Dismantle the Sun

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Dismantle the Sun

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Summary

Dairut is a crossroads. A settlement on the border of Amestris and the Great Desert, a hub of Ishvalan and Xerxian history, it is a place caught between past regret and future hope.

In Central City, Roy Mustang and Riza Hawkeye prepare to return to Ishval for the first time. In Resembool, Edward Elric navigates the complicated minutia of his personal life, but remains unable to shake the feeling that his work in Amestris is not yet finished. In Dairut, Miles and the new Muhaddith break ground on Al’Arshif, the sacred Archive, in the hope of restoring a sense of continuity to their long-suffering people.

Then archeologist Winnie Stokes uncovers an ancient relic in the desert. Then a mysterious cult called the Risen strip Captain Hawkeye from the Flame Alchemist’s side. Then something monstrous begins to stir in the mind of Selim Bradley. Five years after the Promised Day, Ed, Roy, and Miles must face an evil of apocalyptic scale, before it destroys everything they’ve worked for, and everyone they hold dear.

Dairut is a crossroads. But Dairut is also the end of the line. Things are changing in Amestris, and not everyone will survive.
"I, the undersigned, military serial number O-2801097 of 451 Park Avenue, East City, Amestris, do hereby declare this recording to be my last Will and Testament.

"I revoke all previous wills or testamentary writings made by me. I nominate whosoever shall be my immediate superior at my current command to be the Executor of my Estate. Should he or she be unwilling or unable to act as executor, I request that all my belongings be donated to the Charity Commission for the Reconstruction of Ishval. I direct that the executor of my estate shall not be required by the Master of the High Court of Amestris or other competent authority to give security for proper performance of his duties.

"Now that that’s out of the way…

"If you’re listening to this, I’ve cashed in my chips. Kicked the bucket. Gone to a farm upstate. And being as I’m currently recording this Will in an attorney’s office on Fleet Street, I haven’t a blind clue how I eventually go out... I don’t know how I die. Hopefully with my boots on — I couldn’t abide gathering dust in a vets hospital somewhere. Oh yeah, and while we’re on that note… if I’m unable to make or communicate my own decisions while I’m on life support, then I’d ask that my dying should not be delayed, prolonged or extended artificially by medical science. Don’t keep me around, and for the love of god, don’t let Marcoh or Knox try something screwy. I won’t thank you for it, and I hope whoever’s listening to this will allow me that last bit of dignity. I guess if I have any final request, it's that my wish is carried out by my physicians and friends, as is my legal right.

"This recording is already costing me a small fortune, so I’ll make this quick. I don’t have a whole lot of family left. Well, not a lot of blood-relations, at any rate. Cousins, mostly. Never met most of 'em, and now I never will. Regardless, I’ve filled out the necessary forms to let them know what to do in the event of my passing. I dotted my i’s and crossed my t’s a long time ago. This uniform ought to come with an advert for a decent funeral home in addition to the dry cleaning coupons. It’s part of this line of work, I suppose… we contend with this possibility on a daily basis, trying to see through this tragic mortal blindness. Conquer it, even. But it's the sort of blindness even one of those Philosopher's Stones can't cure. The irony is, the alchemists probably understand the concept better than most. Maybe that's why they make such devastating human weapons: they know the stakes. Soldiering forces a desultory acquaintance with death. But, for all my anxieties, I am prepared, and as I record this, I am content. I sincerely hope I didn’t die in pain but if I did, then take some small comfort in the fact that I’m not suffering any more.

"While I’ve made my peace, I know I will die with regrets, as we’re all given to do. It’s part of being human. You can’t live out every iteration of your life, examine every choice, accommodate every decision… you’d tie your brain into knots. So I’ll say my bit, and you can lay me to rest. East City, preferably. Somewhere where I can see the sky.

"They told me, back in the day, that I was a good soldier. Lotta potential, you know. Signed up because I wanted to do right by others and others to do right by me, and for the most part, I reckon I did okay. But I guess my first regret is… I will die a coward.”

Continued in Act I: An Anthem for Doomed Youth
“No.”

She didn’t know whether it was due to the frosty bite of the speaker’s voice, or the silence that hung over the office like an onset of poor weather, but Riza Hawkeye could hear every word coming through over the telephone. The no resounded with a particularly cutting finality — intended, no doubt, to halt any further forays into avenues of conversation. A proverbial cordon slung across the road.

The man holding the telephone, however, was not renowned for suffering rejection gladly, proverbially or otherwise. A person less acquainted with his character would attribute the kindling of insubordination to a brittle ego, a fit of pique from a city brat too well accustomed, perhaps, to getting his way. Captain Hawkeye knew better, of course. He had his carefully-cultivated self image, all irritatingly smug and cocksure, but Riza knew the facade was intended to preclude the possibility of outsiders peering through the act. To see that, indeed, the chronicle of his life was punctuated with disappointment and difficulty and things going terribly, terribly wrong. That despite all appearances to the contrary, an adversity existed, a perpetual ache in his bones and a raging fire that never went out.

But he bore his crosses with swagger and a smile. Riza had long ago decided there was a sort of grace to be found there, somewhere those like the voice on the telephone would never think to look.

No, decided Hawkeye as she rifled through requisition forms, wetting the pad of her finger intermittently. Brigadier General Roy Mustang was not affronted by the no.

He was affronted by the no coming from one Major General Olivier Mira Armstrong, a woman who was difficult and stubborn in the same way a tank with a rusty tread was difficult and stubborn.

And Hawkeye, loathe though she was to give her subordinates -- or her superior, for that matter -- the satisfaction, was inclined to sympathise with the Flame Alchemist’s plight.

The phone cord had been wound around the General’s wrist so many times, his fingers had turned red. Any more loops and he was liable to cut off his circulation. Just another casualty of Armstrong’s stubbornness, Riza supposed, though she didn’t think it would inconvenience Mustang to any great extent: she had already imagined Roy using the swollen digits as an excuse to wiggle free of assisting with the aforementioned requisition forms.

An Ice Queen’s chance in hell, Riza thought to herself.

“General,” Mustang bit out, knuckles white around the Bakelite, “I have afforded you every possible courtesy in this matter. I have gone through the official channels and several more unofficial ones. I have seen more dotted lines in the past week than a Morse operator. Grumman himself has respectfully requested—"
glint of white, snowy light on the blade of her sabre, “then my decision holds. As it has likely escaped your notice, Mustang, winter is fast approaching in the North. The nights are long and cold. Drachma is biting at the bit. I need every non-frost bitten hand and healthy body at my disposal. Your man happens to fall within both categories. Do I make myself perfectly clear, or should I have someone fetch a box of crayons to explain it to you?”

Jean Havoc coughed.

The room they shared in Central Command was not partitioned like Eastern Headquarters, and if Hawkeye was privy to the conversation, then so were the rest of the General’s retinue, although most knew — Lieutenant Havoc notwithstanding — better than to draw attention to the fact. Hawkeye bunched her eyebrows together and glared pointedly at the blonde man’s forehead. It had the intended effect, and Havoc returned to his task without further personal annotation. One hard look at the other two, mousy Kain Fuery and gruff, stolid Heymans Breda, and any lingering traces of frivolity evaporated. They all straightened, preparing themselves for an embittered confrontation of Edward Elric proportions.

Mustang rested a fist on his desk. “General, I must insist… you know as well as I do that the Reconstruction effort takes precedence over—”

Poor choice of words, sir, Hawkeye thought grimly. Breda actually winced.

“Over what, Mustang?” Armstrong snarled. The vehemence coiled from the headset like a bad smell. “Over protecting our borders? Over keeping Amestris safe? While you’re down there playing politics, my men are up here risking their lives just to make sure you and your devious ilk still have a politics to play with. Don’t you dare call Briggs’s duties, my authority, under question, you little shit.”

A suffocating stillness suffused the office. Hawkeye whittled at the inside of her cheek but said nothing; General Hakuro’s handwriting coruscated across the page but Riza had long ago stopped paying her paperwork any mind.

She rested her hands on her lap, hiding her pewter-white knuckles. Riza had gone rigid at Armstrong’s viper strike, rankling at the hatred she harboured for Roy, but a soldier of Hawkeye’s fastidiousness could appreciate the Major General’s position to a certain degree.

The Promised Day had had a way of redrawing the battle lines across Amestris: suddenly, the enemies were no longer attacking from without, but from within, festering in the heart of the country like a carcinoma. While the cancer had been decisively cut out, the public’s attention had been lethargic in swinging back to old martial concerns. A sense of calm had settled over Amestris: with Father and the Homunculi gone, with those implicated in the coup removed from office, the subsequent peace had lulled some into a false sense of security. Hawkeye, like Armstrong, recognised the comfort as delusion. If anything, the Amestrian civil unrest had roused Drachma from its hibernation. Their invasion force’s utter annihilation in the months before the Promised Day had not helped matters. Armstrong had been forced to contend with an agitated northern aggressor without the accustomed support of the Amestrian government. Grumman was no pacifist, but he was no Führer Bradley, either. Not for the first time, Briggs found itself at a conflict of interest with the greater military machine.

And now a certain upstart state alchemist was rattling chains that probably ought not to be rattled, thought Hawkeye. It was little wonder Armstrong was scarce of temper.

General Mustang pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes closed. There was a newfound solemnity to his face, a tightness like too little skin stretched thin over his bones, a few more lines fissured into
the corners of his eyes.

He was always tired, these days, thought Riza, her chest tightening. Roy put on those smiles that weren't really smiles at all, and they went on.

“General,” he began, voice gentle, almost supplicatory, “I understand your position. I do. In many ways, I sympathise. Five years later, and we're both still contending with the aftermath of the Promised Day. We’ve lifted sanctions in Ishval. The engineering projects are well underway in Dairut, but if Major Miles's plan is to come to fruition, then there are a lot of broken families in need of unification and relocation.”

Hawkeye bowed her head in a slight nod. Roy had been wise to mention Miles, shifting the focus of Olivier's assistance to her own man, a Briggs man, instead of himself, the newly-promoted Brigadier General she so despised.

Mustang went on: "Due to the theocratic and filial nature of Ishvalan society, the Reconstruction effort has necessitated an incredible amount of genealogical research, and for that I need my best mind. I need Vato Falman with me in Dairut.”

“You have archives, don’t you? Use them.”

“You know as well as I do that Amestris didn’t keep any official record of its Ishvalan citizens subsequent to the Civil War. We’re relying almost exclusively on those few savants who worked in archives prior to the extermination. One of those savants is Lieutenant Falman.”

Hawkeye could picture Armstrong’s furrowed brow, her blond hair, almost as storm-tossed and wild as she was, shadowing her face, her expression cautious, but not hesitant. Wary, but not afraid. For a moment, Riza imagined the two generals could have been mirrors, each unto the other. Throughout their military careers, their jumping off and landing points stood well apart, but the weight of their responsibilities had crossed in that moment, over the chasm of grim possibility.

Riza had not seen Vato on the Promised Day. She had not seen him since Bradley recommissioned them, their new assignments amounting to little more than exile. But Falman had fought in the conflict, side by side with the soldiers of Briggs. He had defended Central Command. He had held the gate against a Homunculus. He had been brave, and Riza had been so proud. But with Major Miles serving as a liaison between Ishval and the Führer's office and Captain Buccaneer buried on the summit of a distant mountain, Armstrong’s cadre of advisers had grown thin. Vato Falman was a good soldier; his absence, Hawkeye knew, would cut sharply.

“He has a kid on the way,” said Armstrong suddenly; the ice had thawed a fraction of a degree. “Due in half a year or so. Dr. Carmichael is beginning to show.”

The cigarette fell out of Havoc’s mouth, much to Riza’s displeasure — the discarded butt seemed a likely shortcut to smouldering files. Breda, who usually played his confidences close to the chest, betrayed his surprise in a subtle lift of his eyebrows. And at the far end of the workstation, the meagre stirrings of a smile had begun to chip away at the corners of Fuery’s mouth, dark eyes widening behind his glasses.

Falman had a family. Hawkeye hadn’t known: no one had.

“This is a temporary transfer,” assured Mustang; if the news came as a surprise to him, he didn't show it. Because he already knew, wondered Riza, or because he didn't want to give Olivier the satisfaction. “I have no intention of relocating his spouse.”
“You’re damn right. A second lieutenant is one matter — my chief medic and automail engineer is another entirely.”

Hawkeye heard Armstrong indulge a sigh. Someone who didn’t know the Northern Wall of Briggs would call it exaggerated, but for all her posturing, Olivier was an unceremonious being. Quite the opposite, in fact. Riza found her honest, uncomplicated. She was a woman who harboured an almost vicious hatred for the disingenuous manoeuvring of most military types. A company which included, to Hawkeye’s complete lack of surprise, one Roy Mustang.

“I’ll grant Vato Falman a few months leave,” she growled into the phone — the tension seem to unwind from the officers’ bodies; Riza didn’t realise she had been holding her breath until she let it out slowly. “He will assist you in patching up your genealogy records. I’ll send word to Major Miles and the new Muhaddith.” A pause. “I trust you have made his acquaintance?”

Hawkeye almost snorted; consent to an official transfer was a matter of bureaucratic necessity, even in spite of her dogged determination to make Roy's life as difficult as possible in the process. But Armstrong could not allow Mustang his victory without pressing at least a small advantage.

The Flame Alchemist frowned. “I didn’t realise there were any Muhaddith remaining after the Civil War.”

“There weren’t. I understand this particular Muhaddith very nearly succeeded in combusting your skull, Mustang, had Captain Hawkeye not been around to knock you on your muddy ass where you belong.”

Understanding dawned on him. He glanced at the headset as though it might bite him. “Scar is the new Scholar?”

That feral grin managed to make itself known even over the telephone. “Watch yourself, General. One day Hawkeye might not be there to save you, and when she isn’t... well, I hope someone records it so I can play it back with a nice cup of tea. Like listening to a lullaby. Expect Lieutenant Falman on the next train to Central.” For a moment, Armstrong’s words grew low and dangerous, and the old malice boiled like thunderheads over Briggs, an oncoming storm. “But let me make something abundantly clear: you’re a lodestone for tragedy, Mustang. If Falman should go the way of some of your vainglorious bunch of morons, then it won’t be me you have to answer to.

“It’ll be Carmichael… and her unborn kid. And I don’t think that’s a conversation you’re eager to have again.”

Hawkeye saw a muscle clench in General Mustang’s jaw, a spasm that would have passed unnoticed if not for her exhaustive familiarity with his tics. Armstrong’s final snarl of defiance was gratuitous — even cruel, although Riza imagined Olivier had become so acquainted with loss over her years of service that the Major General had ceased to invest any true emotional stake in such things.

But Roy Mustang still wore the death of Maes Hughes like a scar on his heart, some white, noduled ugliness that would never, ever go away. It was one hurt that would never heal, and Armstrong had picked at it like a scabby sore. The grief lingered still, tattooed onto his soul.

Hawkeye did well to mask the slippery, complicated something churning in her gut, something that begged to be named though Riza daren’t not try. There were some truths best left unsaid, some hurts that ran too deep. Some things Mustang's team did not talk about. Lieutenant Havoc did not discuss his paralysis, Kain Fuery did not discuss his time fighting on the Southern Front, and Roy Mustang did not discuss the late Brigadier General. It did not take an especially prodigious mind to
puzzle out why, and Hawkeye knew that such extraordinarily painful conversations inevitably meandered down paths she would much rather leave untraveled, paths that resembled the intestines under Central City and brick tunnels choking with smoke. Resurrected memories of fire and fury. A monster’s screams. A shaking hand. The back of a head of black hair.

And the fear. A deep, nauseating fear that threatened to snatch her breath away. Hawkeye didn’t like to think about it, the memory of him forcing her to confront her worst nightmare, and then, to her horror, realizing she simply wasn’t ready for it.

She had not forgiven him for his betrayal. And so, she wrapped herself in silence, her self-made sanctuary that was, in some ways, her self-made purgatory, as well, lived in the little rooms stacked inside her mind like stones on a parapet. A wall against the hurt.

Hawkeye’s eyes drifted away from her commanding officer. She felt a heat on the side of her face and turned to find Lieutenant Breda staring at her, hard, mouth pressed into a thin, pale line. Riza’s gaze lingered for a time before swinging back to her forms, taking a sudden profound interest in Hakuro’s regimented penmanship, looking at the words but not really reading them. She suspected Heymans was not so hurried in returning to his own work.

The man was far too intuitive.

It was only Armstrong’s rank, a principle almost alchemic in its incontrovertibility, that kept General Mustang from breaking his mask of unruffled professionalism. Or from breaking the telephone. Instead, he murmured a few half-crafted words of thanks and set the receiver in its cradle, endeavouring. Hawkeye suspected, to keep from making too much noise, like there were minute cracks in the world that he dare not shatter. Pens continued to scratch and papers continued their soft susurrus across tabletops, but the Captain knew her comrades’ minds were elsewhere. As was hers.

“Well,” Roy said finally, allowing a smirk that still managed to look so small, and so very sad; Hawkeye could not fathom how he expected it to fool anyone, although it almost invariably did. “Falman’s coming back.”

“I told you she’d come ‘round.” Havoc grinned crookedly at the man opposite his workstation. Breda muttered something circumspect and several hundred cenz exchanged hands. Hawkeye knew she must have looked gravely unimpressed, but Roy, not for the first time, elected to ignore it.

Fuery seemed to glow, the tense lines of consternation from the phone call fading away. When he smiled, Riza thought he looked so incredibly young. Tragically so, barely older than the Elrics. Falman and Fuery had never been particularly close — the former an older man sunk in books and figures and the latter a greenhorn obsessed with his radios — but their minds worked at such speeds that most of the rest of the team were unable to keep pace, and Breda never seemed especially interested in trying. Their intelligence had forced them close together, and it was only after their separation that Fuery realized how terribly he missed his taller, greying counterpart.

“General Armstrong said he’d be on the next train,” said the Command Sergeant brightly. “He’ll be here within the next 24 hours!”

“It’s a temporary transfer,” the General reminded them smoothly, though not unkindly. “Don’t get too comfy with the change.”

“I know, sir, it’s just… well, this’ll be the first time,” Kain grinned, “the first time since the reassignment we’ll all be together again.”
Havoc snorted, but his warm blue eyes revealed nothing of the disparagement the noise suggested. “You sound as though you’re talking about a family reunion.”

Fuery scrunched his face at his superior. “You make it sound like such a bad thing.”

“Unless it’s got my ma following me around with an ashtray and asking when I’m gonna give her grandchildren, then it’s no family reunion I’ve ever known.” Havoc shuddered. “And I’m in no hurry to relive those.”

“Following you around with an ashtray, huh? Your mother sounds like a wise woman. Tell me, does she like cabernet sauvignon?” There was something cheeky in General Mustang’s words that, if not for the way the his eyes still looked clouded and anxious, would have had Hawkeye gazing skyward.

Breda took his cue to interject, using a finger to close Havoc’s slack-jawed gape. “Speaking of mums, how about Falman’s girl, then?”

Fuery almost vibrated with excitement; he pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose to give his fidgety hands something to do. “I can’t believe it… Vato’s gonna be a dad!”

“Chick must be really into the Encyclopaedia Britannica.”

Fuery frowned, turning to his smoking superior. “He’s got other qualities, you know, sir…”

Havoc reclined in his chair, legs sprawled out under the desk. His grin was almost as irritatingly smug as Roy’s. It was little wonder the pair of them so often made Riza want to grind her teeth together.

“All I’m saying,” the sharpshooter mused lazily, feigning serious introspection, “is that when you’ve got a mind like that, you’d be real good at memorising all sorts of... useful information.”

Somehow, Hawkeye doubted Havoc was referring to serial numbers and genealogy records. As Fuery went beet red, Riza shot Jean a glare that could have stripped the paint from the wall.

“Aw, shut up, Hav,” Breda stacked a few more forms on his pile, “you’re just sore because the quote, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, unquote, cuffed a girl before you.”

Havoc’s face wilted into a sulk. “I’m not the settling down type,” he muttered petulantly.

“Right now, you’re not the anything type.”

"I'm just looking for the right partner."

"What, someone who's aerodynamic like you?"

"I'm what?"


Jean threw a balled-up newspaper at him.

“If you’re quite finished, gentlemen,” Riza murmured, pretending to be utterly absorbed in the engineering reports for drainage and sewage in the Dairut prefecture. Toilet reading. If her workspace insisted on forcing a protracted association with crassness, then it ought to at least be useful crassness.
Havoc, it seemed, was not finished. Breda, as Breda was so often given to do, had spurned the Lieutenant’s pride. While it was not a wholly difficult thing to do, it took far longer than Hawkeye found acceptable to piece it back together again.

“Jeez,” he said, sitting his chin on his desk and, Hawkeye noted, getting ink on his face, “Vato got the meaty end of this deal. It’ll be like a vacation for him, going from whacking icicles off that god-awful fort to pouring over books in some hot, sunny desert.”

Hawkeye put down her pen. She realised, for the first time, that her forms were fissured with furrows and creases; Riza had pressing on her pen harder than perhaps was necessary. She didn’t look at Havoc when she said tartly: “If you think the reconstruction of Dairut, a former theatre of one of the worst massacres in Amestrian history, is going to be a vacation, First Lieutenant, then you’re in for a rather nasty shock.”

Havoc’s smile faltered. “Come on, Hawkeye, I was only joking—”

Her eyes blazed. "Nor is it a joke," she snapped.

"Captain..."

“Leave it,” Breda cut in, glaring at Havoc.

“But I was just—"

“I said, leave it.”

Hawkeye grew still, stubbornly, stonily silent, as Breda pushed out from his desk, swinging around the workstation to clap Fuery on the shoulder. The tiny Command Sergeant’s teeth rattled. Unlike before, even as Riza watched him, the ginger Lieutenant’s eyes did not meet hers.

“Come on, Kain, let’s get some lunch.”

“Oh. Uh, okay.”

Breda allowed himself a small grin. “I wanna snatch as many corn beef sandwiches as I can before the veggie gets back.”

“There is no way in hell Falman managed to stay veg up at Briggs,” said Havoc, the prospect of food pulling him out of his foul mood. He had the attention span of a distracted goldfish, Riza thought, fondly despite herself. As he spoke, Havoc pinwheeled his arms as though trying to pull the enormity of Olivier’s mountain fortress into the scope of the conversation. “They hunt bears for god’s sake! Where would he grow the plants?! What does he eat, the pine cones?!”

Fuery mumbled, “Briggs has a greenhouse, sir.” Havoc ignored him.

“In any case, it’s not a risk I’m willing to take,” said Breda, strolling to the door.

Havoc grunted a small agreement. “Yeah. Last time he tried to get us to try his livestock chow, it was that kwin-noah stuff.”

“It’s quinoa, sir. Q-U-I—"

“This ain’t the spelling bee, Fuery...” Riza could hear their voices retreating down the corridor, as ever doing little to respect the peace and quiet of other officers who were doubtless working far harder than Mustang’s... vainglorious bunch of morons.
Hawkeye shook her head. If by some miracle and over her dead body Olivier Mira Armstrong did make Führer, Riza hoped for the sake of Amestris’s mental fortitude she hired a competent speech writer.

The emptied room grew quiet quickly. Only her pen scratched across the silence. The dust seemed to float on the air, sparkling where motes drifted in front of the east-facing window. It was, for a short time, peaceful. Immersed in engineering reports and telegraph correspondences from Major Miles, she almost didn’t hear the General release a deep sigh, the sound rising from the cavern of his chest, as though he had been holding it in for the better part of the hour. Riza signed off on a supply order before looking towards her superior. Roy hung his head, until his chin touched his chest. His hair needed cutting. There was spray of stubble on his chin.

“I thought I’d learned how to dilute some of that acid,” he said quietly, without ceremony. Riza remained quiet. “I’ve known her long enough. But… ever since the Promised Day, there’s been something darker there…”

Hawkeye, still, said nothing. He didn’t need her to. The pause, the space, was affirmation enough. A neat little caesura in his train of thought.

“The brass aren’t making our lives easy, Captain.”

“They never have, sir.”

Roy smiled grimly. “No. But I suppose it would leech all the fun out of it if they did.”

Finally, his head came up. He peered at her from across the office, the light in his eyes akin to something Riza couldn’t quite pin down. Not warmth, certainly, and he’d never insult her with pity. A type of gravity was as close as Hawkeye could manage, a buoyed weight pulling at his thoughts.

“I received another notice from Hakuro today.”

Hawkeye absently straightened her pen. “He’s becoming more insistent.”

“He’s becoming a pain in my ass.”

“Sir…” Her head didn’t move but her gaze flicked towards the door, which, of course, had been left wide open. Idiots. “Perhaps you ought to keep such thoughts to yourself.”

A snort. “If you don’t think he’s saying the same things about me you’re delusional.”

“That does not justify your stooping to his level, sir.”

He peered at her through his fingers. “I never took you for an moralist.”

“I’m nothing of the sort, General, but neither am I terribly keen on our superior overhearing slights against his character.” Hawkeye let out her own sigh. “It would do nothing to rectify the situation.”

Roy scrubbed a hand over his face, fixating on something above Riza’s shoulder. “You’re right.” He laughed hollowly; it was almost a cough, it sounded so ravaged. “Of course you are.”

Riza switched tact, deftly shifting to cool, clinical clarity as though she’d taken a gulp of ice water: “He may continue to make requests, sir, and while you both hold the rank of general, you are the one in Führer Grumman’s favour.” She hesitated, just for a moment, then: “I understand your reservations, sir, but General Hakuro’s proposal is not without merit. General Armstrong’s current
predicament is proof enough of that.”

Mustang’s voice was low, sombre. “Current predicament.”

"Her reluctance to part with Lieutenant Falman," she provided.

"You mean to tell me there's a reason? And here I was thinking she was just being difficult."

"The two need not be mutually exclusive, sir. Both Generals know the military’s numbers are low, sir. Dangerously low. High ranking officers even more so.”

There was a quick, hissing breath forced through clenched teeth. “Hawkeye, when I’m not arm wrestling that stone cold bitch from Briggs trying to get my man back, I’m either scissoring through Reconstruction red tape or trying to get Hakuro to leave me the hell alone. If you’re about to side with him, may I respectfully request you do it elsewhere?”

Riza frowned. “Captains are not commissioned due to the merit of their opinions, sir. I’m just stating facts. Most senior military officials are dead or imprisoned for high treason. There are seats that need filling.”

“And Hakuro thinks you’re the one to fill them,” finished Mustang wearily.

“And others. But… yes.”

The smile he forced was so distortive, so *false*, that Riza was almost overcome with the sudden, explosive urge to smack it off his face. Sometimes, he couldn’t bring himself to afford her even the smallest token of honesty and it enraged her beyond sense. Made her as angry as she had been in the tunnels under Central, when he almost forced her to kill him.

Angry, and scared.

“The situation will not correct itself until a great many promotions are made,” said Hawkeye. Her superior’s smile lingered and Riza swallowed down her fury like bile. It burned the whole way down. “But… until such a time, I am content to remain under your command, sir.”

Roy kept his expression carefully neutral. The smile, at least, faded after a time. He was almost as adept, Hawkeye admitted grudgingly, at affecting some semblance of objective pragmatism as she was.

Almost. He looked at her, and his dark eyes were suddenly so full of tenderness and warmth that some final thread of doubt gave way and Riza understood not only how entirely kind he was, but also that his kindness, his compassion, was the only lens through which she might view some manner of his own, personal truth.

“When you served under Bradley…” Roy began softly; Riza had never discounted the efficacy of her instincts, and at the significance in the General's words she imagined she felt the fretting of something inevitable hanging in the atmosphere, something violent, volatile. Ready to explode.

Don’t be an idiot, she thought to herself, urgently, desperately. After all these years, don’t say something stupid…

“When you served under Bradley,” he continued; he prodded the folds of his consciousness for a mask to hide his sadness, his remorse, but any porcelain face was quick to disintegrate into chalky powder. “I… well, the organisational structuring of this place fell to shambles. A Homunculus may have had other things on his mind but Grumman’d kick me to the curb.”
Though the devastating compassion in his gaze remained still, relief washed over Hawkeye; she very nearly let out a sigh. An immense weight ceased its incessant press on her shoulders. “That cannot be abided, sir.”

“That it can’t... Riza.”

Before Hawkeye could manage even a meagre attempt at reigning in her surprise, her anger at his god damn audacity, Roy notched his eyebrows and turned to leave. As he brushed past her, his left shoulder pressed against her right; the touch was no accident, the bastard. She couldn’t suppress the shiver at the contact.

She remembered: his skin was warm. Even though the thick wool of his uniform, something burned.

*Vainglorious moron...*

“That it can’t.”
He wanted to vomit.

“Winry… listen. I’ve done a lot of thinking — yeah yeah, I know, I do that all the time, but this isn’t, you know, alchemy or anything. Anyway, I’ve been thinking a lot about stuff. About us. And… other things. Err… yeah, so…” He took a deep breath; his lungs hurt, like there was a rock pressing down on them. “You know, back on that day I left for West City… you remember what you said? Well, ’course you do, dumb question. But, uh, you said you’d give, well, you’d give me your whole life, and I was thinking… that’s not fair. Damn,” he attempted an easy laugh, but the sound came out stunted and squeaky, ”that sounds dumb. What I mean, Winry, is… well, that seems a lot. You know, a lot on your part. You’re giving me everything. What am I doing to you? Er, for you? Aside from, you know, eating your food. And messing up your library. And bickering with Granny…

He could have gone on. He didn’t.

