.”

Roy nodded in agreement and in approval. “Then tomorrow we will make our plan,” and he knew his word choice, ‘our,’ hadn’t missed Edward’s notice if the ghost’s expression was anything to go by, and he smiled. “But for today, let’s just be. You and I. And maybe a game of chess while I eat? You haven’t trounced me in weeks.”
Chapter Fifty-Eight

Riza let herself back into the office almost an hour later at Roy’s permission, bringing with her two paper sacks and a disposable drink cup. The cup she passed into Roy’s hand, while the largest of the paper sacks she set down on the desk for him. “Sandwich for you, sir.”

Roy immediately dived into the paper sack with abandon.

Edward was trying not to laugh at Roy’s enthusiasm when Riza spoke again.

“And I got a few office things for you, Edward.” Riza had set the remaining paper sack on the desk and was rustling inside of it to begin pulling items out. “Proper pens, since you’re apparently helping Roy with paperwork…”

Edward immediately darted through Roy’s desk in order to look in eager surprise. “She sprung for fountain pens? For me?”

Roy, for his part, was grinning in happiness for the apparition, and in more than a little surprise at Riza. He hadn’t expected she’d take this well to Edward.

“Little postie-tabs – just put those on the ones you do and I’ll know that I won’t have to double-check anything.” Riza continued, ignoring Roy’s indignant exclamation. “Keep them away from Roy.”

“Lieutenant!” Roy spluttered in offense.

Edward laughed brightly, and Riza ignored him again.

“And ink refills for your pens, of course.” She pulled those out as well and cast her gaze around, uncertain of where Edward was but figuring he was close by her. “Just let me know if you need anything else. I’ll keep you supplied like I do Mustang.”

Edward grinned in delight and immediately picked up one of his new pens, and snatching aside a spare piece of paper off Roy’s desk, he quickly wrote his gratitude and offered it out to her.

Riza took the slip of paper with only an initial marked hesitance, yet a smile slipped onto her face as she read the words and nodded, offering that same smile in the direction she now knew Edward to be. “You’re welcome.” And casting her attention towards Roy, she nodded to him. “Colonel, enjoy your lunch.”

It didn’t escape Edward or Roy’s notice that Riza left while tucking Edward’s note of thanks into the breast pocket of her uniform.

“Well now, look who’s charming my staff…” Roy drawled with amused delight as he leaned back in his chair with drink in one hand and sandwich in the other.

Edward cast him a look of shy happiness, “she went shopping for me.”

“Think she’s trying to steal you from me?” Roy queried lightly, eyes glittering in amusement.

“I think she’s just grateful I’m trying to keep you safe.” Edward scolded him with warm affection, “put such silly ideas out of your head. You’re stuck with me.”
Roy grinned around his latest bite of food, and knew he’d never stop being grateful to whatever strange twist of fate that had allowed him to be stuck with Edward Elric. Edward had done far much more for him than just show him that he had the capacity to love someone the way he loved the ghost.

After Edward had put away his new things in a drawer of Roy’s desk that the man halfway cleared for him, and after Roy had finished the better part of his sandwich and left off holding his drink, the chessboard was pulled out for the first time in, really, far too long.

“You should just admit perpetual defeat, Roy,” Edward stated quite loftily, several minutes into the first game, despite the state of the chessboard.

The look Roy turned on the ghost was one of disbelief, but with a dose of uncertainty as well for his continued success thus far. After all, he did lose the majority of the time to Edward. Looking back down he gave a consideration of the board not unlike he might give a real battle scenario. “And just how, exactly, do you think you’ll be worming your way out of this one, dearest?”

An amused smirk slipped briefly onto Edward’s lips, and he ignored the question as he moved one of his rooks out to tempt Roy. “Your move, dearest.” He traded back candidly, unconcerned if Roy took his bait or not. Either way he’d have the man beat in three moves.

Roy snorted, even as a ridiculous part of him warmed at the endearment, mockingly dropped from Edward’s lips or not. So, his little love wanted to play coy, he’d soon get Edward to admit it had all been a ruse when he had the ghost in checkmate. “I’ll accept your surrender.” He offered in an enticing velvet tone.

Edward nearly shivered at the sound of it, and lifted his gaze to glare. “I don’t need to. And you’d best not offer surrender to others sounding like that. I think I’d get angry and jealous.”