“But, Winry, what I really mean to say, is… well…” Breathe, dammit. He grinned in an effort to mask his flushed cheeks, swallowed to wet a tongue that had gone as dry as the Great Desert. His heart hammered like a steam piston. He dug his nails into the heel of his palm to keep his nerves in check. He fished around in his pocket, smile stapled almost painfully to his face as he tried to affect a cool and composed exterior that definitely didn’t go any deeper than the skin. He cleared his throat. “What I mean to ask, is…”

“Will you…”

The words faltered. Frowning, he patted at the lining of his pocket. His fingers brushed lint, paperclips, what felt suspiciously like a pulpy piece of fruit. A pencil. Some balled-up alchemy notes.

“Oh, no…”

It was missing. Where the fuck did it go?

Edward Elric’s golden eyes bulged. He felt panic curl its warty fingers around his throat. Before he gave himself time to consider the apocalyptic implications of his screw-up, he flung off his coat. Muttering obscenities to himself, he pulled pockets inside out, turned over his shirtsleeves, fretted at the inner lining until the stitches threatened to tear.

Meanwhile, Ed’s audience looked unimpressed. For a dog, Den managed an expression of complete and utter disdain rather well. His tail thumped against the hardwood as Ed scrambled frantically for the item that had cost him the better part of his ever-dwindling State Alchemy stipend and had shot enough nerves to give even Lieutenant — Captain, he corrected himself — Hawkeye pause for thought. But the object remained elusive, and Ed almost sobbed in frustration.

“Looking for this?”

Ed’s head snapped up so quickly his braid smacked against his skull. He imagined he felt the whiplash. Pinako Rockbell — small, bespectacled, not known to suffer fools or Elrics gladly — stood under the lintel, pipe hanging from her lip, the smoke trailing behind her like the tail of a
sullen comet. One hand rested on her hip; the other held a small box.

A small, black, velvet-lined box.

Pinako elected for the time being to keep any sarcastic admonishments to herself, though Ed had no doubt they were there, steeping like steak bits.

“You ought to be more careful with your things, Ed,” she muttered, peering over the rim of her spectacles, her voice as rough and ashy as her tobacco.

Ed nodded glumly. “Wrong coat?” A part of him wanted to point out that the mix up wouldn't have happened had Pinako not forced him to invest in several variations of tweed, rather than letting him keep his dashing red cloak, which, incidentally, had deep pockets where small, easily-lost mementos were likely to remain.

But though he was given to belligerence, even Ed knew the battle belonged to Pinako. It wouldn't do to push her capacity for leniency.

“Yup. Found it in the wash. You’re lucky I got to it before a certain other someone.”

“She isn’t due back from Rush Valley until this afternoon,” he protested.

“Fortunately for you.”

Ed bowed his head, an acknowledgement of the simple sagacity in Pinako’s words. The blush in his cheeks had suffused to the tips of his ears and the roots of his butterscotch-gold hair. Behind the brume of his embarrassment, Ed wondered how long Pinako had been standing in the doorway, watching him mime his proposal to an indifferent dog, stuttering to the point of unintelligibility. He looked over to her, and any wells of confidence dried up at the sight of her pursed mouth, a frown that, while too mindful of Edward’s pride to attempt pity, still managed to convey a dry sympathy. Ed left his coat on the floor and slunk over to the old woman. He peered down at Pinako, but the look she gave him made the former alchemist feel like he was four foot nine again.

“I’m sorry, Granny,” he muttered, one hand extended. Pinako sighed, smoke pillowing her pinched, myopic face, and dropped the box into Edward’s palm.

“How long has it been since you asked me, Ed?”

Edward turned the box over in his hand. There was a matching set inside, two bands, one gold and the other obsidian. The former had belonged to his mother. The latter had belonged to Urey Rockbell. Not a matching set, perhaps, but Ed wouldn’t settle for anything else. Winry and Ed were hardly a matching set, either — their similarities ended in the colour of their hair and the roof over their heads.

But he was in love with her. She was in love with him. And sometimes, things didn’t make a great deal of sense.

“Two months.” Ed considered for a moment. “Well, two months and a week since I asked. Two months since you said yes.”

Pinako nodded; the question had been rhetorical, Ed realised: she had kept meticulous count, like a financier ticking off days in a ledger. “You’ve been carrying that thing around for two months,” she affirmed, taking another puff of her pipe. “One of these bright days you’re going to lose it and it’s not going to turn up again.”
“I’m… I’m just waiting for the right moment.” Faced with a skeptical eyebrow, Ed protested, his voice going a bit shrill: “It has to be perfect!”

“Edward, if everyone waited for the perfect moment to do something nothing would ever happen. It’s all very well to stand on ceremony but what happens when you fall off your soapbox?”

His younger self would have made a scene at the mention of standing on soapboxes, but Ed merely grit his teeth. “I want it to be memorable. A big show. Just giving it to her… I mean, it’s—“

“What?”

“I was gonna say anticlimactic.”

“All spirals and steeples. It wouldn’t match my the colour of shutters.”

Ed’s expression soured, his eyebrows bunching. “I always enjoy our talks, Granny.” He rested his back against the wall, bending one automail leg. Crossing his arms, Ed looked down at his shoes. “I just…” he sighed, and was struck for a moment with how tired he sounded. He wasn’t a teenager anymore, but it wasn’t like he was in danger of his back going out or developing arthritis. So why did he sound like Mustang after a particularly tumultuous all-night bender… “I just want it to be special.”

Pinako’s expression softened. Den padded over to her, and she scratched the dog absently behind the ears. Den whined his pleasure. Not looking up from her ministrations, Pinako said quietly:

“Ed, you’re going to propose to Winry.” She hmphed to herself, the sound wholly ambiguous — not quite a laugh, but not quite a hum of belief. “I think that’s plenty special.”

Edward felt his stomach turn. He counted himself strangely fortunate he hadn’t managed to choke down any breakfast. Just the thought of food made him want to void the contents of his stomach, and he doubted Pinako would thank him for vomiting all over her waxed hardwood floors. “Oh crap,” he breathed, the words hissing through his teeth; his eyes bore into the floorboards and for a moment, he completely forgot about his company, “what if she says no?”

“Pardon?”

Ed knew he must have looked absolutely horrified, because Pinako started when he turned to face her. “Granny, what if Winry says no? What if…” he swallowed and his saliva seemed to burn like battery acid. “What if she throws me out? And I have to leave? Alphonse is all the way out East in Xing, he can’t take me in… and you and Winry would never want to see me again…” He looked down at Pinako, bright eyes desolate. “What… what would I do?”

Pinako acknowledged Ed’s concern with a small tilt of her head, but she was far too wise to his colourful episodes of melodrama to indulge them. “You would manage. You always do.”

“My life would be over…”

“Don’t exaggerate.”

“But how… how could life keep going on after something like that?”
“Because that's what life does, Ed,” Pinako answered simply. “You keep going with it or you get left behind. It’s not a difficult concept.”

Ed withered, running a hand through his hair, mussing it until strands of it exploded from his braid in all directions, as though he enjoyed poking fork tines into the light sockets. His bangs flopped limply over his forehead, plastered there with a sudden cold sweat. Ed began to pace in agitation, mindful of the low lintels as he passed underneath. After his most recent growth spurt, his hair brushed the top of the doorways. That fact, at least, was some small comfort.

He had grown taller, broader, in the years following the Promised Day. His once wiry little body had filled out, contours of muscle bunched where before there had only been ropey tendons like a bad cut of meat. He supposed he had Pinako to thank, in part. While she acquiesced to his sojourns in their little library, pouring over old alchemy texts scavenged from the remnants of Central Command and whatever arcana Al shipped home from Xing, Pinako had been adamant about putting him to work. Chopping wood, retiling the roof, fetching water and pigs of iron for Winry when she was called into emergency surgery… sometimes Ed fell asleep with the weight of an ax in his hands or the water carrier pressing down on his shoulders. The work had been hard, but over time, it had transformed the scrawny, pale State Alchemist into someone Ed almost recognised…

A square-jawed man with golden hair and ancient eyes.

Ed bristled at the mental image, for a moment forgetting that Pinako was in the house with him, watching his anxious circuits through the kitchen with a patient forbearance. He caught a flash of his reflection in the chrome refrigerator and he harrumphed. Until the day he abandoned every scrap of his pride and consented to wearing spectacles or, Truth forbid, growing a beard, height and broad shoulders nonewithstanding, every time Ed looked in a mirror, he was consoled somewhat by the fact that it wasn’t Hohenheim staring back at him.

Small mercies.

Still, Ed mused sadly, passing the velvet-lined box from hand to hand, he could have done with his father’s advice right about then. No matter how desperately he tried to convince himself otherwise, no matter how many times he wished he could be more like Alphonse, Ed had been slow in forgiving Hohenheim for the many years of absence, for all the unanswered questions and uncertain hearsay — a task Al, on the other hand, had accepted with his usual stubborn optimism. But there was one simple, incontrovertible truth regarding his father Ed would never besmirch: Hohenheim may have been a bastard, but regarding his love for Trisha, there was no ambiguity, no doubt or diffidence.

Ed sighed again, holding the engagement ring out in the palm of his hand.

Hohenheim would have known what to do.

“How did he propose to my mom?” asked Ed quietly, searching Granny’s face. He didn’t have to specify who.

Pinako, as ever, kept her expression schooled. She blew a few murky smoke rings, like points of an ellipsis, some linguistic antecedent trailing off into the silence. She seemed lost in thought for a few long moments, and after a while, Ed was worried he wasn’t going to get answer. That Pinako couldn’t remember… or didn’t want to remember.

“Under that old oak in the front yard,” she said softly, eyes hazy behind her glasses. Filled with memories. Her words were watery. “Trisha said he didn’t even get on one knee. Just pushed her on the swing, and when she drifted past him, he pressed a ring into her hand. I guess they didn’t need
to say anything, your parents.” Pinako smiled, then. The small motion fissured lines into her mouth. “I think Hohenheim was even more frightened than you, Ed. He couldn’t even pluck up the courage to find the words.”

In another life, any nugget of information regarding Hohenheim’s discomfort would have given Ed a grudging sort of pleasure. Like a petty child, thought Ed ruefully. Now… it just made him sad.

You and me both, old man.

“You could phone General Mustang,” suggested Pinako, wrenching herself from her reminiscence. “He’s known you and Winry for the better part of the last decade. His insight might be worth considering.”

Ed just gaped at her.

“You look as though I’ve just said a rude word.”

He spluttered: “What the hell would Mustang know? He doesn’t even know I… that I…”

“That you’re in love with my granddaughter? I assure you, pipsqueak, he knows.”

The wear-worn nickname had the intended effect. “Don’t call me that.”

“Then perhaps you ought to be a little more mature in matters concerning your former superior. Regardless of your personal disinclinations for the fellow, he may yet surprise you. The General has a good head on his shoulders.”

How Pinako managed to keep a straight face was quite beyond Edward. In fact, she wore her usual mask of implacable calm, as though they were talking about soup recipes and the Resembool sheep fair and the weather.

“The bastard isn’t even married,” grumbled Ed.

“No,” she conceded, but added shrewdly, “but that doesn’t preclude him from giving you a bit of friendly advice. As much as you two go at each other like a couple of roosters in the barnyard, he cares about you, Ed.”

“The feeling isn’t mutual, believe me.”

“Oh huh.”

“Are we even talking about the same person? He’s a rake! He sleeps around like he lives in perpetual mortal terror of someone pushing a celibacy bill through the Congress. What the hell would he know about commitment?”

Any other crusty septuagenarian would have been scandalised; not Pinako Rockbell. “There’s no law against it, Ed. Perhaps he’s just looking for the right girl.”

Ed let out a very uncouth snort. “Oh, he’s found the right girl already. But he can’t marry her, so he wanders around feeling sorry for himself.”

“Much like you’re doing now?” asked Pinako, eyes twinkling.

Ed glowered. “I am not phoning Mustang. He’d annoy me into an early grave.”

“I know the feeling.”
“If Hughes were still around, maybe he’d…” Ed’s train of thought trailed away; he didn’t have Gracia’s phone number, and even if he did, he didn’t think he had the wherewithal to interrogate her about her deceased husband’s marriage arrangements. Ed may have been in desperate need of certain social graces, but he wasn’t a complete moron.

He rounded on Pinako, trying to push a sudden surge of sadness down into the pit of his stomach. “How is it that all my friends are miserable old bachelors?”

“Perhaps you frighten their spouses.”

“Very funny.”

“Or, more likely,” Pinako went on as though she hadn’t heard him, “they spend so much time bandying with hypotheticals they miss their window of opportunity. They’re so frightened they choose to barricade themselves behind some delusion of dignified aloneness rather than take the risk. Take the chance.”

Ed cast around for a suitable expression, some face to mask his frustration, and his shame, but finding nothing adequate, settled on a tight frown. “I’m gonna wait outside for Winry,” he said. He didn’t care that he sounded sulky.

“She’s not due home for another few hours.”

He brushed past Pinako. “I need some air.”

He felt Granny watching him the whole time, could even smell her tobacco lingering in the air, like an afterimage. Hands in his pockets, Ed parked himself on the front step of the Rockbell’s automail shop. As the door banged shut behind him, Ed blew his bangs out of his face.

Granny was right. She so often was. He knew Winry couldn’t care less about grand romantic gestures and lavish surprises. The biggest bash she had ever been to had been Elysia’s third birthday party and even that, Winry had admitted, had been a bit overwhelming. His hesitation had nothing to do with any obsessive compulsive attention to detail. He could stick the ring in Winry’s toolbox during a fitting and it would have been enough… provided she didn’t throw a wrench at him.

No, Ed thought grumpily, resting his head on his knees. He wasn’t fussy. He was just very scared, and he wasn’t sure whether the fear came from the prospect of Winry saying no and kicking his sorry ass to the curb… or from the prospect of Winry saying yes.

He heard Pinako moving around inside the house, the occasional crash of pots and pans against the countertop as she prepared Winry’s welcome-home dinner. She traveled to Rush Valley on commission every couple of weeks, spending a few days covering for Garfiel, and Granny always made a big fuss of her coming home. In a while, Ed knew Pinako would ask for his help chopping vegetables or cutting firewood for the stove. But, in the meantime, he was in no hurry to leave his stoop. He stayed silent, stuck in his dark well of thought.

It was strange, Ed decided, that Pinako had suggested Mustang. Allowing himself a small moment of grudging honesty, Ed had considered the possibility himself. Rather, Ed had considered phoning Riza Hawkeye. She was a trusted confidant, a friend, and for all her stiff propriety, Ed respected her for her unwonted insight into the beautiful miscellany of other people’s lives — even as she reserved none of that compassion and empathy for herself, Ed thought sadly. But if the Captain was involved, sooner or later the General would be, as well. And Ed, who never expressed any emotion halfway, wasn’t sure if he was ready to bear his heart to someone like the Flame
Alchemist. Swaddled, sheltered things stood a better chance of not getting burned.

He breathed in, eyes closed, mulling the smells of grass and fertiliser, mouldering, organic matter and growing things. If Ed looked up, he almost expected to see Roy and Riza’s faces watching him. Not smiling. Not frowning. Just aware, a patient sort of judgement in their eyes, one pair black like a polished beetle and the other amber like a glass of scotch.

You love Winry, don’t you? Hawkeye had asked him once, after Bradley took her away.

Yes, Ed had wanted to tell her, but, of course, didn't. Yes. With my heart. My sanity. My soul. With everything.

But he didn’t know if everything was enough.

Finally, Ed reopened his eyes. The sky was overcast, a heavy slate-gray. The fields of Resembool cascaded over the hills, a quilted chequerboard of greens and browns uninterrupted for as far as the eye could see. There was a pasture at the bottom of the Rockbell’s drive, across a weedy, dusty old road. The sheep rested and grazed, their progress unhurried, drifting sluggishly between tufts of grass; Ed watch them for a while, not for the first time marvelling at the sedateness that hung over everything like a thick, wooly blanket. The effect was almost stifling.

From the Rockbell’s porch, Ed could look down into the town centre and the train station, beyond that, more fields punctuated only by the occasional picket fence, and at the edge of the horizon, acres of conifers swaying in the wind.

He heard the train whistle sound from the tracks, and watched as the locomotive began its slough through the countryside. Ed smiled: the long column of white steam reminded him of Granny, puffing on her pipe.

Ed’s attention was broken from the departing train by Gerret, one of the farmhands from the neighbouring estate. His cart, pulled by a couple of furry draft horses, all hair and flies, came to a shuddering halt at the bottom of the Rockbell’s drive. Gerret frequently ferried visitors to and from the train station for a few extra cenz. Ed wondered who had come to call...

He smacked his forehead with enough force to leave a welt. Something fierce and strong pressed itself on Ed’s sternum, making him gasp, like he was having an asthma attack. He was an idiot, he thought savagely. It was Winry; it had to be. She was home early, and Truth help him, he wasn’t ready yet.

Just as quickly as it came, the surge of panic receded. Ed looked again, harder, his eyes narrowing. The newcomers did not include Winry. The strangers, two of them, nodded a thanks to Gerret, who continued on his route. They were both about the same height, dressed in pristine Amestrian military blue. Soldiers, Ed realised, unable to shake the sudden sense of unease, a leftover from battles fought long ago. As they approached, kicking up dust from the rain-starved earth, Ed picked out their features. One was gangly, stooped, with an unkempt head of straw-coloured hair. The other was slimmer, smaller, dark hair cut close to the scalp, with wide eyes just a touch too earnest to affect complete professional disinterestedness. The dust from their footsteps and Gerret’s cart eventually settled, and Ed’s gnawing anxiety became cold, crippling dread.

First Lieutenant Maria Ross and Master Sergeant Denny Brosch were grey-faced and tight-lipped as they approached the Rockbell’s porch. It had been a long time since Ed had seen them look so grave, and for all their many months apart, the former Fullmetal Alchemist was not entirely pleased to see them.
“Hi, Ed,” said Maria, flashing a small, kind smile. The two soldiers planted themselves to attention at the bottom of Pinako’s steps. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Wish it could be under better circumstances,” murmured Denny, dragging his boot on the footpath, upsetting the dust again. He seemed determined to avoid Ed’s eyes.

Edward looked between the pair. Any happiness that came from seeing his two friends and comrades again was unceremoniously snuffed out as suspicion crystallised into certainty. Ed’s body felt numb; the disquiet was there but he couldn’t feel any pain, no anger, nothing at all. In some respects, it was kind of nice. For a moment, Ed felt as though he was sleeping. Like he was dreaming and any moment now he was going to wake up and roll over to see her—

“It’s happened, hasn’t it,” Ed muttered. It was not a question.

Ross hesitated, then nodded. Her voice was paper thin and brittle: “We’re… we’re not clear on the exact details. It was the manservant who alerted Grumman. She is refusing to let anyone near him. She’s terrified.”

“Evidently the episodes have been happening for a while,” added Brosch grimly. “Führer Grumman was livid when he found out. Armstrong and Catalina had to keep him from storming the woman's house himself.”

Ed crunched his knuckles, and the numbness was replaced by the slow burn of battle adrenaline, as efficacious as it had been on the Promised Day. His arm, the resurrected one, began to ache. The memory of old automail grafts was as real as a phantom limb, and just as painful.

“She promised,” said Ed, his voice pitched low, nearly a growl. “She swore if there were any relapses, she would tell Grumman. Dammit!” He pulled the grass out in a dry tuft and flung it away. “She promised.”

“We know.”

“That’s why we’ve been dispatched.”

“We need you back in Central, Ed.”

Edward found himself gripping the splintery boards of the porch, clutching it like he was adrift in the ocean and it was the only thing left afloat. “I… I know, it’s just…” he hung his head, “Winry was supposed to come home this afternoon.”

Ross rested a hand on his shoulder. The weight was comforting. “I’m sorry, Ed. I really am.”

“It’s been five years. Five years…”

“We don’t know how long Mrs. Bradley has been shielding him from us,” said Brosch, words heavy with tacit apology. “But we can’t afford to sit by and let this get any worse. Amestris can’t. It could be the Father stuff all over again.”

Ross nodded. “We can’t let these monsters finish what they started.”

Ed knew the truth of it. Perhaps, he thought suddenly, perhaps this was the reason for his anxieties, his disquiet. He wasn’t afraid of proposing to Winry — it was just his battle instincts flaring up, a grim premonition, screaming at him that something had gone wrong, that a great evil had been allowed back into the world, and that he was duty-bound to set it right.
He almost had himself convinced.

Regardless of the reason, even though Ed had prided himself his entire life on never being beholden to anyone, never answering to anyone, it occurred to him then that ensuring Winry lived in a world free of the sins of the past was the only thing he was bound to do. Perhaps the only thing he had been bound to do since defeating Father.

“Alright,” he said; he sounded stronger, more assured than he’d felt in a long time. “I have to let Gran — Pinako know I’m gonna be gone for a while. I have to write Winry a note, and get my stuff.”

Maria nodded her understanding.

Ed opened his mouth as though to say more, but then quickly shut it again, his words failing him. He knew what had to be done. Those two soldiers knew, as well. Edward had made a promise in the aftermath of the battle with Father and the Homunculi, and he knew Führer Grumman had every intention of holding him to it, no matter the cost. The safety and security of Amestris depended on it.

Edward Elric forced a deep breath, preparing himself.

Against reason, against all probability, somewhere in the mind of Selim Bradley, a homunculus was stirring again.
It was still several hours to sunrise when the phone began to ring.

He peeled his face from his desk, peering blearily out the small, mullioned window. The sky was completely dark: moonless, starless, depthless, blacker than stormy nights back on the mountain, with blizzards so thick he couldn’t see his hand in front of his face.

He had been dreaming about snow, he recalled, head in a daze. Not Briggs snow, but the soft stuff that fell in clean, muffled sheets, pretty as a postcard. He tried to remember it, tried to hold on to it, but the visions of driving white became dull and unfocused as he rested his palms on his desk, pushing himself into a sitting position. As the dreams receded, the remembered pain of winter wind smarting against his skin seemed suddenly very dim and distant. Even in the small, dark hours before dawn, the desert heat was oppressive. Sweat rolled down the back of his neck. His feet were hot and cramped in his military-issue boots. His uniform jacket hung on the back of his chair, forgotten. Barring formal events, he had been working in his shirtsleeves for months. His superior would have called it slovenly. He called it common sense.

He looked down at himself, for a moment forgetting the phone. His shirt was rumpled. Stress had turned him lean, and he realised with a start that he had forgotten to eat the night before. When he rubbed his chin, his palm scratched over a fine dusting of white stubble. He had fallen asleep in his chair, his pen still in hand -- not the first time it had happened and doubtless not the last, although his back and shoulders had begun to protest the neglect.

Not that the small, musty cot pushed unobtrusively into one corner was particularly comfy, either. The room allotted to him was serviceable but spartan, a boxy space with such unprecedented luxuries as a water closet, the aforementioned cot, and a desk, its every surface covered in enough errant reams of paper and forms to make an arborist weep. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, the man was not an arborist, and any upset associated with the paperwork rested wholly in his gruelling schedule... and the sore back because of it.

The phone continued to ring. If he were a man given to stilted attempts at personification, which he wasn’t, he would have said the ringing grew more insistent, almost annoyed, the longer he stared at the cradle. Blinking sleep out of his eyes, he picked up the headset. He already knew who to expect. There was only one person in the whole of Amestris who would call at such an hour.

"Speaking?" he asked, the word crisp and clear despite the cotton heaviness in his head. He scrubbed a hand over his face in an effort to rouse himself into wakefulness.

"Major Miles," the voice on the other end of the line began smoothly, not bothering to answer his question, or, he noted, apologise for waking him; he would have been more surprised if she had.

"I just received word from Karley that Lieutenant Falman has made his train to Central. I expect he shall arrive in the city proper after dawn."

Miles parsed through the sudden onslaught of information, trying and failing to contextualise it. "Am I to understand Falman has been transferred, General?"
“Yes.” She spat the word; it was enough for Miles to infer some undisclosed arrangement Olivier clearly found disagreeable. “Temporarily,” she amended. “I’ve granted him two months leave.”

How generous. For Olivier, it was downright charitable. “With respect, General, not that I don’t appreciate your briefings, but does Falman’s transfer have some relevance to my work here?”

“Why, did I interrupt your beauty sleep, Major?”

Miles felt his mouth lengthen into a wry smile, and he counted himself strangely fortunate his commanding officer couldn’t see his face. “Perish the thought, sir.”

“Wipe that smirk off your face, soldier.” Ah well.

“The transfer request came from Mustang. Falman will be a part of the envoy to Dairut.”

The General’s curt, clipped tone of voice made far more sense knowing the Flame Alchemist was involved. There was no love lost between the two officers -- or perhaps there was, and therein lay source of their animosity. Miles didn't really know, and being as he was neither stupid nor suicidal, he didn't care enough to ask.

And, truth be told, there was no love lost between Mustang and Miles, either. The Major found him an arrogant sod.

“Should I inform the garrison and local Ishvalan leadership to prepare for one more visitor, General?” Business as usual.

“Yes. You’re to expect Mustang and his cronies, Falman, and one Maria Ross, serving as attaché to the Führer.”

Miles knew Falman; he didn’t know Ross — beyond the scant details from the Hughes incident, of course — but Mustang’s cronies… Fuery, Breda, Havoc, and Hawkeye, then. Though the Flame Alchemist irked him, Miles admitted to a grudging approval of the others. Fuery had been Karley’s protege once upon a time, two men in love with their machines. Havoc and Breda had graduated with Miles, and while Havoc, though well meaning, had always struck the Major as being a few proverbial sandwiches short of a picnic, Heymans and Miles were cut from the same cloth: two quiet introverts more comfortable at the edges of conversation than in the middle of them. Riza Hawkeye had commanded Miles’s respect from the moment he met her. Bright, disciplined, and fiercely loyal, she would have made the perfect soldier, if only she was as devoted to Amestris as she was her senior officer. Barring that rather glaring oversight, she reminded Miles of a younger, less frosty Olivier.

“I can work with them,” said Miles simply, keeping personal footnotes to himself. “Are you aware of any special accommodations we ought to be making?”

“Miles, make the lot of them sleep in a scorpion’s nest for all I care.” A pause, then: “Although, Falman is vegetarian.”

Miles knew better than to laugh. He settled on another smile. “As are most of the clerics, sir, so I don’t anticipate there being any problems. Regarding the others, I think I can procure some cots.”

“If you must. According to Mustang, he needs Falman’s memory above all else… evidently the Lieutenant used to work in archives under Grumman back before the uprising.” Olivier's slow, molten tone of voice precluded her caring two hoots about such details.

“I wouldn’t know, sir. However, given his reputation, I’m sure Falman will be a valuable resource to genealogists here.”
“Yes... I understand ground has been broken in Dairut for some sort of government building. Care to enlighten me, Miles?”

Mustang must have supplied some periphery details. Miles flipped absently through his paperwork, looking for construction orders. It was a half-hearted effort; he had been over the specifics so many times he felt able to recall anything of immediate importance from memory. “Of course, sir. The formal name is Al’Arshif, translated loosely to The Archive. Before the war, Al’Arshif served as something of a cultural and administrative centre for the Ishvalan people. The original building in the Kanda region was the central repository for state papers, academic writings, familial and religious correspondences, hieratic account books, genealogical records. The Grand Cleric maintains the sacred texts of Ishvalla in the Temple, the Sadagh, while the Muhaddith, as Scholar, having primal incumbency, maintains the Archive.”

Miles’s hand rested on a sepia-toned photograph, a newspaper clipping. Under Bradley’s strict censorship campaign, it had likely cost its photographer her career, perhaps her life. Miles didn’t know. As he briefed his superior, the Major took it in hand. Only those already familiar with the photo would recognise it for a town. It was an image of Kanda, and it was an image of utter ruin. The siltstone edifices were blasted apart, obliterated, reduced to pebbles, to sand. Bodies were easily recognisable as watermarked stains on the clean white stone.

For all his sins, Miles thought, face set in a grim mask, fingertips brushing the glossy print, Solf J. Kimblee had been devastatingly efficient.

“The current Muhaddith has declared the Kanda region maleun… cursed,” said Miles solemnly, eyes on the photograph. "We have spent the past several months surveying potential build sites in Dairut, at Amestris’s easternmost border with the Great Desert.”

“And what of our mutual friend?”

Miles pushed his paperwork aside. “As well as can be expected.” He’s settling in nicely. “He has taken an interest in proceedings here.” He has been an active force for change. “He has made some progress since his accident.” You would not recognise him, Olivier. He is a new man.

The same people who knew the truth regarding Führer Bradley and the Homunculi were the same people who knew Scar had not, in fact, been killed on the Promised Day. Officially, the Ishvalan monk and killer of state alchemists was dead. As far as Miles and Armstrong were concerned, it had best stay that way. As per Ishvalan custom, the identity of the Muhaddith had been kept a secret. The Scholar was a figurehead, a mouthpiece, a man with every face and yet no face, which was just as well. Miles somehow doubted Reconstruction would have proceeded quite so smoothly if certain stuffed shirts in the political spheres knew the highest ranked Ishvalan clergyman, second only to the Grand Cleric, was also the man who five years prior had wanted the heads of every state alchemist on a spit. That nugget of information may have complicated matters.

“He greatly anticipates meeting General Mustang.”

Miles heard a harsh intake of air he hesitated to call a snort. “Sure he does.”

“I will proceed with negotiations as planned, sir. Fortunately, Professor Stoke’s position remains unchanged, and her recent activity in Mishaari means she's allowed us to make use of her Dairut station. Otherwise, the situation here is fairly unexciting. I will keep you updated with any further developments.”

General Armstrong was silent for a mite longer than Miles was accustomed. He could hear her breathing over the line, so she hadn’t terminated the call. She was collecting her thoughts. Miles
wondered why.

“Major,” she spoke quietly, in a low murmur that forbid anything save the utmost seriousness, and the utmost secrecy; Miles went to scratch an itch on the back of his neck and realised his hair was standing on end. “I trust what I am about to say won’t leave the confines of your room.”

“So far as I am concerned, sir, we are not having this conversation.”

“Falman’s transfer… it smacks of Mustang’s meddling to me. I don’t know why Grumman nominated his little pet to head this envoy. Roy Mustang is reckless and impetuous, blinkered when it comes to the lives of his subordinates. His history in Ishval should be reason enough to keep him as far away from your region as humanly possible. Dropping him in the middle of his old killing grounds threatens to introduce a rogue element, Miles, one whose actions we cannot anticipate. I am giving you an order, Major: you and Falman do not answer to the Flame Alchemist. You answer to me.”

Miles nodded once. “Understood.”

“Be sure that you do. I have given you permission to act on your own recognisance, and doubtless Falman has his assignment regarding this Al’Arshif business. But trust your instincts, Miles. If you don’t like what Mustang is up to, him or his little entourage, then you are to stay the hell away from it. You and Falman both. If that cocky upstart makes a fuckup of this Reconstruction effort, then I will not have it said that Briggs men were part of the reason why.”

She hesitated, then. Miles’s red eyes flicked over to the receiver in surprise. Olivier Mira Armstrong, Major-General, the Northern Wall of Briggs, his commander, his Queen, did not hesitate. But he waited, patiently, dutifully, for her to say what she needed to say.

“And,” she managed gruffly, “I will not have your blood on Mustang’s hands.”

Miles fought to keep the sigh suppressed, knowing the General would hear him and rightfully berate him for it. He recognised the warning in her words, and somewhere far, far underneath, a mote of genuine concern. Her anxiety was not without precedent. The Eastern and Northern forces were closer than most: news of Lieutenant’s Havoc’s paralysis had spread through Fort Briggs like a virulent strain of the flu, just as contagious and just as disarming. Buccaneer had wanted to rip Mustang’s arms off, Miles remembered ruefully. Later, after the Promised Day, when Miles escorted Grumman to Central during the cleanup, the Major remembered seeing the thick scar over Riza Hawkeye’s throat. He remembered Grumman going as white as a sheet at the sight of it, almost as pale as the critically hypovolemic Lieutenant Hawkeye herself.

And, of course, there was Brigadier General Hughes, not one of Mustang’s subordinates, perhaps, but a man who had fought Mustang’s war, nevertheless. Fought for it, and died for it. If by some miracle and over his dead body Roy Mustang ever made Führer, Miles knew the Flame Alchemist’s path to the top would be paved in headstones.

Olivier didn’t intend for his to be one of them.

“I am the acting liaison between the autonomous region of Ishval and Amestris,” said Miles firmly. “In matters regarding the relationship between our two peoples, my word is final. Rest assured of that, General.”

“I will rest when Carmichael stops berating me for putting her husband on that train, Drachma has been wiped off the face of the map, and I’m sitting comfortably in Grumman’s chair in Central Command. But until such a time, Major Miles, I suppose your words shall have to suffice.”
“I suppose they shall, sir.”

“Then this is goodbye. I expect regular briefings regarding your activities.”

“Of course, General.” Assured the conversation was over, Miles went to disconnect—

“Oh, and Miles?”

He frowned, bemused. “Yes, sir?”

“I’m sorry for waking you. Good morning.”

Miles arched an eyebrow. He hoped, somehow, Olivier could see it. “Good morning, sir.”

He rested the phone on its cradle. His hand lingered on the receiver, just for a moment.

The smile returned unbidden, Miles's tanned, weathered face creasing with well-worn laugh lines. He had been dreaming of snow. It was a nice dream.

Miles glanced at his cot, considered catching another hour of sleep, then decided against it. His conversation with Olivier had woken him up like a swallow of strong coffee. Though dawn was still a long way off, some of the black had bled from the edges of the sky. The horizon was a strange shade of blue, like the crystalline waters of the streams around Briggs, both the colour of the riverbed’s stones, and yet no colour at all. Soon, the crown of a white, unforgivingly-hot sun would rise over the Great Desert, bathing the horizon in heat shimmers, and work would begin again.

A knock sounded against the limestone, drawing Miles’s attention to the door. Dairut was a settlement of early risers, it seemed.

“Come in,” he called.

The newcomer nodded warmly to Miles, taking care to shut the door behind her and kick the sand from her boots. “Good morning, Major. I thought you might be up.”

“I didn’t want to miss anything exciting, Professor,” said Miles dryly.

Professor Winifred — Winnie, she had insisted — Stokes regarded Miles warmly. She was an older woman with a careworn face, the corners of her eyes and mouth lined, her skin bronzed from her many months in the Ishvalan desert. Her greying, curly hair fell in corkscrews over her forehead. She was small and wiry, clothed in the grubby khaki that seemed to be the uniform of all archeologist types. Miles had taken an immediate liking to her. She had a scholar’s fastidiousness but none of her ilk’s stuffy disinterestedness. Of course, being the team leader of a dig sight in old Ishval, circumstances had forced her to be calm but careful, flexible but focused. Miles admired her earnestness, her simple dedication to her work. She loved archeology, and against all likely probability, she loved Ishval, its history and culture.

The Major had been prepared for a belligerent confrontation upon his team’s arrival in Dairut, where for many years the only inhabitants had been rotating teams of Amestrian archeologists, working on the Xerxian ruins that hemmed the settlement like a jaw of stone molars. However, rather than lament his intrusion into their dig site, Professor Stokes and her cadre of sweaty graduate students had welcomed the Amestrian soldiers with open arms. Winnie and Miles had immediately recognised the benefit of their working together. Unlike great swathes of Ishval, Dairut was already halfway to habitable. After the overthrow of Bradley’s regime, a conglomerate of Amestrian universities had sponsored the establishment of a permanent scientific outpost in
Dairut, complete with generators, telephone lines direct to East and Central City, a train station, and running water. It was also the last stop in Amestris before the Great Desert. A hub of communication, research, and trade, with all the amenities thereof, Dairut seemed an ideal location to establish Al’Arshif.

Over the last few years, in return for rations and supplies, and the freedom to continue her research unimpeded, Winnie had given Miles and the Muhaddith free reign of the settlement’s resources.

Miles had noted at the time that the collaboration worked particularly well from a public relations perspective. Rather than the military pouring its capital into the Reconstruction effort, the restoration of Dairut and Al’Arshif had been funded almost exclusively by Amestris’s academic community. General Mustang had been especially pleased. Ishval would no longer find itself beholden to the whim and will of the Amestrian military, indebted to the very people who had once sought to destroy them. Civilians, not soldiers, had lead the Reconstruction effort.

And Miles highly doubted any of it would have been possible without Professor Stokes.

“I heard you speaking on the phone,” said Winnie, dragging Miles back to the present. She spoke through the nose, like she had a permanent sinus infection. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“No at all, Professor. Just routine correspondence with my commanding officer in North City.”

Professor Stokes furrowed her bushy eyebrows. “Oh, of course, that’s young Miss Armstrong, isn’t it?”

“That is correct, ma’am.” Although you had better hope she never hears you call her miss, he thought ruefully.

“A very serious girl, I remember.”

Miles's mouth opened and closed mutely, betraying some of his surprise. “You’ve met?”

“During my sabbatical, I taught courses in ancient history at the military academy!” said Stokes proudly. Some sabbatical, mused Miles. “I never had the pleasure of Olivier’s company, mind you… she graduated before my stint. But I had Alex for a short semester, before the massacre, of course.”

Miles took the information in his stride, although, several months prior, it had stunned him to hear a civilian openly refer to the Ishvalan Civil War as a massacre. It simply wasn’t done. Miles somehow doubted Professor Stokes had been very popular among her colleagues at the military academy.

“I quite liked Alex, and I’m sure I would have liked Olivier, too.” Miles suppressed a chuckle. “But if you’re not too busy, Major, I wanted to let you know we’ve uncovered the entrance!”

He arched a silver eyebrow. Winnie's recent dig involved a huge white structure of Xerxian origin, likely a temple or tomb of some kind, and the effort had consumed Professor Stokes for the better part of the last six months. “You don’t mean to tell me you’ve been working throughout the night, Professor?”

“Well, it gets rather too hot during the day, Miles. It’s far easier on my students during the wee hours.”

“That makes sense,” he conceded. “All the same, Dairut is still classified as a militarised zone. I would feel more at ease if you confined your activities to times when my men may be able to
Professor Stokes waggled a finger. “Now now, Major, while your concern is touching, I’m a big
girl. My team has been working this Mishaari dig since Grumman’s inauguration, and we’ve never
had any reason to fear for our safety.” She smiled at him, an unspoken apology in the gesture. “I
know you mean well, my boy, but you soldiers do make me a tad nervous. If you really must
oversee our activities, then you might be able to provide us with a few more diggers, perhaps an
Ishvalan translator or three, but otherwise…”

Miles bit the inside of his cheek. Speaking of soldiers… “Regarding our presence here, ma’am,” he
began; he didn’t know how Professor Stokes would react to the news, but Miles found he cared for
her opinion, regardless, “Führer Grumman has decided to send an envoy of senior military officials
to oversee the details regarding *Al’Arshif*, to help compile the genealogy archives, and to look into
the possibility of establishing a new trade route with Xing using Dairut as a gateway city.”

Winnie’s warm expression seemed suddenly forced. “Oh, must he? You know how archaeology is,
Major…”

In fact, he didn’t, but Miles allowed her to continue.

“If there are too many feet traipsing all over the place, someone’s liable to tread on something
important. We wouldn’t want it to get too crowded around here.”

“I understand your reservations, Professor, but the Reconstruction effort hinges on our being able
to rebuild *Al’Arshif*, and if the Führer feels General Mustang and his company are the most
qualified to see to it that things run smoothly, then I am duty-bound to accept his judgement.”

“Oh, Major, you’re doing a wonderful job on your own! You don’t need your higher-ups sending
in busybodies to micromanage things.” Professor Stoke’s chocolate-brown eyes narrowed
shrewdly. “Did I hear you say Mustang? Roy Mustang?”

Her recognition did not bode well. “Yes, ma’am. Strictly-speaking, as an Eastern region, Ishval
falls within his jurisdiction.”

“The Flame Alchemist.” Winnie looked over her shoulder, checking to make sure they weren’t
being watched, as though she expected a pair of eyes to be peering over the windowsill. Miles
would have found the gesture comical if the small woman didn’t look so grave. She stood on tiptoe
to face the Major, whispering hoarsely: “Is that… well, I mean, is that going to be okay?”

Miles frowned. “I’m sure I don’t follow, Professor.”

“That young man has something of a reputation around these parts.”

“I am aware.”

“But are your people,” Stokes considered Miles Ishvalan; to her, the military blue didn’t change
the fact, and Miles had found the shift somewhat refreshing… “are your people comfortable with
his presence? It seems terribly presumptuous of Führer Grumman, if you don’t mind my saying.”

Miles thought back to his earlier conversation with Olivier. “It’s not my place to question his
orders, Professor,” he said diplomatically.

“Well, then what do you think, Miles? Of the record, of course. As a friend.”

Miles considered Professor Stokes. Even without his tinted glasses, his red eyes betrayed nothing
as Winnie searched his face for some concession. After a long moment of contemplation, the Major sighed, bowing his head.

“In many ways, the wounds the Flame Alchemist inflicted on this region, on these people, are still fresh,” said Miles carefully. “Even in Amestris, he is something of an omen of ill fortune. Bad things tend to happen to the people around him.”

“Oh no,” Winnie murmured. "That doesn't sound at all healthy."

“That being said,” the Major went on, straightening until he stood at his full height, “it has been five years since the loss of Führer Bradley, and in that time, General Mustang has devoted himself entirely to the restoration of Ishval. It was he who pushed the autonomy amendment through the Congress. It was he who sponsored the reopening of Ishvalan schools and temples and the resettlement of refugee families in their ancestral homelands. I cannot say whether General Mustang’s motivations stem from a selfish desire to atone for his sins, to shed the weight of the suffering he has caused, or from a genuine desire to see this world, my people, resurrected, even at the cost of his reputation and the reputation of his closest subordinates. Regardless of the engineering behind his efforts, the resultant architecture is undeniable.

Miles took a deep breath. “Ishval is returning, Professor. Slowly, perhaps, but returning, nevertheless, and I truly believe we have the Flame Alchemist to thank for that.”

Winnie’s smiling eyes nearly disappeared in her wrinkles. She gave Miles’s arm a squeeze, then, quietly: “You take after your Ice Queen, my friend... always so reticent with praise. That's why your words mean so much. If you vouch for him, Miles, then I trust you.”

The Major wasn’t entirely sure why, but the Professor’s words made him feel slightly better. While Olivier’s warning was never far from the forefront of his thoughts, he felt, for a moment, more at ease with the prospect of the Flame Alchemist’s presence in Dairut.

He gave his friend what he hoped was a grateful incline of his head. Professor Stoke squeezed his arm a second time, then turned to go, doubtless back to the temple dig. Miles made a mental note to swing by the site before the heat grew too oppressive.

The Major had just sat back down at his desk, trying to bully his paperwork into some semblance of order, when he heard a presence in the entryway.

In her hurry to return to her team, Professor Stoke had neglected to close the office door.

“I didn’t expect Flame to find an advocate in you.”

Miles shrugged noncommittally, dipping his pen in its inkwell and beginning a quarterly report to Führer Grumman. “Not an advocate, no. Perhaps a cautious optimist.”

A grunt. The words were low and gravel-rough: “An optimistic Ishvalan.”

“How not? I’d caution you against holding all of our people to your own unique standards, sayyidi, but of course you already know that.” Miles turned to the newcomer, red eyes twinkling. “Besides, I’m only a quarter Ishvalan. Maybe that entails me to my stubborn propensity for looking on the bright side.”

The Muhaddith, the Ishvalan fugitive formerly known as Scar, grunted again. He crossed his arms as he considered Miles, emotion markedly absent from his brutal, scarred face. The alkehestry tattoos on his forearms seemed to shift with every breath. The Major found himself drawn to them, curiosity overcoming his caution. The Muhaddith wore the tattoos with honour, in memory of a
brother long dead. The designs, re-inked after the Promised Day, were a deep crimson in colour, resembling foliage in old chased ornaments, convolutions of filigree work, but with such a luxury of forms that of a hundred markings which at first appeared exactly the same, no two seemed alike upon a closer examination.

“I confess to a certain degree of frustration,” admitted the Muhaddith coolly, without ceremony; Miles quickly inferred the topic of conversation. “I was not consulted regarding Mustang’s party.”

No surprise there. “The move hinged on congressional consensus, Muhaddith. Talk of your involvement risked the wrong people asking potentially awkward questions.”

The Muhaddith nodded curtly, though Miles could tell he wasn’t entirely satisfied with the Major's explanation. The need for constant secrecy had begun to grate on more than a few nerves. Scar had spent so many years living in the shadows. Miles suspected he was fast growing sick of it.

The Major cleared his throat. “If there are points of order that need addressing, sayyidi, I may be able to relay them to General Armstrong on your behalf.”

“No,” said Scar, in a tone that brooked no further discussion, “there is no need for her to intervene on our behalf.”

Miles wondered whether his countryman said it out of careful consideration or out of pride. He didn't ask.

Suddenly, the Muhaddith looked intently at the Major. “Will Mustang’s bodyguard be with him? The small one with the honey-coloured eyes?”

The question surprised Miles, though he didn’t show it. “Unless he decides to break a ten year habit, then I would assume so.”

“Good. Then we have nothing to fear.”

That merely raised more questions.

Miles understood the Muhaddith and the Flame Alchemist had fought together briefly on the Promised Day. Perhaps, in that short space of time, Scar had inferred some of the dynamic between Mustang and Hawkeye. Miles confessed he didn’t know how deep the relationship went — confessed he didn’t really want to know, the rumours alone were colourful enough... — but he knew Hawkeye served her superior in some forbearing capacity, perhaps as a force of restraint, perhaps as a voice of reason. And Miles couldn't help but admit to himself that he felt infinitely calmer, and infinitely safer, in the Flame Alchemist’s company with Captain Hawkeye a short distance behind the man’s shoulder. As though she was there to protect the rest of them as well as Mustang himself.

In any case, an assurance of Riza's staunch presence seemed to mollify the rigid Ishvalan monk.

The Muhaddith spun on one sandalled foot, making for the early morning desert, leaving as quickly as he had arrived. “The Professor is unearthing her buried treasure today,” he called over his shoulder, his baritone voice expectant; he, too, had grown fond of Winnie over the last few months, a fondness couched in silence and severity, "I suggest you make an appearance, Miles.”

“Yes. Yes, I suppose I should.” Miles put his pen in his inkwell. He promised to finish the report when he returned. In the meantime...

“Let’s go see what wonders she’s uncovered.”
You know, I feel like this ought to go without saying, but if anyone thinks they know who the Will belongs to, then keep it a surprise ;)

"I’m not a coward who ran when the going got tough. I’m not a coward who sat at his desk while my friends, my family, were out fighting my wars. If there is one thing I can be proud of, it’s that I’ve never backed down from a fair fight. I was prepared, willing, even, to die from the moment I put on this uniform, to give everything I had to defend the safety of this nation. It’s only now, recording this Will, here at the end, I think I recognise how terribly cruel a soldier’s lot in life may be. That though we’re honour-bound to make the ultimate sacrifice in the name of Amestris — that our duty asks little of us save a cognisance of our expendability — our bodies, our souls, still amount to very little. I’d say we’re like scarecrows, some goose-stepping idiots made of straw, but even scarecrows have something of substance inside of them. We’re more like people-shaped holes in the world, just outlines. Shadows. I think our lives might be the only things in this funny little world that don’t abide by the law of equivalent exchange. Our science doesn’t make sense, and our Truth isn’t fair. You can throw a thousand soldiers at an invasion force and still lose the battle. You can obliterate an enemy's army and still fail to win the war. Our lives do not equate to any quantifiable value. In the big picture, we’re not worth much.

"But I accepted that reality. Gracefully, with dignity, I like to think. And for that, I am a coward.

"I am a coward because I refused to recognise the value of my life. Because I was too frightened to believe I was worth more than a flag-draped coffin, that I was owed more than ignominy and posthumous promotions, days of post traumatic stress and a clean white headstone. I think, perhaps, that if I believed even for a second that there was a person underneath the soldier, I wouldn’t be able to give myself entirely to serving my nation, that I’d lose my nerve. That I would realize, at some critical turning point in a battle, or with a gun pointed to my head, that I... well... I don't want to die. I want to live... for myself, for my friends, for Amestris. But I do not want to die for them.

"And now it's too late. I am a coward because it's easy to care about your duty. It's very, very difficult to care about yourself.

"So, if you're listening to this, then I urge you to do what I could not do: live. For me. For yourself.

"Yeah... don't make my mistake. Look where it got me. That's all I got to say about that. The rest is up to you.

"My second regret is... complicated. I'm glad the attorney left me alone because I'm turning as red as a damn beetroot just thinking about it. But... if there is a God out there — though I admit I've seen more evidence against than for in my time — then I hope, at least, He bore witness to my confession. That, when the time came, I said what I needed to say to the person I loved.
"In that case, I suppose my second regret isn't a regret at all, but a bit of healthy advice.

"Don't love a fellow soldier. Save yourself the heartache. I feel hypocritical just saying it, to be honest. The funny thing is, for all the anxiety and hurt it caused me, I don't regret our short, bright time together. Nothing untoward happened between us, at least not at the time of my recording this, and unless Grumman slashes the frat policy in the near future, I don't reckon that our situation is likely to change. Just being in each other's company is enough. Was enough.

"No, I do not regret falling in love.

"I regret not being able to fall out of it again."

Continued in Act II: Platform One
When it came time to retrieve Falman at the train station, Riza had been all too happy to volunteer. General Mustang flashed her a smile over a veritable balustrade of paperwork. "Very well, Captain." Some of the tension from the previous day had gone, although the faint umbra under his eyes told Hawkeye the conversation with Armstrong had reared its ugly head at some unconscionable hour of the morning. "You and Havoc—"

She interjected, keen to keep the rest of the men on task, “I can manage on my own, sir. There’s no need to divert attention from Dairut preparations."

Havoc, who a moment ago had brightened at the prospect of a recce and a bit of fresh air, sagged in his chair. His voice was one of abject self pity, the kind reserved for twenty-four hour stakeouts and filing tax returns. "Even at work," he muttered under his breath, although it was clear he intended for everyone to hear him; Havoc was about as subtle as Alex Armstrong, "even at work I get rejected."

Next to Riza, Heymans fought a smile, his mouth twitching.

Hawkeye released a long-suffering sigh; she had neither the time nor the motivation to massage Jean’s bruised ego.

"Lieutenant Havoc, I suggest you keep your social life—"

"Hasn't got one," muttered Breda, earning him a scowl which, much to Hawkeye's irritation, he merely shrugged off.

"Personal life, then," she bit the words, "out of this office." Though she maintained a carefully neutral tone of voice, ever the efficacious arbiter of General Mustang's little fiefdom, she narrowed her eyes at Havoc and said softly, "And if you ever compare me to your... conquests again, I'll tell you just where you can extinguish those cigarettes."

Fuery pretended to stifle a sneeze, his cheeks turning red. Breda just snorted into his coffee cup.

The unlit paper hung from the corner of Havoc's mouth; Hawkeye didn't know what surprised him more: her warning or her vivid imagination regarding his disgusting cancer sticks. Riza left him to puzzle it over, turning instead to the General.

“If Major General Armstrong’s itinerary is correct, and I expect it is, then Falman will be arriving on the nine o'clock train, sir.” Riza knew the Amestrian Rail schedules by heart. “Barring any delays on the line, we should be back well before lunchtime.”

The General grumbled something to the affirmative, which gave Hawkeye pause. Even in his blackest moods, poking holes in Havoc’s gossamer-thin social calendar usually made him feel better. But he had gone uncharacteristically quiet, melancholy even. The Captain looked over at him from under her eyebrows. The corners of Roy’s mouth had turned down. He frowned at his desktop, tapping his fingers, his gloved hands muffling the sound. When he caught her scrutinising him, his jaw locked like a tire clamp, his dark eyes, distinctly unhappy, rising and falling as though trying to blink out a message.
The look he gave her irritated the Captain more than she would have been given to admit. The rest of the officers, had they been paying attention, doubtless would have mistaken the expression for a musing consideration of the timetable, as though Roy was debating catching a catnap or phoning a lady friend while his adjutant was absent. But Riza was not, thank God, as prodigiously oblivious as Jean Havoc, and she could read well-enough in her commanding officer’s face that he had reservations about her going to the station alone.

Riza bit down on her back molars, not quite grinding her teeth, but rasping them just a little.

She found his concern irritating in the extreme. Riza tried very hard not to take it as an insult, and she almost succeeded. While she was wound tighter than piano wire whenever circumstance required her superior’s presence in the more populated city centres -- the crowds of towns and train stations provided ample cover for would-be assassins -- a reciprocal concern wasn’t only contrary to Roy’s station, it was downright disrespectful of her own.

Though she would die for the man without a moment’s consideration -- and had come dangerously close to doing just that once before -- Riza was not so besotted that she couldn’t recognise Roy Mustang for the controlling, patronising bastard he was so often wont to be.

If the General felt the need to question her judgement, then he likely worried for her safety, which irked Riza quite enough as it was. But if he doubted her ability to protect herself, then she was lead to assume that he must not hold her defensive capabilities in any high regard. And if he didn’t trust her to protect herself, how could he possibly trust her to protect him?

Riza Hawkeye would not abide it. Although Falman’s transport was a small matter, almost trivial, and ought not to have been a source of tension between commander and subordinate, Riza found herself viciously adamant. After his stunt from the previous day, she had very little inclination to allow him to sway her decision.

It would take more than the occasional stray touch to make her wobble.

“Permission to depart, sir?” she asked crisply, revealing none of the turgid irritation bubbling beneath the words.

She suspected Roy sensed it regardless. An anxious sullenness creased the smooth plane of his forehead like a kink in a wire. “I…” The single sound dropped like dead weight into the silence. As he collected himself, Riza sensed his many objections floundering among an equal number of hesitations. Fortunately for her, he still had sense enough to feign at least some bearing of professionalism. “Hurry back, Captain,” he managed, after far too long, Hawkeye thought. “I’d like your input on the weapons inventory once Fuery collects it from requisitions.”

She snapped her heels together. “Sir.”

Riza felt him glaring at the side of her head as she tidied her station and grabbed the car keys. She imagined she felt the heat of it, as real as the fire he commanded. Fuery was too absorbed in his work to notice; Breda undoubtedly noticed but knew better than to say anything, lest he get burned; Havoc had evidently decided to ignore everyone else so that he might fully commit himself to his sulk. It suited Riza perfectly fine: the General’s antics were not worth any of their prolonged interests.

She changed into civvies in the locker rooms, a modest skirt and turtleneck to cover certain less-than-fetching portions of her upper back. She told herself, as she drove to the station, that discarding her uniform had nothing to do with General Mustang’s misplaced concern. While civvies offered a certain level of anonymity, should she happen to cross paths with any unfriendly
characters, the change increased her chances of collecting Falman and returning to headquarters without being recognised, cornered, questioned… lauded.

After the Promised Day, her face and those of Edward Elric and then-Colonel Mustang had been exhibited throughout Amestris like three unflattering parade balloons. Very little had changed after five years. While Edward had been able to return home to Resembool, far outside the public eye, she had no such luxury. In military blue, she was easily recognisable as Captain Hawkeye: General Mustang’s adjutant, the sharpshooter with the eyes of a hawk and a heart of stone, with all the titles and tributes, ill repute and infamy therein. In a skirt and blouse, she was just Riza, and very few people would know Riza from the next plain blonde in the crowd.

Although, Hawkeye admitted grudgingly as she entered the station, pulled along by the morning rush, Roy’s concern was justified in one respect: she did not like train stations. Not one bit.

She amended the thought by specifying she didn’t like people. In ones and twos, or in five-person offices, people were perfectly fine. But being a sniper had the ancillary benefit of prolonged isolation, and for all the horrors perpetrated from the cover of her nest, Riza could not help but value, even miss, the sombre solitude her work afforded her. Waiting for Falman, she felt like a rock in the middle of a river, the crowds flowing around her, trying to sweep her away. She planted her feet and fought the urge to stand to attention, peering over heads towards the platform. She didn’t try to get closer, trusting that the Second Lieutenant would come to her. The crowds were even thicker near a glistening black steam engine, the railcar windows still frosty from its time up north. Hawkeye felt a sudden prickle on her neck like a hundred tiny legs. Ever since she was a little girl, trains had reminded Riza of centipedes: armoured, plated creatures crawling along their tracks.

The Captain banished the thought by scanning the terminal. Around her, husbands called for wives, parents for children, conductors for stewards. The sea of voices thrummed at the base of her skull. It was ironic, she decided, that in all the years she had served in the military — in Ishval, under Bradley, during the Promised Day — she had been continually stunned and mortified by the mastery of monsters over man. She had thought, for a time, that humanity had abandoned some parts of Amestris. But in the Central Train Station, there was too much of it.

There was an announcement over the intercom, the words plumy and garbled like Breda speaking through half a sandwich. Riza shifted her weight from foot to foot, tapping her trigger finger against her leg, where her holster rested just under her skirt. She felt as though she had been standing around for an interminable length of time…

A head of silver hair popped up above the crowd, eyes pinched in a squint. Riza waved, and, seeing her, the man’s face split into a grin. He hefted his duffle bag and navigated the crowd with only varying degrees of success, humming and hahhing and excuse-me-madam-ing every two steps. Riza couldn’t help but smile at the sight, all six foot three, 13 stone of him, dressed in pristine Briggs winter wear, bouncing between travellers like an erratic particle in a cloud chamber. Riza wondered, despite his long stint in the military, especially with all the arduous physical demands of Briggs, how the man had never managed to fill out; how, despite the grey, he still carried himself like a skinny, awkward teenager.

Unlike Riza, he had no such disinclination about standing to attention. Dropping his duffle bag — on his foot — his arm snapped into a salute.

“Second Lieutenant Vato Falman,” he intoned, “reporting, sir.”