“You’re the only one I want in my bed.” Roy reassured him with a hint of pleased amusement coloring his voice now. He did not plan to now, or ever, make Edward jealous like that, but in a way it was still heartening to know that Edward could become so.

“It’s not just your bed that concerns me.” Edward told him with a teasing smile, “I have a feeling a lack of a proper bed never stopped you.”

“No,” Roy admitted, and moved to avoid intercepting the rook that he was pretty certain was meant to snare him into some scheme. “However you’re who I love,” he paused as he suddenly considered the chessboard, “even though I’m pretty sure I just fucked myself, didn’t I.”

“Are you talking about loving me, or about helping me kick your ass?” Edward asked sweetly as promptly opened himself up to bring Roy into check on his next move.

“Would you accept my surrender?” Roy asked as he realized that somehow, Edward had lured him along the chessboard and now had him in a trap.

Edward grinned at him with utter enjoyment at the predicament Roy was now facing, and shook his head slowly. “Oh no, I think not. How unfortunate for you… I’m the only Elric who doesn’t accept surrenders.”

“Too late to trade you in for Alphonse?” Roy wondered teasingly as he made a last ditch, but admittedly worthless effort to try and avoid his fate on the chessboard.

“I thought I once told you that if you ever even looked at my brother wrong, you’d have my ghostly wrath to deal with?” Edward reminded him sweetly, though with a narrow-eyed look all the same.
Roy huffed out a laugh and nodded, he did recall that actually. Now that he thought about it. He’d just never bothered to give it much thought, given he’d not been remotely interested, so he’d just dismissed the entire thing. “And I still maintain that one of you is enough for me. More than enough.”

“How romantic.” Edward muttered with a poorly hidden smile, and proceeded to knock Roy’s king from the chessboard. “You need to teach me a new game. So for a while at least you have a higher percentage of winning.”

“But I’m learning,” Roy muttered as he pieced together all the moves Edward had made to trap him so suddenly, “I’m learning that when I’m Fuhrer, if ever there’s another war, you’re going to be my chief strategist.”

Edward laughed quietly and shook his head. “Ah yes, the invisible chief strategist. What will they think of you?”

“That I am brilliant in my madness.” Roy determined and started setting the chessboard back up again for another match. “You would do it, wouldn’t you?”

“You’d have more trouble stopping me from helping you, than convincing me to.” Edward pointed out to him with a faint smile as he considered Roy from across the desk. “And you’d never be able to stop me from being at your side in such times.”

How well Roy now knew that to be true… and he was grateful for it. He actually had trouble imagining doing any of this without Edward, despite knowing that he’d find a way. Everything was just so much easier to bear when someone else was there demanding to bear it with him, someone he couldn’t pull rank on to get them to leave off.

Although he got the niggling suspicion that Edward wouldn’t have given two shits about rank anyway.

He knew he’d be grateful for it still, after all, having an alchemist of Edward’s caliber beside him would only be a benefit. Something that was impossible now… and yet… Roy focused in on Edward’s face closely as he considered something now that he hadn’t given much prolonged thought to in the past.

“What’s with the face?” Edward shot Roy a suspicious look as he realized the man had been staring at him with the strangest expression. “Do I need to get you home?”

“And have our first date be bedside?” Roy asked with initial horror at the thought, before a sly smile crept onto his lips as he gave it more consideration. “On second thought – ”

“No!” Edward held up a hand laughingly, but with ironclad insistence in his silver gaze as he pinned Roy with a reproving look.

Roy laughed in kind, and held his hands up in surrender. “Only kidding, love.” He reassured, half to see that fond and a little bit flustered expression slip onto Edward’s features at the endearment. “Actually I was wondering if somewhere in that genius alchemy brain of yours, there’s a way to make my gloves better. Last time was a bit too close for comfort, and now knowing I’m eventually going up against a homunculus?”

Edward slowly nodded and extended a hand with concentration lining his features, and a bit of a frown that he hadn’t thought of it himself. But then, Roy was frighteningly powerful as he was. When he wasn’t being stonewalled by fake philosophers stones.
Roy slipped the glove from his left hand and offered it out. “There stopped being anything the man I eventually trained under could teach me, and while he was a master at his craft, he wasn’t you.”