“At ease.” She took a deep breath, the tautness in her shoulders from being stuck in a stifling office, subject to the whims of a stifling General, finally fading away. Riza smiled her first genuine
Before he’d relaxed from parade posture, Falman was already fretting at the inside of his heavy winter coat. “The ride down here gave me ample time to begin transcribing what I remember from my time in the Eastern Archives,” he babbled, quite proud of himself, Riza thought. “Government census information regarding the Ishvalan citizenry was spotty at best but their oral histories are extensive. Here are some interviews notes,” he held up a stack of papers filled with his tiny, margin-to-margin handwriting, “and here historical records… uh, genetic analysis, although I remember there are some photos that could do with sketching. Perhaps Alex Armstrong—”

Falman was abruptly cut off as Riza, standing on her toes, pulled his head down to her shoulder. She hugged him fiercely, blonde hair brushing dry against his face. If Hawkeye were any bigger he would have stumbled.

It was like wrapping her arms around a sapling, thought Riza. Strangely fragile.

“C-Captain?” Falman squeaked, voice muffled by her shirt. He held his arms rigidly at his side. “Hawkeye?”

“It’s so good to see you again, Vato,” Riza murmured, clutching him to her desperately, as though at any moment he’d hop back on the train, leaving Mustang’s team splintered again, fractured like before the Promised Day. After a second’s hesitation, Falman returned her hug.

Civvies, thought Hawkeye ruefully. She wasn’t an officer breaching protocol by embracing her subordinate. She was just a woman hugging her friend, revelling in the unexpected joy that broke through her damask of doubt and worry.

They pulled apart, Falman looking slightly overwhelmed. “I… I always regretted it, you know,” he admitted in that diligent, soft manner of his. “During the Promised Day, Breda’s cover-up didn’t do the Briggs forces any favours, and afterwards, with all the misinformation circling about General Armstrong’s involvement, she was keen to return to the North as soon as possible. They said… they told me you and the Colonel — General — were hurt,” Falman seemed stricken, “hurt badly. But General Armstrong just bundled us into a military cavalcade and took us home. I wasn’t… I never, well… I never got to say goodbye.” He considered for a moment, eyebrows furrowing. “I think Fuery still has one of my books.”

Riza laughed. It was a rich, robust, utterly alien sound that made Falman look even more bemused than before.

“You can ask him about it yourself,” she said; the mirth warmed her insides. “If I don’t have you back within the hour the General will probably have half the army after us.” It sounded like exaggeration. It was not. "We have a lot of work to do before departure.”

For the first part of the car ride back to headquarters, Hawkeye and Falman discussed logistics… munitions and supply manifests, budget sheets, travel schedules. As well as affirm her own mental planning, Riza knew every scrap of information would be quietly retained by the Second Lieutenant, handy in the likelihood someone like Havoc couldn’t remember his Ishvalan khopesh from his Xingese qiangs.

As Central Headquarters loomed into view, Falman turned to her from the passenger’s seat. “I have to admit, sir, I am rather excited.” Very excited then, thought Riza. “Before the uprising, Al’Arshif was one of the most significant libraries of the ancient world. They say the old structure in Kanda had been around since Xerxian times. To be given the opportunity to help rebuild it…”
Hawkeye quirked her eyebrows. “And did a certain someone share your enthusiasm, Lieutenant?”

Falman went pink right to the roots of his hair. “Ah, no. Lynn had a few… unkind things to say about General Mustang.”

“Unkind?”

“Downright nasty, I suppose.”

“I see.”

“Well, she is a civilian. She’s entitled to it.”

“Yes, I dare say she is.” Riza often forgot Lynn Carmichael, the chief medic and automail engineer at Fort Briggs, was a civilian attaché. She held no official military rank, but she had become such a fundamental part of the Briggs squadron, an honorary commission seemed hers, regardless. Riza doubted Falman minded very much: he wouldn’t have been able to marry her otherwise.

“I’m sure the others will offer theirs in due course, but congratulations, Lieutenant. Lynn is a lucky woman.”

If possible, Falman turned even pinker.

“And I hear there’s one more on the way,” she ventured.

Vato’s beaming smile was so bright, so wide, Riza could see all the way to his back teeth. “Six months!” he gushed.

“Nervous?”

“Absolutely terrified!”

Riza chuckled.

After a period of companionable silence, Falman's smile fell away and he donned a gravely serious expression. “Captain,” he said gently, staring at the front windshield, “thank you.”

She said nothing, and Falman took her silence as a cue to continue:

“I was just a glorified clerk when the war in Ishval broke out,” he explained, “but the memories of what Amestris did in that place always seemed like a bank of storm clouds hanging over our heads, following us wherever we went. We couldn’t seem to get out from under them. But now... maybe the sun is finally coming out.”

It occurred to Riza that, for all his bookish enthusiasm, Falman didn’t really appreciate the weight of his words, what his contribution would mean to the Ishvalan people. Record books and economic treatises were all very well and good, but genealogy was a fundamental principle in Ishvalan culture. A person's recitation of their family tree contextualised their personal history, linked them to their land, their God, their tribal groupings and the souls of their ancestors. *Al’Arshif* was more than an archive: it was a gateway, as real as Edward's Gate of Truth. A link to the past, and perhaps to a brighter future granted providence by the Reconstruction effort, and by the Ishvalan people's extraordinary resilience.

Falman sighed. “Maybe this stint in Ishval is my chance to help make things right, to make a difference. For Lynn… for my child…” he looked over at her, just for a second, a sagacity in his
heavy-lidded eyes. “For the General.”

Riza’s hands tightened imperceptibly around the wheel. Only the rising and falling of her chest disrupted the silence that followed. Her heart began to pound. She suddenly felt numb, the kind of numbness that made her fingers tingle and her head hurt and whispered truths she didn’t want to hear.

Falman wanted to make things right for the General. For Roy. His reason, his purpose… and her own. For a moment, even though the Second Lieutenant and the Captain had been apart for five years, and one was a married man and soon-to-be father with a clear head and a kind heart, and the other was a scarred, silent woman who would forever deny herself such filial affection, though they stood on opposite promontories, a rope had been thrown between them, and they understood each other perfectly. The longer they served at Roy’s Mustang’s side, the more their goals became indistinguishable from his. It was a truth they had known since their first commission in East City, and for Riza, since a dark, sombre youth stood beside her at her father’s grave. Regardless of the terrible weight of her complicity, despite the labyrinths of despair and desperation he made of her heart, in defiance of the voices of reason and self-preservation that screamed for salvation from situations which were, by their mere association with Roy Mustang, unsalvageable, she had given herself to him. Surrendered herself. Totally, completely, body and soul.

It went far beyond duty. She hesitated to call it devotion. It might have been love, but love to Riza spoke of dark tunnels and a sword at her throat and that horrible stickiness on her skin, the tack of dried blood, her blood, holding her fast to a transmutation circle inscribed on the floor. She pointed guns at love at threatened to shoot it. If it was love, then it was a vicious, carnal thing that raked its claws through her insides.

Gracia and Maes, Falman and his wife, Edward and Winry… that was love. Whatever existed, or didn’t exist, between her and General Mustang was far crueler, and far sadder.

And so Riza had endeavoured to put it, whatever it was, out of her mind. She volunteered to pick up her subordinates from the train station, alone. She berated and scolded her commanding officer. She resented his protectiveness, his contradictory dependence on and concern for her. Because, due to his rank, due to his carelessness, due to his lack of giving a damn, he was able to show it.

And she was not.

Riza parked, and they proceeded up the newly-constructed funicular of Central Command. As they crossed the main parade grounds, Hawkeye saw Falman grimace, something heavy in his eyes.

The last time he had been there, she realised, it had been a war-zone. Falman had watched his superior bleed out. He had stood his ground against a Homunculus. He had ordered the Briggs forces to gun down the Central troops… members of their own military. Academy peers. Bunkmates. Friends.

Riza knew Falman: she knew he framed his world in measurements and ratios, numbers, facts, correlations, consistencies. Before the Promised Day, his had been a life aligned along a strictly linear narrative. But the trauma of that day had interrupted the plot, and the memory still refused Falman’s attempts at reconcilement because it didn't fit with what came before or what came afterwards. The violence, the pain, broke from the Second Lieutenant's strict mathematics.

Hawkeye placed a bracing hand on his arm, lending him her strength.

She hoped Falman and the others would return the favour. Roy and Riza would need it themselves, when they arrived in Dairut.
In Ishval.

“Ah, Captain, there you are. Been searching all over for you.”

Riza gave a textbook if not slightly stiff salute. Falman, after some fumbling with his duffel and his transcription notes, followed suite.

General Hakuro, a rigid, square-jawed man with ice blond hair and, evidently, a serious aversion to smiling, regarded them both, gaze lingering on Captain Hawkeye, wondering, no doubt, why she was dressed in civilian clothing in the middle of a Monday morning. Slowly, his attention swung back to Vato.

“I see Mustang managed to wrangle you after all, Warrant Officer,” he said. “No small feat, knowing your commander.”

Falman’s face fell. He hadn’t been a warrant officer in over five years, but during their stint in the East, Hakuro had always known Vato as a man stuck in a sad little cul-de-sac of a career path, saddled with little more than menial archival work. Hawkeye didn’t know if Hakuro’s ignorance was a power-play, something to knock a member of Mustang’s retinue down a few pegs, or if General Armstrong had simply neglected to make the promotion a matter of public record.

Riza put her chips on the former.

Hakuro began: “Warrant Officer…” Falman, genteel to the point of subservient, did not correct his superior. “You’re free to report to General Mustang. I have to speak with Captain Hawkeye alone for a few moments.”

Riza managed, “Sir, I was asked to return to Headquarters posthaste—”

“And so you have. Your navigating the morning traffic does you credit, Captain.” For all intents and purposes, Hakuro spoke cordially, but his small, hard eyes held about as much warmth as a shard of granite. Hawkeye knew from experience that she could not push insubordination with him — Hakuro would jump at any opportunity to discipline General Mustang over the misconduct of his troops. Riza decided she would not give him the satisfaction.

“The General is expecting you, Second Lieutenant,” she said calmly, emphasising Falman’s rank, “tell him I’ll be along shortly.”

Falman nodded, though his expression was grim. “Yes, ma’am.”

Though Hakuro didn’t touch her, Riza imagined she felt the weight of a palm on the back of her neck, propelling her forward, pulling her into free-fall. It was, she realised, a lot like her days spent trailing after Bradley. A invisible leash around her throat, tethering her to her handler.

Hakuro took his time making conversation. Another power-play, Riza thought. She found it distinctly distasteful.

“Out for a joyride, were you, Captain?” Hakuro’s eyes flicked down to her chest. Riza somehow doubted the General was admiring her taste in turtlenecks. “I don’t remember you going off-duty.”

“Respectfully, sir, civilian clothing makes navigating Central Station a less arduous task. General Mustang ordered my fast return; I judged this the best way to accomplish that.”

Hakuro made a noncommittal grunt. Riza suspected he didn’t really care one way or another. He just wanted to be difficult. And to ogle, apparently.
They reached Hakuro’s corner officer quickly, a dreary cave of a room with the blinds closed, grey walls unadorned, cork boards empty. Hakuro's desktop was clinically spartan. Even the photos of his family seemed too... deliberate. Perhaps, Riza considered, it was the angle of the frames, the way the mementos seemed too fastidiously organised, almost to affect the appearance of casual sentiment. It was quite different from Führer’s Grumman’s own collection; his was less an office and more a curio shop.

Hakuro circled his desk. He gestured to one of the armchairs. “Have a seat, Captain.”

“I would prefer to stand, sir.”

“Then stand at ease, for god’s sake.”

Riza did as she was told, but she did not relax.

“I’ve wanted to have a private chat for some while now, Hawkeye, but every time I've sent a notice to your superior, wouldn’t you know they invariably end up going missing.”

“He has been known to neglect his administrative work, sir.”

Hakuro’s eyes narrowed shrewdly. “Good thing he has you then, eh?” If he intended to come across as facetious, it didn’t work.

“The General’s paperwork is the General’s own responsibility, sir.” She added, after a moment: “I am not his secretary, nor his nanny.”

Strangely, the comment made Hakuro’s expression a fraction of a degree less dour. “Splendid,” he said brightly, picking up one of several identical fountain pens. “Then it seems we're on the same page after all.”

"...Sir?"

“A soldier of your calibre, Hawkeye, a service record as distinguished as yours… it doesn’t seem right Mustang keeps you attached to his hip. You’re squandered as his, how did you put it? His nanny. Devoting precious hours of your time just to keeping the man on task is an insult to your station. You have leadership potential, my girl. Mustang is holding you back.”

In an instant, Hawkeye saw his angle. Something hot and molten rolled in her stomach, the slow burn of anger. She doubted Hakuro had spent the morning searching for her as he so claimed. He had known she would be leaving Headquarters to collect Falman, without the team and without the General, who, so far as Riza knew, had been using the aforementioned notices as target practice. Hakuro had wanted to catch her alone.

“I can't say I follow, sir,” she lied.

“Diplomatic as ever,” he muttered; somehow, the observation did not come across as a compliment. “Not to saddle you with too much administrative bullcrap, Captain, but the Congress has been breathing down my neck regarding these empty postings. With the scum that tried to oust Führer Bradley, God rest his soul, mouldering in our prisons, many of our periphery stations need filling. And if we're to avoid any international incidents, they need filling fast. Your name came up in conversation. After a due amount of consideration, and after a careful review of your record of service, I’ve been asked to personally sponsor your promotion to the rank of Colonel, and your immediate transfer to the head of the Southern Command Centre.”
Colonel… two whole ranks above her current station. It was unprecedented. And the Southern branch... a key power in the current detente with Aerugo. Riza had only just turned thirty. No one, save Roy, of course, had ever advanced so far so quickly.

It was life-changing.

“Sir, while I am honoured by your consideration, I must respectfully decline.”

Hakuro’s frown could have curdled new milk. He stared at her, hard, for several seconds, turning his pen over in his fingers. “Soldiers,” he said, a stake of ice through the words, “do not decline promotions like these, Captain.”

“I am happy in my current position, sir.”

“You are, are you…” The smile Hakuro forced was thin, bloodless. Brittle. Riza fought the urge to fidget as he again spent entirely too long considering her. Not undressing her, perhaps, but hoping against hope she would spontaneously burst into flames. Hakuro probably got off on the irony of it.

“Captain,” he began; Hawkeye immediately balked at his tone, like a raw winter wind, “how long have you served under Mustang? Directly under him?”

Riza caught his double meaning, felt the sick burn her throat. “Ten years, sir.” Twenty one, she affirmed in her head. My whole life.

“Ten years, eh? Long time. Time aplenty.” He watched her over his knitted hands, finally setting aside his pen. “Is there anything I ought to know about your service, Captain? Anything you’d rather your superior not hear? Bear in mind this office is secure and anything disclosed here will stay between us.”

Hawkeye's back itched. “No, sir. Everything has been logged appropriately.”

“Are you absolutely sure?”

She allowed her voice to harden. “Yes, sir.”

“Very well.” Suddenly, Hakuro was standing, leaning over his desk. He was significantly taller than Riza, and the weak light filtering between the blinds threw crooked shadows over his face. “Why don't you want to leave him, Hawkeye... has Mustang ever threatened you?”

Riza stared stalwartly ahead. “No, sir.”

“Has he ever coerced you or bribed you?”

“No.”

“Has he ever threatened your friends, your loved ones?”

“No!”

Something unreadable stirred in his hard eyes. “Has he ever touched you?”

Riza saw red. This time, she made no effort to mask her vehemence. “No… sir.”

Before Hakuro could renew his assault, eager to chip at her until she cracked, the door to the office was flung open. Riza whirled around...
She had never been so happy to see Heymans Breda.

“Oh good, you’re here,” muttered Breda, feigning disinterest, perhaps a bit of annoyance, but Riza recognised the dangerous light in his green eyes, like poison. He took her by the arm, but Riza didn't protest. “The General’s gone and misplaced the train tickets, and we’re due to set off in less than 24 hours; it's damage control time—”

Hakuro snarled, “Just where do you think you’re going, Second Lieutenant!?”

“Sorry, sir,” Breda called casually over his shoulder. Unlike nearly everyone else in Central, Breda was not intimidated by Hakuro. In fact, Breda was intimidated by very little... Black Hayate being the notable exception. “Take it up with General Mustang, sir.”

As her underling practically steered her around the corner, his large hand shifted to her shoulder, squeezed it gently. She revelled in the weight of it, like it anchored her to the floor. Heymans didn’t slow until Roy's office appeared at the end of the corridor.


Hawkeye closed her eyes.

“Thank you,” she breathed.
"Granny told me you left just before Gerret dropped me off. We could have passed each other on the platform."

Ed felt a small, sharp stab of sadness. "Probably a good thing we didn't," he said, the humour forced, his smile stilted, "you woulda bunged a wrench at Denny and Maria and dragged me right back home kicking and screaming."

Winry sighed. "What ever would give you that idea, Edward? Honestly, you have such a low opinion of me sometimes."

"You know what they say about alchemists, gearhead: they draw conclusions exclusively on incontestable evidence. I have enough knocks on the head to prove it."

"The difference being of course that Denny and Maria have never given me a reason to lose my temper, while you seem to enjoy doing nothing else." She took a deep breath; Ed could see her in his mind's eye, twirling the phone cord around her finger, threading it tighter and tighter until it left an imprint on her skin. "And besides, you're... you're not an alchemist anymore, Ed."

"Scientist, alchemist. Same difference." Ed tried to play it off, but the attempt at lightheartedness was far from convincing. He had wanted it to serve some purpose at misdirection, but he knew he could never fool Winry. She saw too much, felt far more. He divined the direction of the conversation but was unable to steer himself from it, hurtling on some appointed course like a stone loosed from a sling.

"I'm scared, Ed," she admitted softly.

Upset, sudden and insistent, twisted the muscles of Edward’s mouth. His hand tightened around the receiver and in that moment he couldn't stop a swell of anger rising in his throat, almost leaving him as a shout. He fought to keep himself from glaring at the Second Lieutenant, who stood posted outside the phone box. How dare they, Ross and Brosch and Grumman. How dare they make Winry worry for him.

"I have to do this," he said instead, his voice low.

"I... I know, it's just... your letter said so little. But it's happened again, hasn't it? The thing—"

Ed interjected, "Yeah. The thing. We can't talk about it over the phone in case someone is tapping the line."

"Is it that serious?"

"Pretty serious, and pretty secret, too. Ross tells me old man Grumman paid the train fare out of his own pocket."

Winry murmured, "No paper trail."

“If the wrong people found out about this, or if we don’t do something to stop it… it could undo everything we’ve fought for.”
"What is it they expect you to do? You can't perform alchemy anymore."

“I’m the one who made the promise to Führer Grumman five years ago, and I’m the one who got rid of it the first time. Maria tells me they've got a state alchemist on call, but they're gonna need my help."

"You don't think it's Roy, do you?"

It was a sound conjecture. A combination of Scar's rampage, the Promised Day, and Grumman's reallocation of war funds to research and development meant that veteran state alchemists were thin on the ground. Alphonse had been offered a commission and had refused it forthright. Ed had been allowed to serve in an honorary capacity but his inability to perform alchemy limited what he could do. General Gingivitis may have been a pain in the neck, but he was one of the only remaining alchemists with significant military experience. He was also, with the exception of Izumi Curtis and Alex Louis Armstrong — the latter having resigned to devote himself to Amestris’s infrastructure, the former more willing to pull out her own toenails than influence the army's thinking on such matters — the only alchemist who knew how to fight the Homunculi. Ed was given to agree with Winry's intuition. As much as it left a taste not unlike milk in his mouth, Ed had to admit that Roy Mustang was the ideal candidate to exorcise the monster from the mind of Selim Bradley.

Or, if worse came to worse, burn it out.

Still, Ed had his reservations. The entire business was so sudden and so secret that it set him on edge. He liked details. He liked facts. Mustang may have been content to fly by the seat of his pants, but Edward cared too much about the repercussions of such thoughtlessness. “If it's the General, I think Maria or Denny woulda said something by now. The thing is, while the martial alchemists are something of an endangered species at the moment, the state alchemy program has expanded to include public institutions outside the military. Marcoh heads Medical and Alex heads the Corps of Engineers. It might be someone from one of their divisions."

"They're doctors, architects, professors... not soldiers. If you're going up against something like this, Ed, I'd feel a lot better knowing Roy was fighting with you."

"Gee, thanks."

"I'm serious! You two need to look after each other."

Ed's face shifted between an expression disdainful and embarrassed. "I'll bear it in mind," he grumbled.

He heard something over the phone, the jingle of the bell in Pinako's parlour, where she interviewed clients, and an intermittent thud-clank of automail on hardwood.

"Oh," Winry murmured. "Sounds like Theo's here for his adjustment. No rest for the wicked, I suppose. I have to go, Ed, but you need to promise me something, okay?"

Ed pressed his knuckles into his stomach. He suddenly felt ill. "Winry—"

"You promise to come home to me."

"I'll try..."

"No, you moron!" The crack in her voice made Ed press the phone hard against his head, until he was sure there would be an imprint of the mic holes in his temple. "That's not good enough,
Edward Elric. You don't try, you do. You're coming home. That's an order."

Ed's back muscles sickled as he rested his forehead against the glass. His abdomen touched the small drawer housing the phonebook, and behind his closed eyelids, something blind and exhilarating and terrifying flashed through his mind. "Win, there's something I gotta tell you."

"Tell me when you get back."

He swallowed. "But—"

"Nope. If it's that important, you'll find a way to tell it to me in person." She smiled softly over the line. "Game, set, match, Fullmetal Alchemist. Now you have to come home."

"Yeah." Tears pricked Ed's eyes. He smacked them away before Lieutenant Ross saw them. "Yeah, I guess I do."

Winry sucked on her teeth. "Granny's calling me. I gotta go."

"Win!" Ed shouted before he could stop himself, his voice reaching an octave he hadn't hit since he was twelve.

"Ed?"

"I..." Ed's hand began to shake; he hardly noticed. "E-equivalent exchange, right?"

The silence that followed seemed bloated with inevitability. Ed almost felt the breath being pulled from his lungs; the sensation reminded him of the White Room under Central, when Mustang set fire to the Mannequin Soldiers. Like something was eating the oxygen in the air.

"I know, Ed," Winry said softly. "Whatever it is you're about to say, I already know."

She hung up before he did. Ed stared at the receiver, caught off-guard by a wave of grief that congealed to a thick lump in his throat. He was slow to place the phone back on its cradle.

“Ed,” Maria called gently, knocking on the screen; her voice was stern but her eyes were soft, kind, "Master Sergeant Brosch will be back soon. We had better be ready."

Ed nodded, stepping out of the booth. The wind made him feel thin and hollow, and somehow even more miserable. Further north than Resembool, Central City had grown gray and bleak, the days shorter, darker. It would be winter soon, Ed realised, and wished for at least the seventh time since getting off the train he’d thought to bring a warmer jacket.

Their waiting spot was well concealed, wedged between the backside of a vendor’s cart and the arcade of pillars framing the entrance to the station. Unless someone made a concerted effort to peer behind the awning, Maria and Ed had a high chance of escaping notice. From the main road, they wouldn’t be visible at all.

Ed didn’t have to ask the reason why: his was still a very recognisable face around Central. The fewer people who knew about his presence in the city, the better.

“Who is Brosch calling?” asked Ed, catching a flash of straw-coloured hair in one of the other phone booths.

“Our ride.”

“I thought Denny said on the train that the military didn’t issue you guys a car.”
"Oh, they didn’t. One of the current state alchemists owns a nice Bentley."

Ed frowned. "Anyone I know?"

"It's unlikely." Maria Ross kept her sight on the pavement, watching the passerby wearily. “You’ll meet her soon. She’s spent the last seven years or so in Creta on a research project, finishing a dissertation. She only recently returned to Amestris to complete her state alchemist certification.”

Ed found his interest piqued. He needed something to distract him from his phone-call with Winry. “I was out West for a while… what kind of research?”

Ross thought for a moment. “Something about clastic sediment compositions, particularly metamorphism through tectonic compression within orogenic belts.”

“… what?” Edward understood the terms well enough; he just didn't understand why anyone would have any interest in—

“Rocks, Ed. She’s a geologist.”


Ross let out a long-suffering sigh. “You sound just like Den—Sergeant Brosch, you know that? It’s Feldspar, actually.”

“Like the rock?”

“Exactly like the rock.”

Ed scowled. “Even Bradley was more creative than that, and the bastard wasn’t even human.”

Maria cracked a tiny smile. “He called Alex Armstrong the Strong Arm Alchemist, Ed, I wouldn’t give him too much credit.”

“So how exactly is a rock alchemist gonna help me contain a rogue Homunculus in the mind of a five year old child?”

“I asked Major Miké that myself. Apparently, feldspar makes up more than 40 percent of our crust, and it crystallises from magma. She’s called Feldspar because her transmutations generate a lot of the stuff, but in the process she also summons… well, lava. And according to intel we received from Ling Yao while he played host to Greed, the previous Greed was destroyed in a foundry cauldron, burned alive in the molten slag. If we need to get rid of a Homunculus in a hurry, Major Miké has the means to do it.”

Ed glanced over at Ross, eyebrows raised in surprise. After a moment, he pushed his bangs from his forehead, grinning devilishly. “Lava, huh? That’s more like it.” Even as he said the words, a sleek silver car pulled up to the curb. Ed hefted his small suitcase and trailed after Ross. “Hang on, so why didn’t Grumman call her the Lava Alchemist or the Volcano Alchemist? That sounds so much cooler.”

“Because I like feldspar, thank you very much.”

A pale, slightly androgynous woman poked her head out of the car window, lips pursed in a tepid
smile. Brosch sat in the driver’s seat, allocated to chauffeur by his superior officer. Not that Denny seemed to mind: the car was gorgeous. Ed figured the Rocky Road Alchemist or whatever-her-name-was must have been loaded far before getting her certification.

“Major Miké, sir,” Ross addressed the newcomer, “this is Edward Elric. Ed, this is Sofia Bel Miké, the Feldspar Alchemist.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Edward Elric, he who evidently has a vendetta against perfectly nice sedimentary deposits.” Even her voice was low and rasping, like rocks in a tumbler, but the way she said the words told Ed she didn’t intend any offence. She jerked a thumb to the backseat. “Hop in, Lieutenant, Master Elric. His Excellency is expecting us.”

“Yes, sir,” intoned the soldier at Ed’s side, clicking her heels and offering a crisp salute.

Major Miké’s stormy eyes, a strange blue-purple, twinkled. “Oh, Ross, if only the university’s endowment committee were so dutiful.”

Maria smiled, as did Denny. Alex Armstrong had left big shoes to fill — proverbially and quite literally — but both soldiers seemed to like their new superior.

Ed, his forehead fissured with frown lines, did not share their enthusiasm. Something about Sofia Miké made his hackles stand on end. A premonition, or perhaps an echo. Ed felt as though he had met the Major somewhere before, a long time ago.

As the car meandered through the streets of Central, Ed scrutinised the officer’s reflection in the rearview mirror. She had pitch-black hair tied into a narrow plait, a stark contrast to skin so pale it almost seemed to glow. She was perhaps a decade older than General Mustang, but, despite being taller than Maria and Denny both, was long and thin, almost boyish in her physique. She had an aquiline face, all arches and angles, hawkish features converging at her nose. Throughout the journey, Major Miké seemed pensive, lost in thought, but Ed couldn’t ascertain what she was thinking. Something about the ambiguity added to her unexpected wit and biting sarcasm every time she opened her mouth. Something else about it unsettled.

At an intersection, Major Miké bladed her hand, palm out, directing Denny through the heavy traffic. In an instant, Ed understood why she seemed so familiar.

He reared his shoulders back. His fingernails dug into the backseat, as though holding on to the car for dear life would somehow settle the sudden nausea that sloshed in his stomach.

“How long did you say you were in Creta, Major?” asked Ed. Maria looked askance at him, shocked by the sudden coldness in his voice.

Miké didn’t seem to hear Ed’s enmity, or chose to ignore it. “I didn’t, Master Elric, Lieutenant Ross did. However, not to belabour the point, I spent seven years and a handful of months in the plateaus and quartz buttes of that exquisite country. Had sand in my knickers for weeks.” Denny stifled a chuckle.

“And Ross said your alchemy was earth-based… tectonic. Explosive.”

“You need to brush up on your geophysics, Master Elric. Magma can no more explode than a handful of schist can spontaneously combust, but put it under enough pressure I suppose the outcome is more or less the same. Hot. Messy. Don’t push the earth, my boy, the earth will invariably push back. And she will win.”

“I knew another alchemist who summoned fire from the ground,” said Ed, absolute loathing in his
words, anger and betrayal simmering in his gut. “He had transmutation circles like yours, as well…

“Tattooed on his palms.”

Ed could have cut the silence that followed with a knife. Brosch and Ross looked stunned — at his impertinence or his insinuation, Ed couldn’t say. Major Miké just stared out the window, unblinking, tumultuous blue eyes peering into some distant place Ed wasn’t welcome.

When no one said anything, Ed let out a sharp peal of laughter. “Bel Miké? I was giving Grumman crap for his naming system but come on, Major. You can do better than that.”

“Ed, stop it.”

He rounded on Maria Ross, golden eyes blazing. “But she’s—”

“We know.”

“And I bet—wait… what?”

Major Miké twisted in her seat to look at Ed. To his surprise, she didn’t appear dangerous, like she wanted to hurt him, or even disingenuous, like she would try to exercise her kin’s notorious silver tongue. Just quietly amused, the corner of her mouth curling. “You didn’t think I’d tell my own subordinates my family name, Master Elric? That’s just poor risk management. And as for these,” she waved her hands, palms out, the maroon transmutation circles rippling in the gray evening light, “these are just convenient. Saves me having to mail order a new set of gloves every three days. Postage costs a bloody fortune in this country.”

“You’re a Kimblee,” breathed Ed.

Sofia Bel Miké — Sofia Kimblee — just snickered. “You sound like you’re cataloguing a new species of lichen. *Letharia kimblee*. You remind me of some of my lab partners, you know, always getting so damn excited when they thought they’d found a new link in the evolutionary chain... when really some idiot accidentally switched the samples for a mouldy bologna sandwich.”

“And you’re both *okay* with this?” Ed cried, ignoring Sofia’s anecdotes, looking between Ross and Brosch. Maria opened her mouth to say something, her expression heavy with disappointment — and no small measure of embarrassment — but Major Miké held up a placating hand.

“I am not my brother, Master Elric,” she said calmly, as smooth as plate glass.

Ed’s head reeled. “Your brother...”

“Oh, you sell him short, Master Elric, he was far more than that. Solf was a sadist, a sociopath, a master manipulator, a torturer, a destroyer, an overall stain on the fabric of humanity.” Sofia shook her head. “Why do you think I changed my surname?”
“But,” Ed’s mouth watered and he fought the sudden urge to spit, “but no one knew…”

She barked a laugh. “Of course no one knew! It’s not something one is keen to advertise! While he was blowing up those poor wretches out East I was in the West under a different name cataloguing pebbles! Our similarities ended at our capacity to perform alchemy, and even then Solf was leagues ahead of me. Little prodigy, he was. Vicious little shit, n’all.” Sofia regarded Ed, one slender eyebrow disappearing under her hairline. “You seem slightly discomposed.”

“YOU THINK!?!” exploded Ed. He jabbed a finger at her. “Last time I saw that face, your face, I was trying to kill a Homunculus!”

Major Miké pretended to think very hard about it. “And would this Homunculus be the illustrious and quite possibly very unlucky Selim Bradley?”

Ed paused, hand still hovering in midair. “…Yes.”

“The same monster that, ah, absorbed Solf?”

“Yes…”

“Who, as I understand it, distracted the beast long enough for you to pull its Philosopher’s Stone core from its body?”

Ed glared. “Yes.”

“Then I’d say that’s a tidy bit of task management on Führer Grumman’s part. Aren’t you fortunate, Master Elric? Crimson’s sister is going to help you do a variation on the exact same thing! I’d say it makes perfect sense, regardless of your inability to understand that psychopathy is not, in fact, genetic.” She tapped Sergeant Brosch on the shoulder. “Second drive on the left, Denny, there’s a good lad.”

Ed stared at Sofia Kimblee — he wondered briefly what her middle initial was — even as she turned her attention to the Bradley estate. Her face was sharp, cut from the same cold marble as her brother’s. Even in the place between her brow and her eyelids, there was a similar crease of introspection. But whereas his smile had been leering, hungry, her smile seemed musing, as though she was more at ease inside her thoughts than outside. There was something of Sensei in her face, Ed realised, the thought rearing unbidden: a subtle, strident species of strength. An endurance. 

**Psychopathy is not genetic.**

*I am not my brother.*

Ed began to suspect, gazing at the face that was, and yet wasn’t, quite like the one he knew, that her shrewdness and sarcasm had been thrown up like a screen to shield them all from the things she would rather remain hidden. Ed knew the signs; he knew what to look for: the lines of tension in the eyes, the distant gazes, the small half-smiles that conveyed regret rather than their intended amusement. Hohenheim had done it. Sensei had done it. Mustang did it. Hell, *Ed* did it. The only comfort he took from Sofia’s guarded pensiveness was that though she could have discarded her mask at any time, thrown it away and crushed it underfoot, she didn’t, because she couldn’t. She chose to endure. Without any assurance of redemption, or even acceptance. Ed suspected her only mainstay of consolation was, though she must have been, at times, a brutally unhappy person, the pain of her familial ties, the horror of them, were hers to bear alone. Her friends, her loved ones, did not suffer because of them.

He couldn’t help it: Ed felt a twinge of profound sympathy for her.
He forced himself to tear his eyes away from Sofia. The old Bradley estate loomed huge over a wrought-iron fence. Brosch had a quick word with the gate guard, and then the Bentley rolled inside.

The mansion was lavish, old, a classical brownstone with tall, narrow windows and double doors the size of dining room tables. Ed, a seasoned country dweller after five years, was far more impressed by the grounds, the rolling lawns of grass framed by aromatic flower bushes and shrubs. A greenhouse sat near the back of the garden, and beyond that, a gazebo jutting out onto a duck-filled pond. Even though the wind threatened rain, the air hummed with bees; Ed could seem them pinwheeling against the car windshields as Denny parked.

Maria Ross frowned, looking towards the house. “Is that…?”

Ed turned from his window, peering past Ross. A man was walking towards them, an officer. He was heavyset, his uniform only just managing to accomodate his barrelled chest, with a head of carrot-red hair and shrewd green eyes.

“Second Lieutenant Breda?” Ed murmured.

Maria smiled fondly. “First Lieutenant, now. There's a rumour he's due to make captain, soon.”

“Oh, pants,” grumbled Brosch, resting his chin on the steering wheel. Whereas Ross sounded delighted, Denny sounded dejected. “What’s he doing here?”

Major Miké looked between her two subordinates. “You had better go see what he wants,” she said. Then, to Ed: “And you had better stay here in the vehicle behind these lovely tinted windows, Master Elric.”

He blinked. “You mean… Breda,” no, not Breda, “you mean Mustang doesn’t know about Selim?”

“Of course not. The General is off to Ishval sometime soon; the exact departure date is on a need to know basis. Man's busy enough as it is.”

“What?”

“This is what you get for living out in the boonies for half a decade, Fullmetal Alchemist, you miss all the good fun. Well, here goes…”

Before Ed could splutter a protest, Sofia swung herself out of the passenger seat. “First Lieutenant! Don’t tell me you walked all the way over here from Headquarters!”

Seeing Major Miké, Breda jumped to attention. The motion was jerky. Ed noted that even the circumspect First Lieutenant looked a little leery of the Feldspar Alchemist.

“Major,” he greeted gruffly. Then, seeing Brosch and Ross climb from the car, grew suddenly self-conscious, eyes darting between the two of them and the pebbles in the drive.

Ed frowned, struck by the uncharacteristic anxiousness. Major Miké made Breda uncomfortable — that wasn't so unusual, all things considered — but Ross and Brosch seemed to make him thoroughly nervous.

“Did you want something, First Lieutenant?”

Ed’s eyes widened. If Breda seemed apprehensive, Denny Brosch sounded downright insubordinate. The Master Sergeant glared daggers at his superior. Breda met the younger man’s
hard stare with barely concealed irritation, his gingery eyebrows furrowing.

“Actually, Major,” Breda addressed the Feldspar Alchemist, although he didn’t break eye contact with Brosch; the air seemed to simmer between the two men, “I was sent here to collect First Lieutenant Ross for the Dairut briefing. I would have come sooner, sir, only the Führer stated she was out for a couple days.”

Before Ross could get a word in edgewise, Denny snapped, “We were on sick leave... sir.”

Breda’s nose scrunched. If he were more of a stickler for military protocol, Ed figured he would have been tempted to cite the Master Sergeant. As it was, he just looked between the two soldiers, glowering. “Both of you?”

“Yes,” Maria supplied, trying to sound as diplomatic as possible. Breda gnawed on the inside of his cheek.

For an uncomfortably long while, no one said anything. Brosch and Breda glared at each other as though willing the other to drop dead on the spot. Ed couldn’t fathom it. Brosch was one of the mildest mannered people he’d ever met, and Breda was about as unshakable as an oak tree. Ed wondered what had gotten their goats…

“Well!” Finally, Major Miké broke the silence, beaming with perfectly white teeth, straight as a picket fence. “I know your commanding officer must have enough on his plate as it is, Lieutenant Breda. We wouldn't dream of detaining you. Ross, why don’t you and Heymans head back to Central Command? I would lend you my car, except I have some rather important equipment that needs transporting.”

Breda’s eyes narrowed. Major Miké should have known better: Mustang’s chief strategist was as sharp as a tack. “To Mrs. Bradley’s house, sir?”

For a moment, Ed thought the First Lieutenant would call the Major bluff. But Sofia lied with ease: “Just alchemy whats-its, Lieutenant. Nothing for you to worry about.” Ed had to admit, the Feldspar Alchemist gave as good as she got: “Although, if you were looking for Maria, why come here yourself? Surely, if you were looking for Grumman's attaché, the presidential manor in Central Command is the more logical starting point, and a far less distant one at that?”

“I was told Führer Grumman and his retinue were here,” Breda said, his words suspicion-laden. "With Mrs. Bradley."

Sensing they were veering into dangerous territory, Ross stepped up to Breda’s side. “Come on, Lieutenant. I have some documentation to go over with Falman... if General Mustang's transfer went through?”

Breda shot one more glare at Brosch, and reserved a slightly more civil frown for the Major, before accompanyng Ross down the drive. “Yeah… he arrived this morning...”

The tension diffused slowly, like someone letting air out of a balloon. Denny and Major Miké watched them depart, the latter with the sedate regard of a python, the former while whittling at his trouser leg, his fingers pulling and scratching.

When Breda and Ross were well out of earshot, Sofia leaned over to her subordinate: “Sergeant Brosch, you’re fidgeting like a three year old on a sugar rush. I think Master Elric and I will be perfectly fine on our own from here on out.” Ed took that as his cue to exit the car. "How about you accompany the Lieutenants back to Headquarters—"
“Thank you, sir!” Brosch gave a hasty double salute before bolting down the drive to join the steadily receding forms of Breda and Ross. As Ed watched him go, mouth falling open; he didn’t think he had ever seen Denny move that quickly, not even during the business with the Fifth Laboratory. He ran like his life depended on it, long hair trailing behind him.

“Ab uno disce omnes,” murmured the Major, watching the three officers.

“‘From one, learn all,’” supplied Ed. “The Aeneid.”

“Well-read, Master Elric. Though I suppose for the youngest state alchemist in history, that’s hardly surprising.”

“Any reason you’re quoting Virgil, Major?”

“Well, sometimes a single stratum of rock in a cross section may yield millions of years worth of geologic history, just as a single observation may indicate a universal truth.”

Ed gave her a hard look. “Your brother spoke in riddles, too.”

“Well, that’s hardly surprising.” She looked over at Ed, her severe face softening for a moment. “Our mother was a poet. Shall we go?”

After knocking, they were ushered into the foyer by a stogy, glistening butler — Ed thought he looked like a penguin in a flop sweat — and told to wait for the lady of the house. Ed noticed an immediate change in Sofia’s expression. She set her wry mouth in a hard line. Her pale, violet eyes sharpened, almost as though a mirror had been aligned inside her head. Any traces of mirth vanished in an instant, packed away somewhere lead-lined and dark.

Duty, Ed understood. It was time to go to work. He may have shirked authority at every available opportunity, but even he knew there were situations when he would do well to start taking things seriously.

When he spotted the grizzled, greying Führer Grumman standing beside a clearly distraught Mrs. Bradley, Ed knew he had stumbled onto one of those situations.

“Sir!” The Major stood to attention. Ed did not, uneasy under Grumman’s penetrating stare.

Before the Führer-President could utter a word, Mrs. Bradley strode forward. She had always struck Edward as being a kind, comforting presence, even after he learned the truth regarding her husband. She was a small, stubborn source of warmth in Bradley’s palace of ice. But as she bore down on them, Ed thought she looked downright murderous.

“Get out of my house,” she seethed. Her eyes were red-rimmed from crying, her face puffy. She seemed on the verge of complete mental collapse. “You will not touch my son!”

Grumman stepped towards Mrs. Bradley. The look in his wizened eyes made Ed shiver: an arresting seriousness, a clinical, cold intelligence, like a chessmaster who knew his opponent’s mistakes were all there waiting to be made, if only he had the wherewithal and ruthlessness to rout them out.

Suddenly, Major Miké intercepted Mrs. Bradley, her perfect seriousness rupturing into a reassuring smile.

Grumman looked far less surprised than Edward.
“Deirdre,” she said soothingly, “we’re not here to hurt Selim. You know that.”

“He’s done nothing wrong,” Mrs. Bradley managed, her shoulders trembling with suppressed sobs. She looked haggard, like she hadn’t eaten, hadn’t slept, in days. “My beautiful boy… he has nightmares, such terrible, terrible nightmares, but he wouldn’t hurt a soul. Five years, Major, it’s been five years…”

“You know it’s not Selim we’re worried about, Mrs. Bradley,” said Führer Grumman coldly, dispassionately, his affable eccentricity completely stripped away to reveal the cunning strategist underneath.

Now Edward knew where Mustang got it from…

“It’s just nightmares,” mouthed Mrs. Bradley, her emotions beginning to overwhelm her. Ed suddenly felt like an interloper, an invader, and he had to fight the urge to turn tail and follow Breda back to Central Headquarters, to get as far away from the Bradley estate as possible. He was complicit in intimidating that poor woman, a mother terrified of the prospect of losing her child. It was Edward who had given Mrs. Bradley what remained of Selim, after the Promised Day. Ed didn’t want to be the one to take him away again.

“This is wrong,” Ed murmured, as Mrs. Bradley devolved into anguished tears. “This is wrong.”

The look Grumman gave Ed made him swallow, hard. The Führer seemed to pitch forward on the balls of his feet, grinding his jaw in slow circles as though he was going to rip something out of Edward with his teeth. “This is necessary, Fullmetal,” he growled. “My promise to this nation, and your promise to me.”

“We are here to evaluate Selim,” said Major Miké, a steadying hand on Mrs. Bradley’s back. “We will not take your son from you, Deirdre. We just want to help him. We won’t hurt him.”

“She’s lying. They’re here to kill us.”

Ed spun around, clapping his hands…

Nothing happened. Just as nothing had happened in five years.

He stood by helplessly as Sofia crouched, preparing to bring her palms to the floor, and Führer Grumman removed his pistol from its holster. Both soldiers stood in front of Mrs. Bradley, who looked towards the staircase in horror.

“S-Selim?” she stuttered, her voice weak and watery.

The boy had grown considerably since Ed saw him last, as toddlers were wont to do. He was the same age as the Homunculus Pride, a perfectly groomed, handsome little boy with dark eyes… trailing shadows in his wake. Shadows that could kill.

Ed peered around the foyer, taking in every detail. There were plenty of light sources, but Pride’s shadows were nowhere to be found. And Selim’s eyes weren’t their usual pitch black, or even the lurid purple of the Homunculi.

They were dark blue, the colour of storm clouds.

Ed remembered Pride, remembered how the Homunculus’s presence had ignited a fear that burned in his belly like acid: the fear of a primordial being, something older than civilisation, like nightmares and the monster hiding under your bed. But Ed wasn’t afraid of the creature on the
staircase; Selim wasn’t an incarnation of ancient evil.

But he wasn’t exactly human, either.

“But before you do,” sneered Selim; the voice was cold, leering, while still being a child's high-pitched lilt. “I think my old friend Edward Elric might like to know what it is I'm doing here... and why, if he doesn’t do something soon, I won't be the last.”

Grumman rounded on Ed, snarling, “What is it talking about? Tell me!”

“I- I don’t know, sir. I’ve met Pride before, but—“

Major Miké’s shoulders tautened, every muscle coiled like a spring. “That’s not Pride. That boy is still Selim Bradley. Your son is alive, Deirdre—”

“Oh, thank God,” Mrs. Bradley moaned.

“But he’s playing host to a couple of strays, I’ll wager. One especially nasty stray in particular.”

Major Miké's smile was grim. "A rapid dog.”

“You’re so cruel, Sophie,” purred Selim. Ed’s hair stood on end.

“Will someone,” growled Grumman, patience wearing dangerously thin, “tell me what in blazes is going on! If that is a Homunculus, Major Miké, then you are under strict orders to dispose of it!”

“No!” wailed Mrs. Bradley.

“And you, Madam, will stay out of my men’s way!”

“That’s no Homunculus, your Excellency,” said Major Miké carefully, almost gently. “That’s a state alchemist who didn’t stay where Master Elric put him.”

Selim Bradley barred his perfectly white teeth. “How dreadfully rude... is that any way to speak to a dearly departed family member?”

Sofia spared a glance at Ed. She seemed to hunt for a proper apology, but, like a tangle of string with a frayed end, the effort seemed all loop and no beginning.

"Rattling around in poor Selim's head... that's my brother. That's Solf Kimblee."
“Oh, you who believe, seek help through patience and prayers. Ishvalla is with the steadfast. Do not say of those who are killed in the cause of God, “Dead.” Rather, say they are alive, only you do not perceive.”

“Mayit.”

The Major opened his mouth, closed it again, then asked: “Pardon?”

The Muhaddith didn’t look at Miles, concentrating instead on navigating the sand that shifted haphazardly underfoot. “The word for "Dead". You’re using the direct object, almāt, not the modifier, mayit.”

Miles indulged a sigh of frustration. Several weeks ago, he had asked the Muhaddith for language lessons. He was beginning to regret his decision.

The sun hadn’t yet reached eye-level in the eastern sky, but the heat was already unbearable. The thin wisps of cloud were milky white, a pale, pearlescent colour that somehow reminded Miles of sick people. The wind blew hard across the dunes, churning the loose dirt and dust, the airborne particles scouring Miles’s cheeks like sandpaper. The Major suspected that if he ever returned to Briggs, he’d either arrive an old man with boiled-leather skin from the high, hot sun, or a smooth-faced youth, the age lines of his face sandblasted away. Miles didn’t particularly relish either possibility.

The Muhaddith passed the outpost garrison at the edge of Dairut, Miles following a close distance behind, and together they descended into the Mishaari basin. The crater ridge marked the unofficial border of Ishval and the Great Desert — Mishaari, a vast, cauldron-like depression, technically fell outside the military’s jurisdiction. Miles supposed it was just as well the Amestrian academic community was the one managing the Mishaari dig site: he somehow doubted he could cite extrajudicial archeology in his fiscal budget.

On the curving slopes of the basin, out from under the shadows of the dunes, the sun seemed to beat down on their heads like a molten ball of nickel, like it would burn right through them. The heat radiated through the soles of Miles’s boots. While he still wore the military-issue blue trousers and train, he had left his uniform jacket at his office, in no hurry to pass out under the heavy wool. Even without the suffocating article of clothing, Miles’s shirt clung to his back. He felt the hairs on the back of his neck singeing.

Meanwhile, the Major noted, swatting moisture from his forehead, his stoic companion hadn't broken a sweat. The Muhaddith’s wide wicker sandals made easy work of the loose sand of the Mishaari slopes, leaving Miles to stumble and curse like someone inebriated. He doubted there was a less dignified creature crossing the desert that morning.

"And your accent needs work," the Muhaddith added after a while, still, Miles realised, picking apart his translation of the Sunda Kita. "You speak Ishvalan like an Amestrian."

"I am Amestrian," said Miles, doing very little to mask his irritation.

"You whine like an Amestrian, too.” The Muhaddith spared Miles a glance. His eponymous scar
jumped and twitched as his forehead furrowed. “I remind you it was you who wanted to work on your Ishvalan. You could at least feign your investment.”

Miles felt as though he was sweating out his motivation along with every drop of water he’d had to drink in the last week. "Forgive me for being a little ill-accustomed to the desert heat, sayyidi."

“It’s barely seven o’clock in the morning.”

“I prefer colder climes. Give me knee-high snow drifts any day.”

The other man shook his head. The Muhaddith’s face refused to affect a wide range of emotions, restricting itself to varying degrees of glaring. As he looked down into the Mishaaari Basin, the glare deepened a fraction. “You speak so fondly that frost-laden hellscapes.” Scar made no effort to hide how much he despised his time in the North. “It’s not natural. The desert is in your blood, Major Miles. This is the land of your ancestors. This is your home.”

Miles envied the Muhaddith’s belief in the words, a conviction Miles himself did not share. The reality, the Major knew, was far less simple. He had always ever been an orphan of two worlds, shunned by one and forgotten by the other. He was jazyiya, a mongrel. A halfbreed. His identity was lodged in some liminal greyness, kindling uncertainty and ambiguity in all chambers of Miles’s consciousness. At least, at Fort Briggs, all traces of ambivalence had, over time, vanished in the whiteout. A peculiar, perhaps consoling type of snow blindness.

Dropped in the middle of Ishval, bereft of blizzards and Briggs, Miles had been forced to face the ambiguity again. If Miles the soldier passed in front a mirror and saw himself in the sand-coloured robes and sash of Ishval, he would be surprised, but he would still find something familiar in the figure. But if the opposite were to occur, if passing on the inside of the mirror, an Ishvalan Miles looked out and saw Amestrian Miles, a man clad in blue, a complete stranger, staring in at him with hard red eyes, the poor creature would be terrified.

And Miles did not yet know how to reconcile the two reflections of himself.

He shook his head, determined to think of something else. “‘In a vast desert,’” he recited, trying picture the cracked pages of the Sunda Kita, the copy spirited from Xing by young Alphonse Elric, “‘covered by sand, above which are dunes, above which is shadow. Darkness upon darkness. If he brings out his hand, he will hardly see it.’”

“‘He to whom Ishvalla has not granted a light has no light,’” finished the Muhaddith in ancient Ishvalan, each word lifting into the air as a perfect note. Miles imagined if the stars were made of glass, and Ishvalla drew His hand across the firmament, the motes of clear crystal would make a similar sound.

“Better,” the Muhaddith conceded. Miles knew it was as good as he was likely to get from the cagey Ishvalan.

They reached the bottom of Mishaari. Miles found the Xerxian ruins bewildering, the architecture strange. It was like looking at the desert through a splintered train window. The clean white stone dominated everything, bleached by the sun and weathered by time, as though the sky had broken and all the colour had leaked out through the cracks. The toppled temples leant at oblique angles to each other, pitted spires twisting like the threads of a corkscrew. Where the walls of the depression curved, the ruins slid together, stone wedged against stone in slanted gradients. As Miles redonned his tinted glasses, to keep the sun out of his eyes, and to hide his uneasiness, the Muhaddith strode forward, navigating the islands of rubble with assured ease.
The dig site would have been difficult to miss, even if Professor Stokes wasn’t waving in their direction, the tiny woman hopping up and down like someone a quarter of her age. The subsidiary structures of the temple were surrounded by Winnie’s settlement — lopsided canvas tents and fire billies, water tanks, overturned supply crates covered in topo maps, and, in the middle of the encampment, a small generator with a telephone line. Beyond the base was the temple proper.

Both Miles and the Muhaddith paused to consider the massive pylons, a pair of broad, flat towers flanking the main gateway. The structure at least 50 meters high, casting long, blissfully cool shadows over the desert. A weathered pride glared from them, hints of blue and gold paint constellating the carvings on the stone’s surface. Beneath the gate, a peristyle court framed the entrance. Many of the columns in the open arcade had collapsed, but on several surfaces the motifs were still legible. Along the bases, cavetto cornices imitated rows of fan-shaped leaves, though Miles doubted any palms had grown in Dairut since the War. Among the sunk reliefs of what, Miles assumed, were Xerxian deities, the Major saw horse-drawn chariots and figures carrying curved khopesh, sacrificial offerings, lines of slaves ferrying a king in a sedan chair. A window onto a world Miles didn’t recognise: a wildness, a savagery, belayed by the beauty of the pylon and the paragons of high civilisation associated with ancient Xerxes.

“You’ve arrived in the knick of time, Major,” called Professor Stokes, jogging over to them, mindful not to step on any of the marble blocks jutting from the sand. She stopped in front of them, hands on her knees. “I hope the journey was pleasant?”

Miles’s smile was thin. “Perfectly pleasant.”

Turning to Scar, Professor Stokes gave a low bow. Then, raising her right hand with the palm towards the sky, thumb and forefinger forming a circle, she said, “Sabah alkhir, Muhaddith.”

“Sabah alkhir,” murmured Scar, returning the gesture.

“Kanat mumta eatan, sayyidi?”

“Nem.” The Ishvalan’s hard eyes floated over to Miles. “Perhaps we should switch to Amestrian, so as not to isolate the Major.”

How very considerate. Miles resolved annoyance and embarrassment with a polite expression. “I have a working knowledge of Ishvalan, sayyidi.”

The Muhaddith’s raised eyebrow betrayed nothing. In Ishvalan, he intoned, “We who are renewed through Ishvalla will swallow up death forever. Ishvalla will wipe away the tears from all faces; it is said He will remove His people’s sorrows from all the earth.”

“Turnips,” replied Miles solemnly, also in Ishvalan.

Winnie began to shake, her head down, making a sound Miles thought was crying… before she looked up at him in the midst of a stifled giggle. Even the Muhaddith fought to contain a tiny smile — even if it was little more than a muscle twitch.

Miles was not an arrogant man, but he wasn’t completely servile, either. His pride stung. While he had grown accustomed to the Xingese transliteration of his copy of the Sunda Kita, ancient Ishvalan was an orotund language: grammatically lofty, syntactically complex, and distressingly difficult.

“Being as General Mustang’s envoy will be speaking Amestrian, we had best make a good habit of it,” said the Professor, trying to salvage the scraps of Miles’s dignity. The Major wasn’t sure it
worked, but he appreciated the effort, regardless. “Tell me, gentlemen,” she went on, tactfully changing the subject, “I’m curious: you were examining the arcade columns. What about the reliefs captured your attention?”

Miles crouched in the sand beside one of the columnar bases. The level of detail was staggering, to the point Miles could distinguish the variety of weapons in the soldiers’ scabbards. “Troops,” he noted, examining the figures, “chariots, auxiliaries… a battle scene.”

“Interesting, no?” said Professor Stoke, kneeling beside Miles and clearing the relief with a hand brush. "Two armies, each trying to wipe the other off the map."

The Muhaddith looked less than impressed. “Empires rise, empires fall. That is the way of things.”

“Ah, but Xerxes was a little different, sayyidi. Theirs was a representative government, a claim even present-day Amestris cannot make. Their congressional system consisted of the capital city and the surrounding territories, from the largest metropolis to the smallest hamlet. It was a system of direct democracy, you see, with participating citizens voting directly on legislation and executive bills.”

“Democracy is so often undemocratic, Professor,” said Miles shrewdly. “If these reliefs are any indication, then there were exceptions to the state of things.”

“Astute of you Miles, as usual. Unfortunately, the democratic process was not open to all Xerxian residents. To vote one had to be an adult, male citizen who owned property. Foreign residents and slaves were ineligible.”

“Pontificating a “civilised” system does not preclude military brutality,” said Scar, his words stony. Miles suspected he was not talking about Xerxes alone. The Muhaddith gestured to the violent clashes on the stone. “For a society built on the backs of slaves, I would expect nothing other than such savagery.”

“Only these reliefs do not depict a slave revolt,” said the Professor. “An army of bondsman would be equipped with farming implements, you know, simple tools: pitchforks, clubs, sticks… not khopesh and crossbows. But the two warring forces enshrined all over this temple are armed to the teeth, butchering one another with unwonted ferocity, suggesting that this particular conflict arose from internal disagreement rather than an uprising or an invasion of a foreign power.”

“A civil war,” finished the Muhaddith. He said the words like he was spitting sand from his tongue.

“Except our records document no such conflict!” bubbled Stokes, buoyant with excitement. “I’ve studied Xerxian and Ishvalan archeology for fifty years and have never come across any allusion or reference to a civil war of this magnitude. The Mishaari site here in Dairut is the only one of its kind. The mystery it presents is as enormous as the mystery of Xerxes’s destruction.”

Only the latter is not a mystery at all, thought Miles. The Major and the Muhaddith exchanged a knowing glance but said nothing.

“Once we’re inside,” Winnie went on, obvious to the Ishvalans’ silent exchange, “we should have our answers. And who knows, sayyidi… if the structural integrity of the temple hasn’t been compromised, and provided we’re able to preserve the reliefs, then we may finally have a starting point for Al’Arshif.”

Scar nodded his agreement. Miles considered the possibility. Engineering projects in Ishval were
notoriously difficult: natural resources were scarce and workforces hard to procure. Though the building was ancient, it would save an inestimable amount of time and money — and nights spent falling asleep at his desk — if the Ishvalan architects were to retrofit the temple itself rather than beginning from scratch.

“Has it been opened?” asked the Muhaddith, pressing on with more immediate concerns.

Grey curls bounced in every direction. “Oh yes, just a little while ago. Join me, gentlemen.”

Miles inclined his head. “Don’t mind if we do.”

Professor Stokes lead them down the old processional causeway. As they approached the archeology teams, Scar lifted the hood and veil of his chasuble, shielding his face from view. Too many members of Winnie’s team were Amestrian. Too many believed the Ishvalan alchemist killer was dead.