“He wasn’t an Elric.” Edward added of his own accord, but felt the statement truthful. Both he and his brother, for the brief time they’d studied and practiced alchemy, had been in a class of their own and swiping their father’s texts on the subject. Texts that a living philosophers stone had used as reference. And Edward wasn’t fool enough to think that what his father was had played no part in how easily alchemy had come to he and his brother.

Roy’s smile had dipped at the corners in wry acknowledgment, and he sat back in his chair as he watched Edward examine the array on the glove. “You wouldn’t have liked him.”

“Is he still alive?” Edward asked curiously, his silvery gaze flicking up to meet Roy’s dark eyes. “Or have you killed him.”

Roy wasn’t sure if it should bother him or not, the casual way Edward had asked that question, as if the thought of Roy killing someone was commonplace. And then he remembered the stitches still holding him together. No, it wasn’t so farfetched that Edward would assume he’d permanently removed a potential threat. In saying Edward wouldn’t have liked the guy, of course the ghost would assume things. “He’s been dead for quite some time now, but not from my doing.”

Edward nodded, accepting the answer for what it was and not prying. It’s not that he wasn’t interested in trying to ferret out some details of what he was certain was an interesting story, it was more that Roy clearly didn’t remember it fondly. Asking Roy to revisit a less happy time of his past wasn’t exactly what he wanted to do, what with their final conflict with the Brigadier General drawing quickly towards a head.

“What’s your assessment, O’ Edward of the Elrics.” Roy asked at length in a hopeful, jaunty tone. Edward abstained from rolling his eyes. Barely. “The array is solid,” he approved and set the glove back on the desk between them. It would need at least a minute before Roy would be able to touch it again. “Although if I’d noticed something off before now, I’d have said.”

“But?” Roy prompted, knowing the apparition well enough to know that there was a ‘but’ there.

“But,” Edward conceded with a faint, fond smile directed at Roy, “I have an idea. Along the lines of what you’ve been working towards in your research journals. And if you’ll allow me, I’ll take one of your spare gloves and make some modifications.”

Roy didn’t even have to consider denying the request, and honestly he’d not have minded if Edward hadn’t requested at all and just gone ahead and done whatever he was planning. He trusted Edward wholly and completely, with his life, with everything. Although since Edward was asking…”only if you let me watch, so I can learn.”

Edward tried to control his smirk, he really did, but it still crept onto his face as he fixed a teasing look on Roy. “I wasn’t aware there was anything about that which you still needed to learn.”

It took Roy a second longer than it should have to piece together the taunting tone, teasing look, and the words just said between them to realize exactly how Edward had chosen to twist his words. So his easily flustered little love wanted to go there, did he? “Oh I’ll always be willing to take direction from you, to ensure I’m doing it exactly the way you like it done.”

Edward grinned despite himself and shook his head. “Impossible.” And for all the multiple meanings that one word had in consideration of their situation, his heart still felt light.
With just that one word, said so fondly to him, Roy felt all his drive to tease Edward melt away. Now he reached out around the chessboard towards the ghost, who seeing his intentions had already offered out a shimmering incorporeal hand for him. “Yet it still stands true.”

“One day.” Edward heard himself promising, but he smiled as he realized it for the truth. One day he’d be able to handle being around for such things with Roy, but it definitely was not this day. The mere thought still flustered him.

Roy tipped his head sideways a bit as a somewhat teasing smile lined his lips, “then one day you should join me in the shower.”

“A hot one, I hope. Cold ones don’t suit you so well.” Edward couldn’t help but retaliate in flustered amusement.

Roy scowled at the reminder, and suddenly his desire to get Edward into that shower with him was twofold. “Hush, you tyrant.” He scolded against the bright laughter escaping the ghost now.

Edward eventually did so, although a smug delight was still glittering in his silver eyes, but leaving off tormenting this ridiculous man he’s somehow, somewhere along the line fallen in love with, he gestured to the glove between them. “But yes, if you want to watch, of course you can. I can’t guarantee what’ll happen, to be honest. It’s mostly theory on my part, continuing off of your own theories. But I’m interested in trying.”