Though none recognised him, the presence of the Muhaddith did not go unnoticed. A hush fell over the site, whispers shifting like sand. Many of the students stopped their work as Scar passed, their chisels and brushes falling to their sides, something akin to awe in their young eyes. The smattering of Ishvalan archaeologists bowed their heads low, raising their hands in the gesture Miles had observed before.

“Professor!” a young Ishvalan woman tore across the site towards them, a portable communication system strapped to her back; the pack was almost as big as she was. “Call for you from Central City.”

Winnie pursed her mouth. “Oh, can’t it wait, Annika? We’re about to head in!”

“I’m sorry, Professor, Sayyid Muhaddith…” she did not acknowledge Miles, “but it’s from the Anthropário Organisation.”

“Oh dear.” Stokes turned to her two companions, apology etched on her features. “They’re our primary donors, gentlemen. If I don’t take this, I’ll be out doing bake sale fundraisers before you can say cenz-snatcher.”

Scar grunted. Miles gave a small facial shrug. “By all means.”

The young woman, Annika, thrust the phone into Winnie’s hand. The two of them wandered a short distance away, though Miles caught the tailing ends of the conversation:

“Hello, Dr. Bates.” The Professor shook her head in disbelief and mouthed something to Annika. The girl giggled. “Yes, the dig is proceeding well… yes, I think we’re very close… no, sir, the military is not causing any problems, they’ve been very helpful… yes… ah, tomorrow, isn’t it?… yes, I heard about that… oh, sir, I can’t imagine it’ll inconvenience you too terribly… yes, I will be certain to take care of it. Okay. Bye bye, Doctor.” Professor Stokes shook her curls, returning the headset to Annika, who scampered away. “Pitfalls of academia… the man is a micromanaging menace. Sorry about the delay, Major, Muhaddith. The entrance is just ahead.”

The three of them stepped between the pylons, Professor Stokes ushering her underlings away and snatching a small lantern as they passed an equipment depot. The walls rose high above them, the corridor like the bottom of a deep canyon. The shadowy passage was blissfully cool. Miles began to pick his clothes from his skin.

Professor Stokes chattered as they descended into the ruin, as though reciting field notes, more for her own benefit than for theirs, though Miles found the tidbits interesting, regardless: “Aside from
the reliefs, the structure resembles your standard-issue Xerxian sanctuary, right down to the masonry. The focus of the building will likely be a cult icon, somewhere in the heart of the temple, some freestanding chamber insulated by the peripheral corridors and subsidiary chapels we’re currently passing through.”

Just as Winnie predicted, the narrow walk soon opened up into a massive chamber, weak light filtering through ruts and cracks in the ancient architecture, though Miles imagined once upon a time the space must have been completely dark. The Major had seen photographs of ancient temples, glossy prints of vast sandstone chambers and pylons, the details of the reliefs blurred by the sepia. The temple reminded Miles of those; even the heavy dust hanging in the air, the taste gritty, evoked the texture of a water-stained daguerreotype. Despite the loftiness of the structure, the chamber seemed a primordial, shadowed place. The hall’s walls were completely smooth, unmarred by carvings, though the torchere columns lining the walls had been shaped to imitate lotus flowers, like some prehistoric marshland, leaving Miles and Scar and Winnie to slog through the primeval mound.

At the far end of the chamber was an archway, leading to what Miles assumed was Winnie’s cult icon. Leaving Professor Stokes to coo over the architectural particulars, the Major and the Muhaddith stepped closer. The archway was shorter than Scar, narrow, an unembellished, unremarkable gap in the wall that, judging by the crumbling masonry surrounding it, seemed quite significantly older than the rest of the chamber. As though the temple itself had been built around the archway, and not the other way around. Less a door, thought Miles, and more a door-shaped hole. A crack.

The Major nursed a sudden prickle of unease. Where there should have been some half-decayed piece of wood disintegrating from termites and rot after who knows how many years, there was just an arched space eclipsed in darkness. Miles crouched, then, after a moment, stood on his toes, trying to adjust the angle of the light streaming from Professor Stokes’s lamp. He couldn't discern a wall or corridor on the other side of the archway, or even the stone floor of the threshold. The entrance was completely, utterly black, so thick it was almost physical; Miles imagined he could stick a billie through the archway and bail the darkness like water at the bottom of a sinking boat, hold it in his hands, the press against his palms neither warm nor cold, a temperature impossible to record. It wasn't just a lack of light. Beyond the arch, there was nothing: a tangible, corporeal nothing.

Miles felt the Muhaddith tense at his side, the muscles in his forearms tightening.

"Sayyidi?"

"That door," he growled, the sound low and dangerous; he hadn’t sounded like that in many years, "I don't like it."

"You're not the only one," said Miles, then added, "Although… it could just be very dark."

“Do not attempt to persuade me if you can't persuade yourself, Major," snapped the Ishvalan. "Observe the light from the Professor's lantern. It cannot pass the Door. The blackness just… eats it."

"Yes, I noticed that, too."

"There is more," murmured Scar; absently, he rubbed his tattoos. His eyes darted around the chamber, pupils narrowing to pinpricks until the red glistened. "There's an energy in the air. A heaviness. The Door is exerting a pressure I cannot explain. I cannot give it a name, but it is familiar to me..."
Miles eyed the *Muhaddith’s* arrays. “Is it alchemical?”

“I do not know.”

The Major wiped his glasses on his shirt to give his suddenly jittery hands something to do. “Then familiar how, exactly?”

Scar's red eyes, which seemed almost luminous, like polished rubies, darted over to Professor Stokes. She had made a few quick sketches of the building and, noticing the two Ishvalans, began to make her way over to see the object of their investigation. Whatever the *Muhaddith* wanted to say, Miles realised, it was not for Winnie's ears.

Miles frowned. Scar was a private man, but he wasn’t paranoid. He was not usually so circumspect around the Professor: Winnie had been sharp enough to deduce the former fugitive's identity, and forbearing enough to forgive him it. The only truth Miles and the *Muhaddith* shared, which Winnie did not, was the truth regarding the Promised Day: Father and the Homunculi, the nation-wide transmutation circle, the Philosopher's Stone.

What, Miles wondered, about the chamber, the archway, would unsettle the *Muhaddith* so much it reminded him of the darkest day in Amestrian history…

"Oh, what's that you've found there, boys," asked Winnie cheerfully, materialising between the two Ishvalans. “The temple icon?”

The *Muhaddith's* jaw locked. He looked at Miles intently.

"Not quite," said the Major carefully, hedging his suspicions, and his growing sense of disquiet. “We were hoping you might be able to tell us, ma'am.”

Professor Stokes scrutinised the Door with a potent intensity, muttering to herself before frowning deeply. She held up her lamp, pointing the bulb towards the archway. The light ended just beyond the threshold, choked off by the darkness.

"How terribly interesting," murmured Winnie, trying to maintain her professional objectivity, but betrayed by the apprehension in her eyes. "The doorway appears to absorb all wavelengths of light, almost as though there's a solid object resting there instead of an open space.”

"Or the threshold is far larger than appearances would seem to suggest," muttered Scar, glaring at the archway, "and the light cannot reach the other side.”

"What makes you say that, sayyidi?" queried the Professor.

"There is a breeze.”

Scar was right. What Miles had mistaken for an airflow correction from the opening of the chamber seemed to be a steady wind coming from the Door, tussling the ends of their hair.

Miles took a deep breath. Then, going to his holster, he removed his pistol.

“Sayyid Muhaddith, Professor Stokes, I would advise you both to stand back for a moment.”

Alarm flashed across Winnie's face. "What on earth do you expect to do with that, Major? If you damage anything…”

“I agree,” said Scar, eyeing the sidearm warily. “Weapons are unnecessary. This is foolish,
brother."
"I am the commanding officer in this region. I’ll be the one to investigate."

The Muhaddith sneered. "I am not one of your military dogs, Miles."

"Nor I!" agreed the Professor empathetically. "Besides the fact that we're currently outside Amestris's borders, Major. You have no authority!"

"This isn't an order, Professor, it's a request. A polite one. As an Ishvalan, I cannot allow the Muhaddith to come to harm, and as a soldier, my commanding officer would skin my hide if I wilfully endangered a civilian. Please stand back."

Miles could tell neither one of them was particularly pleased about it; both Scar and Winnie were unused to and unhappy with the role of passive bystander, but, fortunately for Miles, they did as they were asked. The Major was grateful: he knew Scar could break his arm like a carrot stick if he so desired it, and Winnie would probably help him...

Miles stepped forward slowly, sidearm in hand, the safety off. Even without the Muhaddith’s sensitivity to alchemical and alkehestral energy, Miles too felt something stirring in the air, a pressure pressing on his ears. The Door made him dizzy; it was difficult to rationalise the sheer lack of presence across the threshold. His mind kept rejecting the image, kept trying to push it away.

Steeling himself, he continued forward.

The archway was even smaller than his initial estimate. The curved lintel was nose-height. Miles would need to suck in his sides to squeeze through. Someone Scar’s size wouldn't stand a chance. When he was only a few feet away from the Door, the Major's head began to pound painfully. Aura flashed at the edges of his vision. He blinked rapidly, trying to clear his eyes.

And, for a moment, swimming in the depthless, dimensionless black beyond the gate, Miles could have sworn something blinked back at him.

Suddenly, the Major felt a constricting pain around his wrists, as though someone had lashed him with a whip, held the burning leather across his pulse points. He dropped his gun, crying out, trying to plant his feet as something he couldn't see began to drag him towards the Door...

"Miles!" someone called from a great distance. He thought it might be Scar. It was suddenly very difficult to tell. There were so many voices...

"Miles!"

"Miles! Wake the fuck up, Miles!"

Miles blinks, his eyes almost crusted shut. He has been fast asleep... fast asleep after a long day of exercises in the snow...

"Get your ass up!"

He recognises Buccaneer's voice. Miles groans. He decides he’s going to kill him. Slowly, in the most protracted way he can imagine.

Without warning, one huge paw and a particularly alarming automail claw are tangled in Miles's nightshirt and he is being lifted out of his bunk, carried through the air, and
deposited unceremoniously on the floor like a bag of laundry. Miles's body screams in protest as his shoulder crushes against the cold metal. He wonders briefly if his collarbone is broken.

Another pair of hands, smaller, sans automail, but no less strong, fist in Miles's collar and heave him into a precarious standing position. If he wasn't awake before, he is now.

"On your feet, soldier!" a voice snarls in his ear.

Miles stares right into the fierce glare of General Armstrong, long blonde hair in disarray, still in her nightclothes, as though she has just been roused from slumber herself. Even without her uniform, she commands complete obedience. The seriousness in her eyes drives a rod of ice through Miles's chest. He swallows the choice words he has been saving for Buccaneer.

"Commander," he asks hoarsely, his throat suddenly bone dry, "what's going on?"

"What's going on?" he murmured.

"Major Miles!" someone… Winnie, perhaps, cried out for him. Somewhere in his peripheries, Miles saw the Muhaddith — Scar, the fugitive, have to help Edward Elric find him before Kimblee does — snatch Professor Stokes’s shoulder with enough force to make her cry out.

"It's pulling him in," snarled Scar. “Major!” he bellowed, bringing detritus spiralling down from the ceiling, though Miles wondered how he could shout the distance from Briggs to Baschool… "Break free of it! Don't let it take you!"

“We’re taking you somewhere,” Buccaneer says gruffly, brushing past the General to scout the corridor.

Olivier grabs Miles's wrist, her palm burning like hot water after a freeze, and before he can utter a word of protest, she begins to drag him through the fort.

Miles doesn’t dare try to shake her off but every muscle in his body cries out for some remittance. "General Armstrong, sir, please..."

She doesn’t look at him when she says, “At midnight, the military police raided the ghettos in North City.” Her voice is a low growl, her fingers digging into his skin. "It's started.”

A boulder slides into Miles's stomach. "What...

"There's no one left. Anyone who resisted was shot. Karley intercepted their transmissions. They're headed for Briggs next.

Karley has been working the night patrol with Buccaneer. The Captain must have roused General Armstrong when they overheard the order on the military channel scanner, and now...

Suddenly, Miles plants his feet, forcing his commanding officer to stop as well. Something dark and dreadful flickers across Olivier's face and Miles fights the urge to scream. His is a grief, a fury, almost apocalyptic in scale, suffocating him as it rises in his throat… “The ghettos... General, Lydia…”

"Is dead." The flatness in General Armstrong's eyes is difficult to place. "She would have been found in violation of racial infamy laws and summarily executed."

His visions lurches. He finds himself clutching Olivier's arm. “No... no no no..."
She snarls at him, "Get moving, soldier!"

"No!" cries Miles, his voice cracking into something like hysteria. He refuses to take another step, "I have to get her... I have to get her out of there... Olivier..."

Armstrong punches him, hard, in the jaw. Miles's head jackknifes against his shoulder. His mouth fills with blood, and as he sobs he spits gristly clots onto the floor.

The General’s voice is a rasping whisper, her nose inches from Miles’s own. “If you leave this fort you will be found guilty of the rape of an Amestrian woman and shot.”

"She's my wife!"

"No. According to Executive Order 3066, she is your victim."

Suddenly, Buccaneer rounds the corner, his heavy steps shaking the ground. "General, the men report storm troopers are inside the fort, approaching this location."

General Armstrong swears. “Shit!”

“Shit!” cried Winnie despite herself; somewhere in the devolving abstractions of Miles’s mind, he wondered if she had ever sworn before — Olivier... there’s a woman with a mouth on her…

“Muhaddith, I can’t reach him… there’s something keeping me here, some kind of force—”

Scar bared his teeth. “Let me…”

“Let me,” grunts Buccaneer, gesturing to the adjacent door, a seldom-used ready room. Without another word, the Captain hands Miles a spare uniform and Olivier a corduroy sweater, something to throw over her nightclothes. He also shoves a massive pile of paperwork into the Major’s hands.

“Good thinking, Buccaneer,” grumbles Olivier. “Miles, get into the ready room and put on that jacket.”

“What…”

She pushes him so hard he almost falls over. “DO IT.”

Miles stumbles into the ready room, pulling the uniform over his nightclothes. By the time he is dressed, General Armstrong is sitting at the table, absently flipping through the random assortment of files. There is even an empty mug by her hand. They could have been pouring over the paperwork for hours. Miles stands at her side, his eyes stinging. He feels as though something has taken a massive bite out of his chest; it hurt to brush up against the edges of his grief.

“Lydia…”

“Shut the fuck up,” hisses General Armstrong, each word smarting like frostbite. “Or I will cut out your tongue myself.” Her head jerks up at the sound of approaching footsteps, her blue eyes, so pale they are almost white, narrowing like a cat’s. “They’re coming. If you value your life, Miles, you will keep quiet.”

“I’m coming,” murmured Miles, his body going slack. He looked down at his wrists to see cords of black fibrils, writhing, millions of tiny hands pulling him into the darkness. Through the Door, an Eye stared out at him, through him. “I’m coming...”
They're coming, thinks Miles despairingly.

I am going to die. Just like Lydia. Just like—

“Gentlemen,” says General Armstrong evenly, as cold as ice, two military police in full riot gear bursting through the door. Miles feels his stomach drop into his feet. The looks the soldiers give him register a degree of hatred he has never known before.

“We have a warrant for the arrest of one...” the larger of the two men, brown, greasy hair hanging over his face, eyes obscured by the shadow of his helmet, can't pronounce Miles's Ishvalan name and settles on: "your man, General Armstrong. We're gonna need you to hand him over."

Olivier doesn't blink. “On what charges?”

“Under Executive Order Number 3066, ma'am.”

Armstrong’s lip curls. “Sir,” she corrects him, the single sound slicing through the air like a sabre.

“Sir. This man is a traitor. We are under orders to relocate him—”

“Relocate, eh...” Armstrong rolls the word over in her mouth like a connoisseur sampling a frankly disappointing vintage, “Major Miles is my adjutant, Lieutenant-Colonel. Unless you intend to intern him in the Briggs basement where I can reach him at my own convenience, I can’t sanction his removal at this time.”

“This is not a matter up for discussion, sir. The Führer President has ordered us to...”

“To what?” she asks, the words dangerously soft. The storm troopers cannot answer her, and she stands. With her blonde hair dishevelled, and her eyes, strong and strange and the bluest blue imaginable, narrowed, dressed in her nightclothes but clutching a pristine silver scabbard in one hand, she stalks towards the soldiers like a valkyrie. An angel of destruction.

“I’ll tell you what I’ve been ordered to do, Lieutenant-Colonel.” She spits his rank like an anathema; the other soldier, a spotty one, barely older than a teenager, gulps. “I’ve been ordered by Führer Bradley to reinforce this nation’s northern border. My duty is to protect the Amestrian people from Drachma. I can’t do that if I don’t have the man who organises... my... god... damn... tactical... manoeuvres!” She raises her voice with every word.

The young storm trooper looks terrified, clutching his rifle like a safety blanket, but the greasy one meets Armstrong's icy glare. “Sir,” he says; there is a strange lack of presence in his voice; a desperate, futile hunger, the thirst of a drowning man, in his eyes, “you will have to take any issues directly to Central Command. That Ishvalan is coming with us.”

Though his expression betrays nothing, Miles feels himself being whittled away to a state of numb, inarticulate terror; the terror of a child who can't dress itself, who can't talk above a whisper, who soils its clothing. Reduced. Diminished. The only coherent courses of action Miles can rationalise are running... and leaping from the parapet of Briggs.

Olivier's expression is wholly ambiguous. Standing beside her, Miles thinks he sees her suck in the sides of her cheeks as she looks over the two storm troopers, her eyes revealing nothing. Miles realises at once that a light has gone out there, somehow. Like she has been rendered blind. The damage done is irrevocable. She has accepted it, taken it into her heart, the edges of it like the blade of her sabre, sharp enough to carve, to slice. The way a scar changes a face. Never the same. As though a ship had sunk in the black ocean of some distant world. Very quickly the water would
heal all traces of its passage below. But the map of the ocean bed would be forever altered. Its sacrosanctity surrendered.

And the knowledge of that surrender, coming from the woman who never surrenders, frightens Miles far more than death in one of Bradley’s camps.

“Lieutenant-Colonel,” she begins, her voice low, “may we discuss this in private, please? There is an auxiliary office here. We shan’t be disturbed.”

Behind the soldier’s eyes, Miles sees his mind drift to dark places, to memories of indulging such thoughts in his own small, private hours. His hands are disgusting, Miles realises. His cuticles are black. There is dried blood under the nail beds.

Miles opens his mouth, and the glare of pure hatred Olivier Mira Armstrong gives him is almost enough to make him weep.

No, he thinks, desperately. No.

“No,” Miles mouthed the word but no sound came out. He thought he felt an arm falling across his chest, a grip like iron, like ice, pulling him flush against someone's chest…

“That can be arranged, General,” says the Lieutenant-Colonel. His eyes are the colour of fog, slate-grey and brittle, like calcified stone.

The sound of the door to the inner office, the sound of its closing, is like an ending. Like truth.

He does not hear their entanglements.

Miles feels suddenly tired beyond any tiredness he has ever felt before: insubstantial, as though he will come apart at any moment and be blown away. The soft, cool surface of the floor looks so inviting. Perhaps he can lie down a while…

The Major heard shouting from a distance, the voice plummy as the sound dropped like dead weight in the temple’s dusty air. There was a blinding flash of light in his peripheries before the Muhaddith, his cheeks alarmingly pale with the strain, red eyes boiling, turned and roared. His grip on Miles’s arm was enough to pull tendons out of alignment.

Then Miles was falling, falling forever until he hit the ground a moment later.

His head smacked against the stone floor, hard. He felt something hot stinging his eyes. It was so cold; he hadn’t noticed it before, but Miles began to shiver. It wasn't cold before, he remembered thinking, distantly, dimly. His body had gone numb, but he still felt that cold.

A brutal, scarred face, the skin ash-grey with exhaustion, loomed over Miles. The Major stared up into it, then, when his vision began to blur, blinked the tears from his eyes. But, once he started crying, he didn’t think he would ever be able to stop. Suddenly, Miles found himself floundering in his terror and confusion and, underneath it all, a deep, nauseating shame.

Olivier...

“My red-eyed brother,” managed Scar, voice haggard, his body trembling; he had risked his life to pull the Major free of the Door. “What did you see?”

Miles released a breath. Then he dragged it back, rasping, the sound like sobbing, the sound like laughter.
“Truth,” he murmured.

“I saw the Truth.”
“Why now, huh? I'm still young... ish. In the prime of my life. Probably could afford to cultivate some healthier living habits but, let's face it, who couldn't? Even the notary clerk thought it seemed awful pessimistic of me, like I'd somehow curse myself by anticipating the worst case scenario. She's got a point, but a life in the military teaches you to expect those scenarios, to prepare for them, to endure them. Forewarned is forearmed and all that.

"The lawyer himself said the recipients of this Will might find it a little strange, this recording. Macabre, I think was the word he used. A voice from beyond the grave. Most folks just do it pen-and-paper style, sealed in a neat little envelope and read by some stodgy executor with a nice suit and a crap haircut. But contracts of that sort are as thin and tearable as the stationary they're written on. Perhaps it's paranoid of me, and indeed, paranoia is one of those beasts with an insatiable appetite, but I've forged and redacted enough official documents in my time to know the paper says only what the reader wants it to say. This recording will never be altered, and no one will take away my voice.

"But... it is going to be difficult... and probably is very difficult listening to me now. Believe me, if there was something I could do to change that, I would. And I'm sorry.

"So, recording instead of paper, and now instead of later. Truth be told, I got the idea after the Promised Day. The ink slingers are calling it a thwarted coup against Führer Bradley, but my inside skinny says a few of the more perceptive folks are starting to point fingers. Hell, so long as they're pointed away from us, I don't care. The battle ended about a month ago. Feels like a lot longer. Feels like yesterday. A lot of good people were hurt, some of 'em my best friends. My comrades. Some are dead now. I will never see them again. Never hear their voices again, or drink with them, or play chess with them. Along with our hilariously expendable lives, we soldiers have to contend with the prospect of the echoes we leave behind, the ripples. The fact of the matter is that, as a military force, many will curse us, damn us, besmirch our names and our careers long after we are gone, conflating our government with our personal humanity. A legacy stained in blood.

"And then there are some of us who won't leave a legacy at all. Our names will get blotted from some ledger, and we will be forgotten. If there is nothing left to remember us by, then what's to say we ever existed in the first place? I used to fear being turned into a pariah. Now, more than anything, I fear being turned into a ghost.

"In that case, perhaps falling in love was a way of hedging my bets. A way of knowing that, at the very least, long after I'm gone and that green flag is covered in six feet of Central dirt, someone will remember me. And they might hate me for it, for being a coward, for being arrogant, for trying to put a giant wooden stake through both our careers. They might hate me for dying before I ever got the chance to tell them how smart... how honest they are. How rare, how beautiful, it is, just to be able to live in the same world as them. To be able to exist together, for some short, bright space of time, a little room of our own in this madhouse of a universe.

"Because though she may curse my name, it's still my name. Some memory of me. Some echo.

"Maybe it's even simpler than that. Maybe I loved her because I could do nothing else, even though..."
“… even though, I know she didn’t love me back.

“I don’t regret falling in love, gentlemen. I regret not being able to stop, and continuing to believe that someway, somehow, if I put every iota of my heart and soul into loving her, it would somehow be enough.

“Of course it wasn’t. It never will be. I regret not being able to see that, and knowing I never will.

“Love is difficult. Unrequited love, even more so.

“In matters of the heart, do what you must. But make sure there’s something of you left, at the end of it all. And to... well, you know who you are... do us both a favour and live well. Live long. If you don’t completely hate my guts and want to do something to remember me by, then have a happy life. And to the one who has your heart... take good care of it.

“I don’t want to talk about that anymore. I’ll lose my nerve, I think.

“My third regret... well, a regret we all share, to some extent, is Ishval.”

Continued in Act III: The Cenotaph
Act III Scene I: The Cenotaph

Fury Burn

It began to rain.

He only noticed when the wind shifted, raindrops pattering against the glass at his back like a spray of pebbles on a car windshield. The drops fell fat and fast and somewhere, he knew, Lieutenant Breda was walking back with Ross in tow, getting absolutely soaked.

Better him than me, thought Roy. He felt a twinge guilt for his callousness, but Breda was a big boy, and military-issue firearms were still known to fire properly in inclement weather. Unlike a certain alchemist and the pair of white gloves he kept about his person.

Roy grimaced. That was not to say he was not a big boy himself... or to imply that he was as... incontinent in the rain as his beloved subordinates seemed to delight in reminding him.

He simply appreciated the value of a dry office and a sunny day. Regardless, he decided he'd buy Breda a coffee upon the Lieutenant's return.

Swivelling in his chair, Roy looked out over Central. Every time he took stock of his surroundings, a part of him always anticipated seeing something new, some novel abrasion or corrosion on the otherwise unremarkable cityscape. And he was always disappointed. The view remained unchanged, if not slightly damper: the courtyard right below the office, the funicular tunnel, the moat, the streets arcing to some finite point in the distance like the rays of a pentagram. Roy thought the lawns and facades needed the sun, or at least a little light, to be beautiful. The mist blurred them, turning them runny grey, like watercolours bleeding across the edge of a canvas. It was very untidy, in a way.

Odd, thought Roy, that on such rainy days, the elements of his life — his view over the city, a testament to his status and station — were reduced to so many sad, quiet, colours, so much stillness, so many silences. The blearing yellow and black of the streetlights lined in neat rows below the high walls of Headquarters, aligned from corner to corner, very much like the soldiers guarding the entrance. The sharpness of car exhaust and woodsmoke cutting across the city's gritty stink. Eels of smoke slithering from townhouse chimneys, until the grey of the fires burning in their grates and the grey of the mist were indistinguishable from one another.

He realised, with a strange, mutant melancholy, that a part of him would miss the rain. Where they were going, there was only the dust and the dismantled sun.

Even now, he thought, with his desk reupholstered in shipment manifests and his team scattered on various Dairut errands, something in his world didn't seem real. Fractured, he thought, only the breaks were not clean, and the edges refused his attempts at realignment.

He was returning to Ishval.

For a time, after his eyesight had been restored, he had been deliberately slow in pushing for Reconstruction. Despite the fervour that had gripped him in hospital, for all the assurances of cooperation from Führer Grumman, Roy had felt a terrible guilt at the prospect of making any motion in a situation which ought to have demanded complete immobility on the part of the military. It felt... wrong, almost hypocritical, as though Amestris had fooled itself — as though he
had fooled himself — into thinking and behaving in a way that suggested they had higher standards, more noble beliefs, than was the case. Roy had shared his misgivings with Hawkeye — with Riza — as soon as his sight had been returned by the grace of Dr. Marcoh, when he was once again able to gauge her reaction, her thoughts betrayed by her extraordinary eyes. He confessed no small part of him wanted to leave Ishval to the Ishvalans... allow them the dignity to grieve in peace, to rebuild their devastated state without the Amestrian military machine breathing down their necks. Without entertaining the insult of permitting the Flame Alchemist to rebuild, when all he had ever done to those poor people was destroy.

Riza had recognised his hesitance for what it really was. She knew his fear. She shared it. And she had told him, in a moment of unwonted confession Roy knew no one save him would ever hear, that Ishval, to her, was a singularity burned into the backs of her eyes, its substance and structure at once familiar and alien. It had turned on her mind's horizon, exerting its own peculiar gravity, a tidal force urging her re-entry just as quickly as it pushed her into an exit trajectory. But, like any bodies caught in a decaying orbit, their collision was inevitable.

Roy had sighed at that. Collision, he had told Riza, his voice wry but his eyes anxious, sounded violent. Like something crashing to earth.

Her answer had been simple, a small, quiet yes. Because she knew that their return would break their hearts. That it would be painful.

But Riza was brave. She was strong, stronger than Roy could ever hope to be, because even when Roy tried to deflect the truth, she took it in hand, held it until her palms began to bleed.

“It's not about us," she had told him. And that was all he needed.

For five years, their battleground had been the debate chambers of Central City. Major Miles — a fine soldier even if he acted as Olivier Armstrong’s eyes and ears, Roy thought grudgingly — deployed to coordinate relief efforts in the East, while Roy knew he would be most effective in currying favour amongst the powerful political spheres, especially with the greener statesmen and carpetbaggers, those who still retained a flicker of good conscience. Führer Grumman's inauguration enabled the reinstatement of a legislative Congress to retake control of policy. Among their first acts had been the removal of Bradley loyalists from power and, under not inconsiderable pressure from Grumman himself, the enfranchisement of the Ishvalan people. Under Roy's direction, Eastern military and engineering coalitions set out to transform Ishval by setting up new free labor economies, with military police working with local religious authorities to protect the legal rights of Ishvalans, negotiate labor contracts, and set up schools and temples. Along with the refugees, thousands of Amestrians had traveled East as missionaries, teachers, businessmen, tradesmen, architects, researchers... including the team in Dairut working under the direction of one Professor Winifred Stokes. The public's support of Reconstruction had been overwhelming, far beyond anything Roy could have anticipated.

He knew the old prejudices still lingered. There were still occasional brazen acts of vandalism and destruction. But, as younger, fresher minds entered politics, and the tension from Bradley’s innumerable wars began to ease, and the scum and stagnation of the old administration disintegrated, Roy had dared to believe — had had the temerity, the nerve, to hope that things were beginning to change.