“We’ll go somewhere remote for testing.” Roy decided, and then considered Edward with a seriousness that was utterly opposite the teasing banter of just moments ago. “You do know you don’t have to push yourself to be around when I –”

“Roy,” Edward interrupted with an instant firmness to his tone, and a slight hard glint in his eyes, “you could never make me do anything. You’ve never been able to make me do anything. If one day I want to be around while you are actively engaging in whatever dirty fantasies you have about me, I’ll thank you not to ruin the mood by questioning my decision about whether or not I can handle being present for it.”

Roy couldn’t help but feel sufficiently scolded, and he offered Edward an apologetic smile as he nodded in ascent. Yet scolded or not, it didn’t stop him from cheekily asking, “you think I fantasize about you?”

Edward gave him a deadpan look, “I don’t think, I know. Because I know you.”

Conceding that Edward had a more than valid point, Roy grinned. “Come on, one more chess match and then back to work. I have a first date I want to take you on.”

Edward could hardly say no to either of those things, didn’t want to say no. “I best trounce you quickly then, so we can get back to it.”

The trouncing, while it did happen, was not immediate. And did not conclude the way that Edward had thought it would, with Roy managing to pull out a narrow victory over him. After Roy had sufficiently delighted in his comeback win, they got the pieces and the chessboard put away and Roy finally pulled back on his glove that had been lying on the desk between them since Edward had put it there.

Afterwards they resumed working through the paperwork that remained, with Edward continuing to use the little postie-tabs that Riza had bought for him to signify which ones she didn’t need to worry about. Something that Roy would huff about childishly every so often. Here and there they would
pass over each other’s current report to mention something or get an opinion, but for the most part they worked in a comfortable silence.

They were nearly through it, only a few folders remaining for each of them, when a knock sounded at the office door.

Riza poked her head through without waiting for permission, “Greg’s back. Want me to send him in?”

“Please.” Roy allowed with a faint smile that slipped from his face in favor of an expression carefully blank as his Lieutenant’s head removed itself from his office.

Edward had set his pen down and sat himself on the edge of the desk, and as they heard murmurings outside the door, he glanced aside at Roy. “Just let me know if you want me to spook him to prove anything.”

“I don’t think spooking is necessary,” Roy replied in a low, quiet tone as the door began to swing open, “they already know you exist. I don’t think they’d believe they’d win any favors from you by claiming to doubt it.”

Edward tipped his head in wry acknowledgment, but said nothing.

Greg had reentered the office.

“Your decision?” Roy asked simply, but tone final and commanding all the same.

Greg took a cursory look around before settling his gaze on the Colonel, “we’ll do it.” He stated despite the nerves he still had about the entire affair, because in truth, Colonel Mustang was the safest option.

Despite the Colonel’s reassurance that should any of them refuse, they would receive no backlash from the ghost, none of them were willing to test that. He had asked, and everyone had agreed that if the ghost was invested in protecting Colonel Mustang, so too should they be. They had never wanted to cross the ghost before, they were hardly about to start going against the supernatural entity now.

“Good.” Roy approved of with the same reserved manner he’d adopted from the moment Greg had reentered his office. “Remember, you’re just lingering. Maybe a little bit of extra cleaning here and there. That’s all.”

“Believe me, Colonel,” Greg told him with blunt honesty, “that’s all any of us are willing to do. We’re not military, or spies, and we want no part of the games you all play with each other’s lives.”

“Then expect extra checks in the mail.” Roy concluded with a note of finality in his tone, “if you need to contact me, leave me a note in here after hours saying you need to talk, and I will find you. Otherwise for your own safety it is best if you do not contact me in person until the matter is settled.”

Greg nodded, and made to leave before hesitantly turning back to the Colonel, “how exactly is this going to help you? Us just hanging around more often where the Fuhrer is?”

“It will,” Roy told him dismissively, “that’s all you need to know.”

Greg gave another nod, glancing around the office with a different sort of nervousness as he asked, “and you’ll tell the ghost we’re helping?”

Edward raised his hand, “right here.” Yet he smiled at the head janitor, “he’s probably going to lose
the rest of his hair because of all this.”

Roy thought it best not to comment one way or the other on that one, especially not in front of Greg. “He knows,” he replied with a hint of something darker, warning in his tone, “he’s watching you right now.”

Perhaps a bit unfair to use Edward as a veiled threat and reminder to not double cross him, but he used it all the same.

Greg felt something icy descend to his stomach, clench its claws into him, and he was certain he paled several shades as he managed to get out as steadily as he could, “thank you, Colonel Mustang.”

Roy waved him off, and nearly just as soon as Greg had departed, had Riza taken his place in the office.

“He just left looking like he’d seen a ghost.” Riza couldn’t help but mention, her lips quirking a bit in humor at the statement, despite her worry that all this had just backfired.

Edward huffed out, shooting Roy a rather wryly amused look. “Wonder why that could be.”

“That he did not, but I may have reminded him of Edward all the same.” Roy offered out in explanation.

Riza couldn’t exactly find it in herself to blame him for playing that card. “Well?” She asked as she came forward to where her friend sat behind his desk with a wholly unreadable look on his face. “Do we have babysitters?”

Roy finally let slip a satisfied smile as he inclined his head once in a brief nod. “Hopefully they’ll remain invisible to Bradley, just for the sole fact of their employment here, because I honestly doubt any of them are any good as a true spy.”

Riza hoped so as well.

Edward and Roy were left alone again after Riza had caught them both up on the status reports of Armstrong, Maes, and now Falman. It seemed that there had been no changes in the Brigadier General’s position, the man was still apparently in the laboratory.

Roy had sent Riza off with an unconcerned expression, but he knew she wasn’t fooled by it. Neither was Edward.

“How much longer do you think we have?” Edward asked of him quietly, ignoring his remaining pile of paperwork he was assisting on in favor of watching Roy’s face closely.

Honestly, Roy wasn’t sure, but the fact that Grand seemed immovable from the facility was beginning to worry him. Either the man was under a literal gun to finish, and quickly, or he was already dead. An ingredient. “We’ve probably never had all that long.” He admitted quietly as he met the concerned silver gaze. “But whether he’s finished it or not, I’ll still kill him.”

“Either you do, or I will.” Edward reassured him with a steely edge to his voice, and a determined glint in his eyes. “I won’t see you brought to harm if I can do anything to prevent it.”

Roy knew it for the truth, accepted it for the truth, and now he knew better than to try and argue Edward against it. “We’ll assess an entry plan tomorrow morning, and I’ll take a good look at my stitches tonight.”
“I don’t trust you not to try and remove them before they’re ready,” Edward frowned at him suspiciously, “so I’ll be checking them too.”

Roy couldn’t help but chuckle at Edward’s decision. “I promise I’d not make you worry like that. But really, dearest, there are easier ways to see me shirtless.”

“All that pale skin? I’ll be blind as well as dead!” Edward declared wickedly, and turned primly back to the report he’d been examining as Roy spluttered indignantly.

Roy tried not to notice that as he got back to his own share of the paperwork with a grumble, his scowl had melted into a smile. In all honesty, he did enjoy Edward teasing him, and those rare moments where the ghost tried to fluster him.

Together they fell back into their comfortable working silence, with Edward having to swat Roy’s hand away every so often when the man tried to steal his postie-notes. They did finish though, and Roy sat back in his chair with a tired but satisfied groan and tried to work a muscle kink out of his hand.

“Call to requisition a car until after the weekend is over.” Edward reminded him as he floated over to perch on the desk directly in front of Roy, his legs merging through Roy’s.

“Am I taking you places?” Roy asked teasingly as he stopped leaning back in order to roll the chair forward and rest his hands on the desk at each side of the ghost’s hips. The position caused him to have to crane his head back and up to meet Edward’s gaze, but he was hardly complaining about the proximity it put them in.

“I believe there was something on our schedule, yes.” Amusement danced in Edward’s eyes as he let one of his hands fall to rest through one of Roy’s. The man was barely inches from him, but he wasn’t at all inclined to move. If anything, he was fighting the desire to move closer. “Something about a zoo trip, so I can see all sorts of fun new animals to ask you for as pets.”

Roy chuckled quietly and raised the hand that remained free of Edward’s to trace the shining line of the ghost’s neck. “l believe I still owe you a pony first.”

“You do,” Edward agreed. “I also might want one of those rhinoceros things you were talking about.”

Roy actually could affirm for Edward right this moment that the ghost would indeed want one, but he was holding out hope nonetheless. “I am not buying you a rhinoceros, dearest. That’s all I need, a rhino chasing you about the yard because it senses you.”