Now it's time to return, thought the Flame Alchemist as he watched over Central City. He caught his reflection in the glass, started at how gravely imperious he looked.

*Back to the land I destroyed.*
"Hello Mr. Dramatic."

Roy turned from the window, scowling. Lieutenant Havoc flashed him a lopsided grin.

"Don't you have absence reports to file?"

"You know, sir, I did, but the paperwork took Falman all of five minutes before he went to catch up with Sheska. By the time they started reciting Cretan cookbooks I figured I could murder a cigarette. They didn't even notice me go."

"So you've been arsing about for the past hour, have you?"

"Arsing about and nabbing sandwiches from the commissary."

"That's almost productive, coming from you, First Lieutenant," Roy deadpanned.

Havoc waggled his brows, fishing a cigarette from his breast pocket.

"I hope you don't intend to smoke that in here."

Something wicked flashed in his blue eyes. "Why, you 'fraid of Riza finding out?"

Roy glared at him. "I'm afraid of my office smelling like your shitty cigarettes, Havoc."

"Ah, come on, boss, it's no different from setting your rubbish on fire." Havoc swaggered over to Roy's desk, long and lanky in Amestrian blue, carrying himself with the energy of a green recruit. The General had to despise it otherwise he'd be jealous of it. Havoc smirked. "And I'll bet my Ma's fanciest china that most of the crap in the wastebasket is what's left of General Hakuro's notices... and a good deal of your paperwork, besides."

"I can't for the life of me," muttered Roy, "possibly imagine what you're talking about."

"Does Ri know?"

He made a sound intended to launch something clever and biting; it came out sounding like a grunt. Roy was a little leery of Havoc's air of familiarity with Hawkeye. They may have been gun chums, but she was still his superior officer. Jean ought to at least attempt to act his age, and his station, for once.

"Do you intend to tell her?" asked Roy cagily.

"Dunno. You got a light?"

Another scowl. Then, reaching into his desk drawer for a lighter — Havoc's had been confiscated, and Roy would not use his ignition gloves — he gestured the First Lieutenant over.

"Blackmailing a superior officer." He lit the cigarette hanging from Havoc's lip, who took a grateful drag. "I ought to have you in front of a board of review."

"Nah, boss, I'd charm all the ladies down in the court martial office. No one would get prosecuted ever again."

Roy snorted, not bothering to dignify it with a response.

Havoc pulled a chair over to the General's desk, straddling it. "Says the man standing in front of his window looking like someone from the cover of a shit romance novel."
"Havoc, you must really lack a sense of irony if you of all people are berating me about shit and romance."

The First Lieutenant seemed not to hear him. "I mean, do you ever get any thinking done standing there, or do you do it because you think it makes you look intimidating?"

"I am intimidating, thank you, Havoc."

"Uh huh. Speaking of intimidating... gotta ask you something. About Hawkeye."

Roy coughed. The motion clamped his teeth, so his nod was stiffer than he'd intended.

"Is she..."

He suddenly realised really didn't want to hear whatever Havoc had to say. "Jean—"

"Her friend, Rebecca... you know if she's single?"

The General's fists gradually unclenched, dropping to his sides like clock weights. Normally, he would have snapped at the sniper, or given him some biting critique of his — frankly, abysmal — track record in such matters, but Roy felt so strangely relieved by Havoc's familiar earmark of inaneness, the Flame Alchemist decided to humour him.

"How in the seven hells should I know?" Roy frowned. "Didn't you ask her for a drink a couple months ago?"

"That I did."

He thought back. "She gave you a black eye."

"That she did."

"And you still want to chance it?"

"Yup."

If it were any other woman, Roy still would have found it ridiculous. But Rebecca Catalina — Riza's friend for reasons that would forever remain a mystery to him, the two could not have been more different if they were born separate species — was a special sort of spiteful. She despised him, Riza had admitted, though not as reluctantly as Roy would have hoped. Had evidently called him, in no uncertain terms, a "womanising arse-kisser with eyes only for state supremacy and screwing."

Charming woman.

"It'll be different this time," said Havoc, as though completely ignorant to the fact his eye had looked like a plum for a week. Breda had nicknamed him shoe shiner.

"She'll break your kneecaps."

"That's not a no, sir."

Roy just stared at him. "One of these bright day," he said eventually, his eyes narrowing on his sandy-haired subordinate, "you're going to get written up on harassment charges. And let me assure you, it won't be me pulling your ass out of the ensuing dumpster fire."
Havoc smiled. "She won't say no."

"How—"

"She's in love with me."

"What?"

"Yup. Head over heels."

"You're delusional, Lieutenant."

"Nah... I'm a little slow on the uptake." He blew out a smoke ring. His words were oddly pensive, floating like the ash from the end of his cigarette. "But I'm not blind."

Roy had a number of rebuttals ready. Fortunately for them both, the phone began to ring.

"If it's Major Miles," muttered Mustang, his hand going to the receiver, "I'm going to ask him to tell his superior to grow a pair, quit using him as an intermediary, and call me herself."

"Your funeral, boss. She'll cut off your stones and use 'em as paperweights."

Shaking his head, Roy put the phone to his ear. "Mustang speaking."

"I trust you had no issue finding those missing train tickets, Brigadier-General?"

For a moment, Roy’s tongue stopped working. He frowned fiercely, black eyes glaring daggers at the phone. Across from him, Havoc stiffened, close enough to recognise the voice on the line and experienced enough to know it spelled trouble. Roy wasn’t exactly sure what Hakuro was on about, but he’d be damned if he was going to let the Major-General know that. When he spoke, he fought to maintain a modicum of his deference: “Yes, sir. No issues.”

“I only ask because a certain rotund First Lieutenant barged into my office this morning, interrupted an important meeting, and told me to... what was it?” Hakuro pretended to think very hard about it; Roy’s teeth clenched so hard they ached. “‘Take it up with his superior.’”

Roy sucked in a breath, trying to muster his patience. He found Hakuro had a habit of testing it to its very limit. The well was dangerously close to dying up.

When Falman had entered the General’s office that morning, Roy and the others had been overjoyed, eager to see one of their dearest comrades and friends after so many years. Breda had clapped the grey-haired man on the back; Havoc had hooped and hollered, making a general ruckus and no doubt disturbing everyone in their wing of Headquarters. Fuery had beamed, the smile looking too big for the Sergeant-Major’s round face. It was only at the sight of Falman’s fidgeting — not very unusual in of itself, the man seemed to have a perpetual nervous jitter — coupled with Hawkeye’s notable absence that Roy began to nurse a twinge of unease.

Where’s the Captain, Roy had asked.

Falman had stood to attention. General Hakuro needed to speak with her, sir, came the dutiful reply.

Thinking back on it, Roy had been more annoyed than concerned. It was all very well and good for Hakuro to be an all-round nuisance to him, but with last minute Dairut preparations underway and Captain Hawkeye serving in some capacity as the unofficial task manager, Mustang couldn’t afford
to play parlour games with Central’s resident hardarse. He’d sent Breda to fetch her and thought nothing more of it.

Until the First Lieutenant had returned, his Captain in tow, several minutes later. Riza had schooled her expression with her usual diligence and efficacy, but Heymans — no less disciplined but far less concerned with putting on airs for Roy’s sake — had turned to look at Mustang as they entered.

His face had been like thunder.

For the second time in as many days, Roy’s fingers itched to set the receiver on fire. “I apologise for my subordinate’s brusque manner, sir,” he managed; to his credit, his professionalism never faltered. “But we are in the middle of finalising certain last minute arrangements—”

“Cut the bullshit, Mustang!” snapped Hakuro. Roy’s patience was dwindling but the Major-General’s was gone. There was a small pause where Roy thought he heard his counterpart take a deep breath, as though marshalling his strength and preparing to bellow into the phone. But Hakuro let the air out slowly, with deliberate care. When he spoke again, his voice was like ice: glassy, smooth. Thin.

It made Roy’s hackles stand on end.

“General,” he said softly, “you made the rank of major early, I remember. Young. You may have to dust off some cobwebs, but I’m sure that alchemist’s mind of yours is up to the task. Tell me, do you remember anything of the Punitive Articles of the Uniform Code of Military Justice… specifically Article 134?”

The air seemed to arch beneath his sternum: Roy held his breath, palate tight. He felt sweat on the small of his back. Still, he found himself intensely, dangerously calm, trying to determine if the swelling in his chest hid uncomplicated anger or something far more vicious. “Yes, sir.” He kept the honorific address but he made no effort to mask his utter hatred of his superior.

“Can you recite it to me, please?”

“This is not detention at the Academy!”

“Now, please, Brigadier-General.”

Roy closed his eyes and grit out: “Article 134… prohibits personal relationships between officers and enlisted personnel that are unduly familiar and do not respect the differences in rank.”

Havoc’s eyes widened, and Roy’s gut twisted in shame. Mustang wondered if Hakuro could feel the fury inside him, pulsing under his hands, right through the phone. Like fire along a line of gunpowder.

“Go on, General.”

Damn him… vindictive son of a bitch. “Such relationships… are prejudicial to discipline and violative of service tradition, calling into question the officer’s objectivity, resulting in actual or an appearance of preferential treatment, which compromises the chain of command.” Roy’s knuckles were bone white. “Not that I don’t value the importance of reviewing the punitive articles, sir, but does any of this have a point?”

“You tell me, Mustang.”
Roy spared a glance at Havoc, but Jean had taken to staring into the middle distance, chewing absently on his cigarette. The First Lieutenant’s expression was unreadable, guarded. He had traded his characteristic smirk for a cool, solemn seriousness, as though he was wary of involving himself in a spat between superiors… or wary of broaching the delicate topic at the heart of the conversation.

“Fond of blondes, are you, General? There are plenty of pretty faces around Central, Roy… why pursue the only one forbidden to you?”

It was only years of military discipline — and an hoary Grumman in his ear reminding him that embittered enemies were blathery enemies — that kept Roy Mustang from tossing the phone across the room… or storming down to Hakuro’s office and torching the place, Hakuro and all.

“Major-General,” seethed Roy, his breath hissing between his teeth, “unless this line of interrogation has any immediate relevance to my work in Dairut, or unless you have an airtight case ready to present to the court martial office, then I must insist we shelve this chat for another time.”

Roy could hear Hakuro’s smug delight, knowing he’d succeeded in making Grumman’s golden boy squirm. “This could end you, Flame Alchemist. You ought to be more careful with your little trysts. You are the one roach I can’t seem to exterminate, but all I need, it seems, is time to find the proper poison.”

His voice was a near whisper: “You’ll be looking for a long time.”

“I’ll find it.”

“There is nothing to find… sir,” he added, entirely as an afterthought.

“No? Then promote her. Turn her loose. Prove me wrong.”

He did slam the phone down, then. The violent crack of receiver against cradle sent a jolt up his arm. He felt his pulse behind his eyes, radiating outward from an aching head. His mouth felt like gelatine, congealing to a solid mass around his tongue and teeth. He looked for Havoc and found the First Lieutenant drifting back towards his workstation, hands in his trouser pockets. He opened a drawer, parsed through the paperwork for the ashtray he’d squirrelled out from under Hawkeye’s nose.

“I’m sorry you had to hear that, Jean,” muttered Mustang. He dropped his head into his hands, fingers tangling in thick strands of black hair.

“S’nothing,” muttered Havoc. The two men didn’t say anything for a while, Roy cradling his aching head and Jean staring at his piles of paperwork but not really seeing them.

“Major-General Hakuro is concerned with the lack of staffing at several of our major installations,” said Roy wearily; he didn’t know why he felt the need to explain himself — it wasn’t as though Havoc hadn’t been floundering in the aftermath of the Promised Day right along with the rest of them. “Many of the generals implicated in the coup d’etat five years were the commanding officers of our western and southern garrisons. Despite the ceasefire with Aerugo, tensions are still running pretty high, and many of the brass have been badgering for the speedy promotion of a few exceptional officers… Captain Hawkeye included. Hakuro’s just a little more… persistent, than most.” Roy regarded the phone like one would a poisonous snake. He knew he was talking too much but he was damned by his own inertia: he couldn’t seem to stop, and Havoc had gone preternaturally quiet, as though willing him to continue: “The Major-General takes to military procedure with an almost martial efficiency. Hawkeye’s still on the career path, but she’s been very
vocal regarding her intentions to remain in Central. Her goals don’t align to Hakuro’s own, and he doesn’t like that.”

Havoc seemed to have taken a profound interest in the far wall. “Off the record, sir?” he asked quietly.

“Never stopped you before, Lieutenant.”

Jean’s gaze swung over to Roy. “Hakuro’s right. You’re so full of bullshit your eyes are turning brown.”

Mustang breathed through a frown. Despite his frustration, both with his superiors and himself, he was still sharp enough to know Havoc was trying to cheat him out of something, some nugget of understanding the First Lieutenant, despite his candidness, thought best to play close to the chest. Roy suspected he knew what it was, regardless, and he found the grim potential of it knotting in his throat.

“Jean—“

“I’m not stupid,” he snapped, stabbing out his cigarette. He looked as he did when the two of them had first confronted Lust, née Solaris, the Homunculus masquerading as hapless Havoc’s girlfriend. His pinched sullenness was almost affronted, hurt and insult etched into the lines of his face. “That bastard just had you recite three lines of the frat policy, and it’s not because he’s trying to needle you into giving Riza a promotion.”

“Captain Hawkeye,” corrected Mustang, irritably.

Jean snorted. “Fuck off, Roy.”

“I said off the record, Lieutenant, not off your head.” The General snapped, “Mind your language.”

Havoc’s eyes fixated on Roy, the blue flat and angry. “Tell me something: don’t you care about us enough to tell us the goddamn truth for once?”

“I know full well what you’re suggesting, Havoc,” he growled, “and not only is it hugely injurious, it’s illegal. I’ll tell you what I told Hakuro: there’s nothing to find.”

“You don’t think so, huh?”

“I know so.”

“And people call me the moron.”

“Havoc—“

“You’re not made of stone, Roy. Riza’s not made of stone.”

In the brief stillness, Roy’s annoyance died. What surged in its place was rage. But he could find no words to bellow. He fist ed his hands and let out a haggard breath: “Don’t you dare bring her into this.”

But Jean would not be deterred. “You’re both so human it’s tragic sometimes. Tragic because, despite everything, you’ll both go on being miserable and alone for the rest of your lives. I get it, boss: that’s part and parcel of gunning for the top. But that shouldn’t change anything.”

“Drop it. Now.”
"She deserves more from you, Roy."

"Jean!" snarled Roy, pressing his knuckles into the desktop until the bones popped.

"More than this nothing you've forced yourselves into! None of us want to lose her, sir. She's made herself necessary to us, to you. And I hate to break it to ya, but everyone knows it. Bradley saw it. That asshole with the gold filling saw it. Hakuro sees it. He's gonna try to tear you down, and you know damn well if you fall she's gonna be falling right along with you, two steps back but all the way down."

"Are you done?"

They fell silent, something bloated and ugly hanging in the air, a humid pressure, the press of a thunderstorm. Roy, who had risen from his chair, sat back down again. He watched Havoc sag at his desk, defeated and numbed by the jarring anger that radiated from the Flame Alchemist like the corona of a newborn star. Inside, Roy’s stomach clenched painfully. He turned and sorted Havoc’s words, the misshapen circumstances that had orchestrated to make those words as certain to Roy as his own existence. And he tried to reconcile his failure — to guard his subordinates, to guard his heart, to guard Riza — with the uncanny certainty of watching all his many self-deceptions slip away under Jean’s singularly unique brand of wisdom.

"Yeah," muttered Havoc, snatching at a form on his pile so violently, his fingers tore the paper. "I’m done."

"Done with what?"

Havoc turned towards the door. He went grey.

Captain Hawkeye strode into the office, Falman and Fuery trailing behind her. Kain bubbled excitedly about his fullerphones and portable telegraph equipment, Vato lending an ever-patient ear to his young counterpart even as he settled at his old workstation and began to fold the mission accoutrements. Hawkeye herself carried a narrow wooden crate, stalks of straw poking between the cracks — weapons, no doubt. She seemed far brighter, far more settled, than she had that morning, doting over the armaments with the patience and care of a painter over expensive acrylics.

Mustang locked his jaw, glaring at First Lieutenant Havoc. If Riza had overheard anything, Roy was going to personally ensure Jean lived just long enough to regret it.

"Done... uh..." Havoc rummaged around for something to say, then sighed, glumly, "done asking the General if I could smoke in the office, ma'am."

"So that's where you went," muttered Falman. "I thought you got lost in the stacks doing research."

"Research, huh? Your sense of humour hasn’t changed a tick, Bishop."

Hawkeye's mouth twisted in a frown. She made a soft sound that seemed to hover over her tongue. "If I see so much as an errant ashtray, Lieutenant Havoc, I'll have you disassembling and reassembling the Remington rifles until you're seeing rods and rust protectors in your sleep."

Roy couldn't help it; despite the blackness of his mood, he smiled, a laugh made without opening his lips.

Havoc cast his eyes downward. Instead of brushing off her warning with sarcasm, he pretended to be deeply absorbed in his work. A cloud, not unlike his cigarette smoke, seemed to hang over his head, and Riza, ever diligent, was quick to notice. "Yes, ma'am," he muttered sullenly.
Roy's smile vanished as Hawkeye looked between them both, eyes narrowed shrewdly, her hair, shorn short, glinting like cornsilk as she turned her head.

The General knew she could sense the tension in the room, saturating the air like oxygen from a gas leak, as though one tiny spark was liable to set the whole place on fire. Roy also knew he could try to hide behind one of his porcelain faces, smug and sure, some vain attempt at steering his adjutant in the wrong direction. He knew he could commend himself to what he wanted her to see, to an illusion of normality.

But she was Riza... and she could recognise his deceptions as easily as he could craft them. So he gave her a small, sad smile, his apologies left unspoken, as they so often were, a gaze that begged her forbearance in allowing him his secrets. Her unbearably astute amber eyes stayed fixed on him, and Roy knew she wrestled with her own hesitance, but her hands did not falter on the weapons, and her jaw did not clench in frustration.

She merely sighed through the nose, something akin to regret in the sound, before she ignored Roy and Havoc both to finalise the armament manifest.

“What are those, Lieutenant Falman?” asked Fuery, setting aside a potentiometer as Vato held up a bulky item of tawny camouflage, about the size and shape of Vato himself. The texture reminded Roy of a sack of potatoes, and he doubted the cut of it would be any more flattering.

“Sand suit,” said Riza simply. “On loan from the University.”

Havoc, interest piqued, peered over at Falman. For all the man’s faults, Jean was very good at setting aside his personal concerns for the sake of the team. “Why the heck do they look like straw scarecrows sans straw?”

The Second Lieutenant explained: “They function as pieces of personal protective equipment, an impermeable whole-body garment like a hazardous materials suit. The Ishvalan prefecture is in the midst of its annual drought. Coupled with high winds and the passage of a dry cold front — a convective instability resulting from cooler air riding over heated ground — we run a very high chance of encountering sandstorms.”

“So these suits are intended as protection,” finished Fuery. He hesitated for a moment, then said, his gaze distant: “We had a dust-storm over the trenches, once. It felt like my face was being scoured off. Scratched my glasses, too.”

“The storms of Ishval can be even more vicious,” said Riza quietly, casting her mind back. "Most of my company used to anticipate them: for all their ferocity, sandstorms meant ceasefire."

Fuery nodded. "It was the same on the southern front. A little breather, even if you couldn't actually breathe because, you know... sand."

“Appropriately, the word for such a phenomenon in the local tongue is alghadab,” supplied Falman. Roy’s eyebrows arched; he had forgotten Vato was fluent in Ishvalan. “The fury burn.”

Havoc held up one of the costumes. “Whole-body garment, huh?” He grunted; his expression turned wistful. “I think I knew a girl who was into this sorta thing…”

“Too much information, Lieutenant,” murmured Hawkeye.

Roy was fairly certain he had known that particular girl, too, but was in no immediate hurry of antagonising his subordinate even further.
Fuery looked out the window, his face pinched in worry. After a brief flash of magnesium-white, the thunder cracked, the sound rattling the windows. “Hey, I sure hope Breda and Ross aren't getting caught in that.”

“If I were them, I’d enjoy it,” said Falman drily. “There will be very little rain where we’re going.”

“The wrong species of storm, sir,” agreed Fuery.

Roy looked over at Riza. She did not sense his attention consumed with her work and, he suspected, making a concerted effort to ignore him. Her expression was subtle, but the tiny lines in the corners of her mouth seemed anxious, the smooth plane of her brow furrowed, her eyes distant, a little lost. The face of one unsettled.

Yes, Roy affirmed to himself, the rain drumming in his ears and his argument with Jean, his confrontation with Hakuro, hammering incessantly inside his head.

There are some storms, he thought, turning to look back at the city beneath the grey, mangled sky, that are far harder to escape.
Act III Scene II: The Cenotaph

Chapter Notes

If Hoopy can shoehorn physics into their stories, Hoopy will shoehorn physics into their stories.

The Man God Forgot

I want to die.

Ed pressed his forehead to the window, staring vacantly at the countryside. The glass was warm from the high, hot sun. Dirt and grit left streaks across its surface. The texture against his skin was abrasive, like a square of sandpaper. As he watched, the pale outcroppings of rock and sand began to blur together. To Ed, the etchings of the landscape looked vaguely morbid, like bleached white bones, the vertebrae in the spine of the world.

The train shuddered as the tracks curved, cutting through the crest of a wide anticline, causing Ed to bump his head against the glass. The perfect flatness of the basin was interrupted only by pearly buttes and spires rising hundreds of feet into the air. The desert was prodigiously barren; as Ed watched the rises fly by, he saw few trees, save the occasional spindly juniper. The only plants were scrubby tufts of cliffrose and rabbitbrush, clinging to life by the side of the tracks.

"This region is largely siltstone, not sandstone," said his travelling companion without introduction, like Ed was only catching the tailing end of an internal conversation. He grunted a noncommittal acknowledgement.

The scenery's stubborn monotony bored Ed, and in any case, he was too preoccupied to lose himself in the landscape: more immediate worries kept wrenching him back to the present, demanding his attention. His right arm ached and he fidgeted constantly. He was no stranger to long rides — in fact, there had been a period of his life where he seemed to spend more time on a train than off it — but the events of recent days refused to let him settle. Ed fought the urge to pace the empty cars like an agitated panther.

Major Miké, on the other hand, hadn't budged for several hours. She kept her nose pressed to the window like a kid peering in a candy shop. Every now and again she voiced her professional annotations, sharing geological tidbits about buttes and tors and other formations Ed didn't bother to commit to memory.

"Common mistake people make about the Ishvalan prefecture, Master Elric," she went on, more to her reflection in the window’s surface than to him. "The original surveys of the area attributed the composition to sandstone. You can discern the difference in the stratification patterns."

"Oh?" muttered Ed, feigning interest, his chin smushed in his hand. Miké didn't seem to notice his complete lack of enthusiasm.

"Yes indeed." Her deep voice was as gritty and rough as the detritus on the window. "You see, siltstone lacks the fissility and laminations which are typical of sandstone. As you can tell by our
surroundings, the stratified layers are not particularly pronounced and the superposition of sediment seems to have weathered at more oblique angles."

Ed arched an eyebrow. Instead of peering out the window, he looked over at the Major. Sofia Bel Miké sat across from him, draped casually across the seat, reams of field notes and travel logs — Ed spied a few hastily-scribbled transmutations circles — spilling out of her briefcase. With her left hand, Sofia sketched the Ishvalan landscape in a small leather notebook. With her right, she kept scrubbing the grime from the window, trying to keep her view unobscured. She didn't look down as her pencil danced across the paper, nor did the careful lines of the drawing waver as the train passed over ruts in the track.

Dressed in civvies, she had traded the heavy, shapeless Amestrian blues for a collared shirt and loose cotton trousers over her combat boots. She kept her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail; two thin strands of black had come loose, falling over her forehead like antennae.

Ed shook his head; the likeness was uncanny.

Though, he supposed it could be worse.

She could be wearing white.

_I want to die._

Ed hadn’t yet decided what to make of her, the kin of one of the most notorious killers in Amestrian history, the sister of a man who had very nearly cut the Fullmetal Alchemist’s charmed life abruptly short. Ed’s abdominal muscles clenched a bit at the thought. Sofia’s mild manner and good humour had for a time seemed so out of character for one of Kimblee’s ilk that Ed had entertained the possibility she had been lying to him, or the kinship was far more distant than he’d been lead to believe. But her face, _his_ face, was telling. Even on the train, fixated on her work, there was an electricity in Sofia’s eyes, a volatile spark like lightning in a Tesla Coil, that Ed could only describe as a kind of obsessive intensity.

A contradiction, he decided. It made a strange sort of sense. Sofia Kimblee, a state alchemist who loved rocks more than research. A genius without her brother’s trappings of strident, blasphemous brilliance. A woman who had everything, and wanted anything but. A soul itching for independence from and yet desperate for acceptance of her familial ties.

Edward caught Sophia staring at him. Being held under the blue-purple light in the Major’s eyes grew very uncomfortable very quickly. Ed wilted under her glare; it was irrational, perhaps paranoid of him, but for a moment he suspected she knew exactly what he was thinking.

_I want to die._

He grimaced, squeezing his eyes shut.

“A cen for them, Master Elric?” Major Miké asked gravely, continuing her sketch.

Ed said nothing for a while, his mind elsewhere…

"Führer Grumman, who is this man?" asked Mrs. Bradley, her shrill voice quaking. She had gone as white as a sheet and her words were jagged and bright, like broken glass. "Who is controlling my son?"

“We aren’t controlling him,” corrected Selim patiently. “He’s just resting, for the time being.”
Grumman's eyes glinted behind his glasses, but he shook his head in angry denial. "Someone we long believed dead, Mrs. Bradley. In fact, I'm not entirely convinced it's him speaking now. The Homunculus responsible for the murder of Brigadier-General Hughes nearly six years ago had a penchant for disguises. This could very well be another one of their tricks."

"Führer, eh?" Selim Bradley considered Grumman, rolling his blue-purple eyes towards the old man with leisurely disinterest. From the boy's mouth came that calm, never-hurried, and yet ostensibly dangerous voice Ed would have recognised in an instant: the last time he had heard it, he'd been impaled on a piece of pipe. "You don't seem to have suffered considerably in the wake of the Promised Day. In fact, if your epaulettes are any indication, I'd venture to say the circumstances worked rather more in your favour than against it. How deliciously devious of you, Grumman, well done. I didn't think you had it in you."

Grumman's moustache bristled, but he didn't give the creature the satisfaction of a response.

There was a long silence while Edward wrestled with the astounding, terrifying implications. "I saw you," he murmured; his mouth tasted of ash. "I watched you fall."

Selim cocked his head in Ed's direction. He nodded thoughtfully. "Your arm..." mused the boy. "So... you succeeded after all, Edward Elric. Succeeded in restoring your original bodies. I trust young Alphonse is off somewhere taking in the fresh air, in full possession of all necessary anatomical integrants. Tell me: what did you give up? Must have been something terribly important..." Abruptly, Selim's smirk lengthened into thin-lipped sneer, a crescent carved into his face. "Was it Miss Rockbell? The soul of the woman you love for the body of your precious brother?"

The edges of Edward's vision reddened in anger. "Shut up!" he snarled. He jabbed a finger at Selim, who looked not in the least bit bothered by the outburst. "I saw you, Kimblee! I saw you consumed by the souls in Pride's Stone! You didn't even put up a fight!"

Selim rested his fists on his hips. "Well, of course I didn't.\" He harrumphed. "Did you think I would be afraid of dying, Edward Elric? Did you think I would rage against it, tremble in fear of my immortal soul? I would have thought you knew me better than that. While I admit death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a person, I am not so pedestrian that I fear it as if it is the greatest of evils."

Grumman rounded on the two alchemists. "How do we know that thing is really Solf J. Kimblee?" he growled.

"It's him all right."

Ed looked meaningfully at Major Miké. "How do you know?"

"Because he just quoted Socrates. It's him."

"But what has he done with my son?" demanded Mrs. Bradley, straining against Sofia's firm hand on her shoulder.

Selim jerked his head towards her. "The whelp's foster mother is the only one asking any intelligent questions. However, for the sake of expediency and to put your mind at ease, madam, we've not harmed your son. We're merely borrowing him."

Sofia made a small noise of consideration. "That's the second time you've referred to yourself as "we", Solf. You were many things, but so far as I can remember, schizophrenic was not one of
“Schizophrenia,” Selim mused. “An interesting choice of words. The short explanation being of course, that it’s not just me in here.”

Ed’s stomach churned. “What do you mean... you’re not the only one in there...”

Selim’s round face wore malice poorly, but the manic light in the boy’s eyes was entirely Kimblee’s. “I would have thought you of all people would understand, Fullmetal Alchemist.

“It’s a Truth you already know, after all.”

"I hope you're not having any misgivings about this," said Sofia, eyebrows quirking. "We're only two hours out from our destination, and I doubt Grumman will be in any hurry to send another train." She glanced out the window: the countryside had grown hazy, the grains of siltstone hovering in the air. “And it looks as though we’re due for a rather nasty sandstorm. In a few more minutes we won't be able to see more than two feet from the sides of the train.”