“They can’t fit inside a house?” Edward frowned in curiosity, and a flash of even greater interest in potentially having one. “Is it the size of a pony?”

“Oh, my sweet, sweet country-raised ghost.” Roy teased with a broad grin. “You know so much and yet so very little.”

“I’m going to find something to hit you with.” Edward told him frankly, a smirk on his lips.

Roy chuckled and drew back in order to get to his feet and grab his keys from his desk, “maybe later. Come on, let’s get out of here and get home.”

Edward floated up off the desk to trail after Roy. “I don’t get a first date with you in uniform?” He couldn’t help but ask with a wide grin. “What if I have a thing for it?”
“Do you?” Roy asked humorously, already knowing the answer.

“Fuck no, they’re hideous things.” Edward case the uniform in question a dubious expression. “I could kiss whoever made it flame retardant though.”

Roy instantly felt something dark and protective surge up inside him at the mere idea of Edward, his Edward, kissing anyone but him. Not that it could happen anyway, but his jealousy where Edward was concerned was rarely ever logical. “Be satisfied with knowing that she was well compensated.”

Edward couldn’t help but feel a spark of warmth envelope him at the tightness of Roy’s tone, and smiled fondly at this clearly jealous man that he had come to love. “I think I can manage that, you possessive bastard.”

Roy didn’t make any attempt to argue it, in fact it was more of an embrace of the words that happened instead and he nodded once in firm agreement. His piece said on the matter, he let them out of the office and went directly to Riza’s desk where she looked up at him attentively. “Have a car sent around for me. I’m on strict restrictions regarding how I travel until Monday.”

“Good.” Riza approved as she reached for her desk phone receiver, not needing to ask who had insisted that Roy take a car until Monday. In fact she felt her approval of Edward grow tenfold.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Roy offered out in parting as he made to leave.

The goodnights of the staff who still remained in the room followed Roy and Edward out into the hallway. Once again Edward bullied Roy into taking the elevator down to the ground floor, and by the time they exited the main building there was a car idling for them.

Within minutes they were pulling out of the facility and onto the public roads to make the journey home – one made so much shorter with the use of a vehicle.

Once home, with the front door shut and locked behind them, Roy immediately began unbuttoning his uniform jacket with a huff of distress that he’d only ever give in the privacy of his own home.

“Stitches?” Edward asked in concern as he floated alongside Roy as they made their way up the stairs.

“Yeah,” Roy shrugged the jacket off in relief to be free of the stiff fabric. “One of the first things I’m doing when I’m Fuhrer, is having a uniform properly tailored to me, and made with cotton. Not whatever burlap knockoff this one is made out of.”

Edward’s face screwed up in distaste, and he followed Roy into their bedroom to watch as the man hung the jacket up and began to carefully strip off his shirt as well. The part of him that was flowering to life with his acceptance of how he felt for Roy was inclined to enjoy the sight on a level that stirred something hot inside him, but the knowledge that Roy was in discomfort had a look of concern written on his face as he dropped to the floor at Roy’s side to peer at the stitches.

“How are they looking, my sexy nurse?” Roy asked with affection suffusing his tone as he watched the top of Edward’s head.

“Again, the sexy nurse will order another cold shower.” Edward replied without hesitation, but with a smile all the same as he raised a hand to trace his fingers through the line of stitches. “There’s definitely irritation.” And he darted his gaze up to Roy’s, his hand not moving from where it rested slightly through Roy’s skin. “Do you own any shirts that aren’t three sizes too small?”

“They are not that small!” Roy protested, and not for the first time if memory served, “I just prefer to
“spend my money on clothes that actually fit me properly.”

“So that’s a no?” Edward arched an eyebrow up at him.

Roy rolled his eyes, “not exactly. I have some clothes that are a larger size, just so I can layer when it gets cold. I can pull something out that’ll fit looser.” Although he made no move to do so, quite content to remain with Edward so close to him as he glanced down from Edward’s gaze to inspect the stitches as well.

Edward was right, the skin did look irritated. Luckily not infected. He wanted these things removed as soon as was feasible, given he had a Brigadier General to kill. Not that he couldn’t do it with the stitches in, but he would prefer not to, and he knew Edward would prefer the same.

Edward nodded in glad approval, still not moving his hand. Moving instead to come around in front of Roy and rest his other hand similarly just slightly through Roy’s side as he looked up into the clear affection shining in the darkness of Roy’s eyes. “And just where were you planning to take me tonight?”

“That would be a secret, my love.” Roy avoided with a showy indifference that had Edward scowling up at him – he took pleasure in that scowl, took pleasure in the interest it meant. Had he been able to, he’d have kissed that lovely scowl from Edward’s face, but instead he settled for raising a hand to the ghost’s softly glowing cheek to say softly, “I’ll get changed and we’ll be off.”

Edward was fairly sure that he would be content to spend the rest of the night here, just as they were, touching each other in their own way and sharing each other’s space. It did things to him – wonderful, shaky things that made him doubt his own ability to float. “You’re doing it again.” The whispered words were out of his mouth before he realized he was saying them, or that he was drifting ever so slightly nearer.

“What are you doing?” The words were soft, a caress of their own as Roy dared not move. Dared not break whatever spell was on this moment.

Edward felt a shiver run through him as he let the heat in Roy’s gaze wash through him, “making me feel like I might still have a beating heart.”

“How many times must I tell you that you’re alive to me,” Roy whispered in heavy fondness as his gaze searched Edward’s, “before you begin to believe me?”

“I’m not sure I ever will.” Edward confessed quietly as he dropped his gaze in order to rest his forehead where Roy’s chest began, illuminating the already pale skin with his own muted silvery glow. “But keep telling me anyway.”

“You know I will.” Roy’s voice was gentle, promising, as he gazed down at Edward’s head resting against him as best it could. For several minutes they just stood there together as they were, with Roy unconcerned about the burn in his muscles from maintaining a pose of holding someone he couldn’t actually touch. It was worth it, would always be worth it.

Eventually Edward drew away, trying to summon back some steadiness as a smile flitted across his lips. “I’m never going to get my first date this way, get changed so we can go.”

Roy accepted the demand with a backwards step towards his closet and a wicked grin. “You know,” he began with an ominous teasing note to his voice, “you’re the first sexy nurse I’ve ever taken on a date.”

“And I’ll be the last, Roy Mustang.” Edward dictated with a firm note of finality, and not an
insignificant amount of possessiveness seeping into him. “Now take those hideous uniform trousers off. You’re not taking me anywhere looking as you are.”

Again, Roy could never let it be said that he would not deliver when the one he loved, the only one he’d ever loved, requested he lose clothing. Unfortunately more clothing would be immediately required, but he took his enjoyment where he could.

It was with great care and caution of his stitches that he redressed into looser fitting clothing. All of it being done under Edward’s watchful eye – something that he would have enjoyed more if he weren’t so focused on ensuring the fabric didn’t catch and rip at his stitches as he was pulling the clothing on.

“You’re sure you’re good to stay out late tonight?” Edward couldn’t help but ask as Roy turned off their bedroom light so they could leave. “We don’t have to do this tonight. You are still recovering.”

Roy shook his head and started off down the hallway, heading for the stairs. “Edward, I’ve been waiting for this moment for what seems like eternity. Believe me, right now, tonight, I want nothing more than to be with you like this.”

Edward gave a nod of ascent, but as they reached the last stair he floated around to place a hand up towards Roy’s chest to stop him. “Have me home by midnight?” He asked with a teasing smile and a pure, true happiness shining in his eyes.

“Are you giving me your own warnings about the rules of dating you?” Roy grinned at the notion and stepped around the ghost to grab the car keys from where he’d tossed them just inside the doorway.

“Someone has to.” Edward grinned as he floated back up to Roy’s side with a short laugh. “I’m still a pure innocent virgin, someone has to look out for my honor.”

Roy snorted in disbelief and reached for the front door handle, “my love, you are many things, but I’m not so sure that innocent is one of them.”

Edward scoffed, but his disagreement held little weight in his mind, not as he followed Roy out their front door. That was when the excitement and nervousness hit him. That was when the ridiculous amount of happiness that Roy would never again leave him at night to go on dates rushed through him.

He’d never be left alone again, waiting at night for the man he hadn’t realized he’d been in love with to come home to him.

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