Ed shook his head, knocking his bangs free of his eyes. "Just thinking."

"About Selim?"

"Yeah. And... other things."

The Major inclined her head in understanding. "It's so desperately depressing, watching the innocent suffer for sins they did not themselves commit. While young Mr. Bradley is an exceptional case, it's unfortunate he's a party to all this."

Ed snorted.

"That somehow sounded a wee bit skeptical, Master Elric."

Sofia Bel Miké had an astonishingly robust appetite for understatement. "You never saw him before, when he..." Ed trailed off, his mood suddenly as dark as the toothy, leering shadows of his memories.

"When he was Pride, the Homunculus," finished the Major.

He nodded mutely.

Sofia grew ruminative for a moment, setting her notebook aside. "Unlike yourself and the illustrious General Mustang — and most everyone else in the military these days, it seems — I have never encountered the Homunculi. But I have encountered my fair share of monsters. I have met the devil, Master Elric. And I do not think that boy is a devil."

"Just an empty shell playing host to devils," murmured Ed. "Kimblee and the rest of... them." He shuddered.

"I think you're letting your memories of a certain state alchemist cloud your judgement."

Ed scowled but said nothing, steeping in the annoyance distilled from the journey's boredom and his own disquiet.

Sofia went on: "They're not monsters, Master Elric. In life, perhaps they were, but in death, they're just lost souls. Waywards. Wanderers. You do not bastardise the lost by conflating their return with
the terror of the Homunculi, or by stuffing their souls into the head of a five-year-old boy and calling him a monster. This rogue Gate Solf spoke of may enable them, but it does not resurrect them."

*I want to die.*

The Fullmetal Alchemist closed his eyes.

"The Truth..." Ed breathed.

"The truth about what?" pressed the Führer. Of course, Ed thought: Grumman wouldn't know...

"It's not just Solf J. Kimblee in here, Edward Elric," said Selim; his pale face became a death mask around bright, perfect teeth. "We're all in here."

Ed twisted his lips back quickly and decided he had exhausted his politeness. "Knock it off with the bullshit, Kimblee! What the hell is going on?"

"We are Everyone. Pride's Stone was remarkably versatile, wouldn't you agree? While only a few of us retain a shred of self-identity, we are all here, trapped in Selim Bradley's nightmares. Amestrians, Ishvalans, Aerugonians, Drachmans, Cretans, Xingese, Xerxians, gypsies, peasants, rich men, poor men, adults, children, soldiers, artists, murderers, monks, the good and the bad, the sinful and the righteous..." Selim stabbed his finger into his temple. "All here. All scratching at the inside of this little head.

"Like a thousand grabbing hands, desperate to be free."

Ed screwed his eyes shut. Something pulsed behind his eyelids, a strobing light, almost violent as it flashed between blazing, supernova brightness and complete darkness. The memory grabbed him with its writhing tendrils, like synapses, snatching at his soul. He remembered the fear, the helplessness as he tried cover his face but found to his slow, sedate horror that his body was gone, that he had no eyes to cover, nor hands to cover them with. For a moment, he remembered the lurch of vertigo, like he was standing at the mouth of a very deep cave, and could glimpse the shores of another world, blinding white and utterly featureless, though a Gate at the crux of the infinite distance, the space about the size and shape of a palmed coin.

And Ed remembered clutching desperately for some defined edge, some precipice, amidst the corrupted simulacra. For a moment, he wasn't standing in the Bradley's foyer. He was voiceless and bodiless again, floundering in visions he didn't understand, in knowledge too dangerous and truths too huge for any mortal to fully understand.

"You've come from It, haven't you?" asked Ed. He couldn't control the tremor in his voice or the shaking of his hands. "You've come from the Realm of Truth."

"Oh dear," muttered Sofia.

Grumman said nothing, biding his time. Watching. Waiting. For all the old man's anger, the seriousness of the situation, which seemed to cushion their heads like cotton, threatening to smother them, kept the Führer from asserting his presence. Mrs. Bradley had given in to sobbing quietly, wary of the creature that had replaced her child, and horrified beyond sense that she was never going to see him again.

"For the non-alchemists in the room," said Kimblee with Selim's voice, arrogant despite the four furious pairs of eyes burning holes into his forehead, "the Truth serves as something of a Monadic
embodiment of the universe, after a fashion. It is the consciousnesses and consciences of all living beings. Consequently, it's also a notorious pedant, as I'm sure the eminent Elric brothers would be wont to agree. It oversees and regulates all alchemic exchanges... and punishes them accordingly, of course." Selim closed his eyes, and intoned: "'Naked came I out of the world's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Truth gave, and the Truth hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Truth.'

"It's also worth mentioning that all living things possess their own Gate of Truth, a means by which those worthy of or cursed with the privilege can glimpse Truth... or, rather, their own cognitive perceptions of the actual Truth that their limited three dimensional intelligences make up in a vain attempt to comprehend that which does well to defy comprehension."

"So that's where you come from, eh?" muttered Grumman, grey eyes narrowing shrewdly. "You've traveled through this Gate from somewhere else... God's domain, if you will, where no mortals are meant to tread."

"It's not that simple," said Ed. Selim regarded him coolly. "Only those alchemists who attempt Human Transmutation are summoned through the Gate by the transmutation's rebound. They're confronted briefly by the being known as Truth before the Gate itself pulls them back through its doors. Inside, it's..." Ed swallowed, the staccato flashes of light and darkness pulsing in his peripheries, "like a cascade of pure knowledge, about the world, the universe, alchemy and, well... everything, forced into the alchemist's mind as they begin to break down both physically and mentally, becoming part of the flow." He stared hard into Selim's eyes, where Kimblee resided.

"The realm of God and Truth, as you put it, Führer sir..." Ed said, his voice a near whisper, "no one really knows what's there, hidden in the cascade. No one knows who resides in the black spaces behind the world. Maybe it's where the alchemists who succumb entirely to the rebound go. Maybe it's where Father came from, and where he ultimately returned. Maybe it's where we go when we die, and the creatures in Selim's head are telling the truth. But if Kimblee and the others did come back through the Gate, back into our reality," Ed tried to do the calculations in his head, but gave up, dwarfed by the sheer enormity of the task, "then the alchemical toll must have been enormous."

"There was no toll," said Selim. "No alchemy is responsible for this. Just happenstance."

"What?!"

"There... was... no... toll."

"There has to be a toll," murmured Ed, raking his fingers through his bangs. He thought he pulled out some strands of hair but he didn't care. "It violates the equivalent exchange principle, everything I know about alchemy..."

"If you don't mind my saying, Master Elric," interrupted Sofia, "before you give yourself too much of a headache, it seems to me your little quandary has less to do with alchemy and rather more to do with physics."

"How do you figure that?"

"Hear me out: when you were twelve, you earned your state alchemist's certification. When my brother was twelve, he graduated university with a degree in physics." She chuckled. "When I was twelve, I was writing in my diary and thinking about Eva Blackwell from my form, but nevermind. My point is, Solf once wrote a rather stunning paper about the possibility of worlds existing..."
parallel to ours, a sort of additional coordinate axis system beyond the three spatial axes with which we are familiar. According to his theory, by proposing travel along these extra axes, which are not normally perceptible, the traveler can reach worlds that are otherwise unreachable and invisible, much like the realm beyond the Gate of Truth."

Ed was familiar with the concept, though, due to his intimate and rather harrowing personal experience, favoured his own expertise on the subject. "That's just dressing up alchemical science as physical science. It doesn't explain how beings residing in this parallel world managed to travel to ours without the use of alchemy."

"Ah, the wily little sociopath thought of that as well. He suggested the Realm of Truth and the Realm of Earth, our world, exist side by side like parallel pressure systems. The Gates themselves function as the universe's plug doors, and, at the risk of sounding trite, keep our world from suffering spatial-temporal hypoxia by keeping us on our side and Truth on His."

"Thus regulating the pressure difference on the two sides of the Gate," murmured Ed. "The higher pressure on one side forces the doorway into its socket, making a good seal and preventing it from being opened until the pressure is released... by something like an attempt at human transmutation." He slumped back in his seat. He realised, with a start, he could feel the hammer blows of his heart right through his clothes. His skin had gone clammy and cold. "But in that case, the alchemy itself might not be the catalyst. The Gate, at least, a Gate... it might be a natural phenomenon."

I want to die.

"In terms you can understand, Fullmetal Alchemist," Ed bristled as Kimblee kicked against his vanity, "someone has uncovered a plughole in the dermis of reality, a natural conduit like a calcium channel. The channel is depressurised, and things are beginning to leak through. Including us."

"And why you?" asked Grumman, stepping beside Edward. "If there are truly as many souls accompanying you as you so claim, then why speak with a single man's voice? And why communicate using the body of Selim?"

The boy sneered. "Not bad, Führer-President. You're sharper than you let on."

"Answer me."

"Very well, very well. Yes, we are speaking with Solf J. Kimblee's voice because he is, for all intents and purposes, the only one of us able to retain even an iota of his sanity in the tumult. In fact," blue-purple eyes glittered, and Kimblee trilled gleefully, "before I gave myself over to my beautiful alchemy, my scholarly concerns rested in the field of physics. Incidentally, I find all of this rather fascinating."

"I am not in the least bit surprised," said Sofia. Nothing in her words suggested humour.

"Regarding your second question, that's easily understood through the Law of Natural Providence. All Doors open inward, and all objects or materials of a particular substance can be transmuted into other objects with the same properties of that initial material. While Selim's Stone core was destroyed, courtesy of young Mr. Elric here, the body comes from Father. We are drawn to his shell."

"He is not a shell!" cried Mrs. Bradley. Sofia murmured some nonsense words of calm, trying to
keep the woman settled. "He has a life! He has memories and dreams!"

Selim chortled. "Don't we all, Madam Bradley?"

"Then am I to understand it that you're here fulfilling some sort of diplomatic function?" queried Grumman. "You referred to yourselves as Gate Dwellers... are you operating in an ambassadorial capacity on behalf of this Truth of yours?"

Selim forced the air out through his nose. His laughter had a dozen sharp edges to it, a bright snarl under the the grey light of the foyer. Motion rearranged the shadows on the creature's face as Selim grinned toothily.

"Oh, nothing so bureaucratic, Führer."

Selim turned to face Edward, boring into him with such unwonted intensity it made Ed weak at the knees. His automail joints began to clank together as his legs trembled. Suddenly, the whole place, the whole house and its assembled company, seemed a pointless and ugly mistake, with no relation to what Ed understood about the world, about alchemy. The urge to return to Resembool, to clutch Winry to him and never let her go, was a slow-burning ache in his chest.

"My request is simple, though its realisation may take a bit of doing.

"You see... I want to die."

"I've never been to the Xerxian ruins," confessed Major Miké. "In fact, I've never been further East than Central City. My family are Northerners. We crisp like bacon in the sun."

Ed watched the sandstorm roll over the desert. Sofia had been right; he was hard pressed to distinguish the edge of the track through the dust. "Hopefully we won't be out here long enough to work on your tan, Major," he muttered.

"I heartily agree, Master Elric. Although I must ask... why Xerxes? Even Grumman seemed a little taken aback when you suggested we go East."

"Something Hohenheim said to me, once... regarding the creature the Homunculi called Father. Evidently, using Hohenheim's blood, an ancient Xerxian alchemist managed to contain a small portion of the knowledge and life of the Gate within a flask, creating a being capable of existing in the physical realm. Seems to me, if this alchemist used a naturally-occurring portal to distil the first Homunculus, then Xerxes is as good a place as any to start." Ed tried not to sound like he was trying to convince himself. "Maybe, after so many years, this ancient Gate has reopened, and things are starting to find their way out."

Rather than question Ed's reasoning, Sofia fixated on a single name: "Hohenheim?"

"My..." Edward bit the words out, like he had sand in his mouth, "my father."

"Oh! I didn't know you had a father."

"He's dead."

Major Miké had the good grace to look mortified. "My apologies, Master Elric. That was tactless of me."

Ed shrugged. "S'nothing. He lived a good, long life. He was happy, in the end."
"That is some small consolation, I suppose."

Ed looked up at Sofia through his eyebrows, curious despite himself. Old habits... "Do you have any family, Major?"

"You mean aside from the disembodied soul slash former serial murderer currently sending us on an assisted suicide mission?"

"Uh... yeah."

A pause. There was something heavy in Sofia's eyes, Ed realised. Something in the tilt of her head, a kind of quiet defiance that reminded him abruptly of a certain blonde woman back in Central City. Major Miké was nearly two decades older than Riza Hawkeye, but she wore the same expression, a kind of sadness akin to a resignation in everything she said and did, as though she had suffered tragedy equal to Ed's own.

"I never knew my father," she said simply. "Solf, I think, figured out who it was, but he never told me, the little sadist. Liked to hang it over my head. After a time, I refused to give him the satisfaction and just stopped asking. My mum died quite young, unfortunately."

Ed looked at his hands. "So did mine. The plague, right before the Civil War broke out."

Sofia sounded delicate, but frighteningly lucid, like cut-crystal, riddled with cracks: "Mine drowned herself in the kitchen sink."

Nausea assailed him with violent force. Ed met her eyes, and her tired, dark irises reminded him of galaxies where all the stars were going out.

"She heard about the massacre in Ishval. She heard about the Crimson Alchemist. And it..." Major Miké blinked, "it was too much for her. After I found her, well... I did what I had to do. Then I changed my name and decided to dig up dirt in Creta for the rest of my days."

Ed didn't realise he had been digging his nails into his palm until his fingers began to cramp. He unclenched his fists, looking at the little red crescents carved into his skin. "I..." he mouthed; he found he couldn't hold on to the words. They kept slipping away like sand between his fingers...

"Never you mind, Master Elric. We had best focus on closing that Gate."

He hung his head. "If we even can close it... or if there's even a Gate to close."

"You will figure something out."

"You sound so certain."

"I think I am, rather."

"You barely know me. We met yesterday."

"I know your type. You will find a way."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because you're an alchemist, Edward Elric."

"Not anymore," he murmured, the words bitter.
“Alchemy’s not a profession, my boy,” said Sofia gently. “You were an alchemist long before Roy Mustang brought you to Central and Führer Bradley named you Fullmetal. It’s who you are. You can no more abandon alchemy than an albatross can abandon his nest. No matter how far out to sea we are flung, we will always strive to find our way back to land. To us, alchemy is coming home.”

“But I can’t—”

“Transmute?” She chuckled lowly. “Transmutation is a tool. If I lose my pick, do I cease to become a geologist? If your dearest Winry looses her wrench, does she cease to become an automail engineer? No, Master Elric: alchemists are not soldiers or scientists; we are merely creatures born abnormally, desperately sensitive.”

Ed thought of Shou Tucker. He thought of Isaac McDougall and Grace Lambert Rosin. He thought of the Crimson Alchemist. “Major, so many us are monsters just masquerading as human beings. We think because we can alter the state of matter we have the power of God and the right to play God in the lives of other people. Too many are dead because of alchemy.” Your mother, for one, thought Ed, but didn’t say aloud.

“You’re thinking of Solf again,” she noted shrewdly.

“And others,” he said. “None of them cared about anyone or anything except themselves. They valued the principles of alchemy over the lives those same principles governed. How can you call such people sensitive?”

“You value human life as your ideal, Edward. Your sensitivity rests in your humanity, in your compassion. I suppose my brother just valued something else.”

“Blowing shit up?”

“Beauty,” said the Major enigmatically. “An aesthetic ideal. A sublimity we could spend years searching for and still never truly understand as he did.”

Ed narrowed his eyes skeptically.

Sofia rested her chin between her thumb and forefinger, gazing out the train window at the storm, the whirls of dust an angry brown like something decaying, mouldering. “We perceive the world as it is and envision the world as it ought to be and spend our entire lives trying to reconcile the two. By some strange, unknown, inward urgency, we wrestle with the burden of never really feeling alive unless we are striving for that ultimate understanding. And in our search, a touch becomes a blow, a sound a scream, a misfortune is a tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, our friends are our lovers, and our lovers are gods. Truth is everything, and failure is death. Alchemists are cruelly delicate in such respects; we feel too much and that sensitivity seeks to destroy us. Coupled with our overwhelming urge to always construct, to discover, to invent, to know — without the constant creation granted providence by our alchemy, our very breath is ripped out of us.”

I want to die.

Ed heaved a sigh, gripped the back of his neck with both hands.

“I want to die.”

Sofia started. Even Grumman looked surprised, his eyebrows rising in a slow arch.

“That doesn’t sound like the Kimblee I know,” said Ed cautiously; he couldn’t help but wonder if
the silver-tongued alchemist was trying to play him for a fool. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“The Kimblee you knew,” Selim corrected. He let out a long, ragged breath, like wind through shredded shutters. Mrs. Bradley had said Selim had been plagued by nightmares, the voices of the Gate Dwellers coming to call in the wee hours of the morning. The child seemed worn at the edges, frayed, as though he’d been stretched in too many directions at once. He looked as though he hadn’t had a bite to eat in days. Ed noted the heavy rings under the boy’s eyes, the unhealthy narrowness of his chest and a slouch in his spine. His shoulders jutted sharply. A few strands of lank black hair were plastered to his forehead; his skin was pale and clammy, feverish. Even his neat school uniform looked wrinkled, like he had taken to sleeping in it.

Or, Ed thought gloomily, not sleeping at all.

“I’m tired, Edward Elric, and I’m bored,” said the Shade quietly. Its voice lacked even Kimblee’s loquacious lustre. “I am quite ready to be shut of this world.”

Major Miké steeled herself, venturing: “I imagine you would appreciate the chance to face death with some dignity.”

“Dignity has nothing to do with it. I simply can’t abide a job half-finished. It’s lazy. You understand, of course.”

“No,” murmured Sofia, “no I don’t. I don’t think I will ever understand you, Solf. Not the way you are.”

“No one ever did, Sister Mine, that’s why I am, and always have been, alone. And I cherish the solitude. I’m sick to the teeth of languishing in this purgatory with millions of other gibbering nitwits. I had quite enough of that in my military days, thank you very much.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way,” insisted Ed, “you can—”

Selim scoffed, “Change? Forsake? Repent? Ha! I have no regrets, no sorrows, and no remorse for myself.” Faced with the heavy silence, he sighed. “Look at you all,” he muttered darkly. Ed could almost imagine a man in a white suit, crossing his arms, leaning back in his chair as he studied them all with the objective detachment of a man at a microscope.

“Why do you hesitate?” asked Kimblee, genuinely bemused. “I am abhorrent to you. Even in this state I stand as a testament to something primordially discomforting. It’s almost peremptory to be disgusted by one such as me. And yet... you hesitate. Do you concern yourselves with the morality of the act? You swore never to take life, Edward Elric, but closing the Gate that enabled my return will keep many other nasty things from pouring forth into your world. Is that not noble? I, personally, have never favoured philosophies that necessitate such sharp demarcations between what is considered good and what is considered evil. That separation is self-deception. The two are never disconnected. One cannot exist without the other. So long as I am acting free of any petty moral imperative, I feel I am doing what is necessary. But you, Edward Elric — wrapped up in judgments, always regretting the past, cursing yourself, blaming yourself... martyring yourself, even.

“If I were a man given to such sentiments, I would pity you...”

Suddenly, something shifted in Selim’s face, ripples in his pale skin radiating outward. It was as though a mirror had shattered behind his eyes. The child blinked rapidly, like he was dislodging sleep. When his gaze settled, he looked around, stunned and scared. His tiny hand clutched at the banister rail.
“Mummy…” he whimpered. Liquid black eyes darted from the Führer to Ed before finally settling on Mrs. Bradley. “Mummy, I had a bad dream…”

Something twanged painfully in Edward’s chest. Sofia Bel Miké, her eyes heavy-lidded and melancholy, turned away, finally releasing her hold on Mrs. Bradley. The old woman rushed forward and bundled her child into her embrace, crushing him to her chest. Selim wrapped his skinny arms around her neck.

“It’s all right now, sweetheart,” she murmured, her voice choked with unshed tears. “They’re gone. The monsters are gone.”

Ed couldn’t bear it. His fists clenched at his side, his face twisting in anguish.

Führer Grumman removed his cap, passing it from hand to hand. It was the distraction Ed needed. In that moment, he thought Grumman looked ancient. He had been the leader of Amestris for five years. It seemed more like fifteen. Stress and sadness had aged the once vibrant, eccentric man, hanging decades on his face. He was a shadow of the person Ed had known back in East City, what seemed like so long ago…

“Major Miké, Mr. Elric.” He redonned his cap crisply, summoning his officers. Ed wasn’t strictly-speaking military anymore, but he fell into line right beside the rigid Feldspar Alchemist. “Where do you suppose such a Gate may be located? Best guesses, gentlemen.”

Ed didn’t hesitate. “Xerxes, Führer sir. The old ruins.”

Grumman nodded; he didn’t question Edward’s judgement. “Serendipitous, as it happens. Tomorrow morning, there is a train passing through the gateway city to the Great Desert. It is carrying munitions and supplies to the Ishvalan prefecture. There will be no other passengers save a small escort party. You will board that train. Major Miké, you will serve as Mr. Elric’s escort, and Edward, my boy, you will do whatever needs to be done to keep more creatures like Solf Kimblee from dragging themselves into our world. Am I clear?”

Sofia clicked her heels, saluting. “Sir!”

Ed muttered something to the effect of a “yes”. Over Grumman’s shoulder, he watched Mrs. Bradley and Selim. Ed felt his eyes stinging, but he didn’t know if it was from sadness or pain.

“We’re thundering East on little more than a wing and a prayer, Major,” said Ed in a trembling voice which he tried and failed to keep steady. He laughed hollowly. “On an empty train filled with dry goods!”

“From what I know of your life, Master Elric, this is just another Tuesday for you.” She flashed him a toothy smile that was just a touch too wide, too white. Any other time, Ed would have shuddered. Now, he took a strange sort of comfort in it. “With my alchemy and your know-how, this ought to be a doodle. I’ll even destroy the Gate with a little volcano, just for you. Just you see… we’ll make this right, and then you can go home to Miss Rockbell.”

“Yeah… yeah we will, won’t we?” Ed managed with a faint smile. “All we have to do—”

He was interrupted by sound of a violent explosion.
A Game of Chess

Earlier

There were two of them, a tall man and a young woman. The man, grey-haired and rail-thin, wore the uniform of an officer. The woman did not.

Still, she was easy enough to recognise. While the civilian clothes succeeded in diverting attention away from her obvious military ties, she had done nothing to mask her appearance: the close-cropped blonde hair, falling into a wing over her eyes — and such eyes they were, he marvelled, like honey and topaz — identified her as Captain Hawkeye as readily as any epaulettes.

He watched them from a dark, sequestered corner of the station, the crowd buffering him. Caught up in their reunion, the two officers did not notice him. Miss Hawkeye had been troubled by high-strung at first, and for a while the man had worried his surveillance would not go unnoticed. But the older officer had soon put her mind at ease, and as the two of them made for her car, neither soldier noticed him pick up the phone.

He dialled a number which, he knew, would not work a second time.

"Hello, Cassandra," he murmured: "How are things proceeding?"

The line was poor, and he struggled to make out his associate's reply. The interminable noise of Central Station did not help matters. He much preferred the countryside platforms: quieter, less crowded, more idyllic. And the trains tended to run on time.

He kept his voice light and casual in the event of any nosy types happening upon his phone booth. It was unlikely any random passerby would infer the nature of his conversation, but his paranoia had helped him more times than hurt him, and he endeavoured to be, above all things, consistent. "It's almost time, Cassie: my projections indicate a system should pass through on the morrow. I hope the apostates won't be a problem until then?"

No, his contact assured him, and he trusted her confidence, even as his anxieties itched incessantly at the back of his head. After all, in the ancient traditions, Cassandra was the seer cursed to speak true prophecies no one believed. He was not about to become her Paris.

"It seems the Flame Alchemist was successful in securing his former officer. Miss Hawkeye was sent to collect him. They'll be leaving Central tomorrow morning, along with the rest of the General's retinue."

Cassandra muttered an acknowledgement.

The man gripped the phone a fraction of a degree tighter; he licked his lips, tasting salt. He hadn't realised he had broken into a cold sweat. "The apostates must not be allowed to interfere," he insisted, his words wavering. "Protect our people, and I'll protect you."
Though Cassandra's reply was lost in the interference, he trusted she got the message. The static was some small comfort in of itself: a storm was coming. He replaced the receiver and took a deep breath. The air smelled of coal and steam engines. The atmosphere thrummed against his inner ear, a steady pounding like a pneumatic heart, all shafts and couplings.

The man clenched his fist to stop a trembling hand. Though he was nervous, he wasn't frightened. He trusted Cassandra. He trusted the Will of the Theoi. He trusted himself.

All being well, and he had taken extreme pains to ensure that that would indeed be the case, the Flame Alchemist would never reach Dairut.

Falman tried to keep his frustration at bay. More and more he felt as though he was fighting a losing battle.

One of the quartermaster crates had been mobilised as his makeshift desk. Reams of notes — mostly his own transcriptions, though there were a few municipal documents, mostly land records, Sheska had managed to scavenge from the archives — threatened to spill onto the floor. He already had a pile of papers stacked to knee-height at his feet — and Falman had long legs. He had placed a tin of beans on the top of the stack to keep the papers from shifting or toppling as the train hugged corners and took wide turns.

The task was becoming increasingly convoluted and his attempts at maintaining some form of organisational structure, increasingly futile. It was all very well and good for General Mustang to ask him to remember the genealogical details he had committed to memory: the recall was almost reflexive. But making any sort of cogent sense of the innumerable names, clans, dates, and homesteads was another matter entirely.

Prior to the Ishvalan Civil War, it was standard procedure for any court of record to grant Amestrian citizenship to whomsoever sought it. As was the general practice at the time, the State Archives did not order any naturalisation records notarised by local courts or, evidently, stored for posterity's sake. A massive volume of documentation detailing birth dates and locations, occupations, immigration years, marital statuses and spouse information, witnesses' names and addresses, were all missing.

Never mind two months, lamented Falman, resisting the urge to rest his forehead on the neat stacks. He was going to need two years.

While many of the official census records had been destroyed during the War in order to disenfranchise the Ishvalan citizenry, the land entry case files, specifically the military land warrants, uncovered by Sheska had been kept more or less intact. The records documented the transfer of public lands from the Ishvalan people to the more private ownership of a select few in the military. It made a cruel sort of sense, Falman realised soberingly, that the only documentation Bradley would want preserved was the legal proof of Amestris's annexation of the Ishvalan prefecture.

It was taxing work, Falman affirmed, sighing to himself. But the immensity of his task was only the first thing trying his nerves.

The second was Lieutenant Havoc.

More specifically, the noises coming out of Lieutenant Havoc's mouth...

“It's a damn tough life, full of toil and strife, we Easterners undergo
and we won't give a damn when the gales are done how hard the winds did blow,
For we're homeward bound from the Northern grounds with a good mark taught and free,
And we won't give a damn when we drink our dram with the girls from East City.
Rolling down to East City, me boys, rolling down to East City,
We're homeward bound from the Northern grounds, rolling down to East City…”

“Sir,” Falman managed, setting his pen down with deliberate slowness, until it rested perfectly parallel to the top of his ledger, "most respectfully, I must ask you to desist whatever it is you’re doing before I bung this tin of beans at your head. Respectfully."

“Whaddya mean, whatever it is I’m doing? I’m singing.”

General Mustang's envoy, clad entirely in the itchy, shapeless sand suits, had been relegated to one of the rear railcars, along with the vast majority of their equipment. The ride from Central City on the Youswell line to Dairut took twelve hours — twelve hours and five minutes precisely — plenty of time for one such as Falman to plow through the mountain of genealogical research but not long enough to justify outfitting the boxcars with a couple of bunks, or attaching a spare coach. Falman supposed it was just as well: he didn't exactly have time to sleep anyway, and taking on civilians tended to attract the wrong manner of attention. There hadn't been a terrorist attack on the Amestrian rail in six months, two weeks, three days, and however many hours, but General Mustang and Führer Grumman were men given to erring on the more generous side of caution. In any other case it would suit Falman just fine; silence and solitude was conducive to an efficient workspace. Unfortunately, the railcar he shared with the four other officers — Lieutenants Breda, Ross, and Havoc as well as Command Sergeant Fuery — was neither secluded nor silent.

“That’s not singing,” said Breda, not looking up from his chess match. Maria Ross sat across from him, equally engrossed in the arrangement of the pieces on the chequerboard. They were welcome to it: Falman much preferred the weekly crossword.

Havoc was sprawled across a gun crate, long legs dangling over the edge, staring at the ceiling, an ashtray on his stomach. “What the hell do you call it, then?”

“I dunno,” Breda shrugged, then moved his knight, "but I’m pretty sure there’s a treaty somewhere banning it on the basis of crimes against humanity. I'm gonna have to go with Falman on this one, Hav.”

Havoc scowled. "Spoilsport. You're just as bad as the Captain."

Ross grinned, but likewise didn't look up from her game. "If Heymans were anything like Captain Hawkeye," she mused, "that bean tin would have been thrown five minutes ago, with deadly pinpoint accuracy, and you'd currently be sporting a black eye."

Falman cracked a smile. Though he knew enough about her following the incident with Barry the Chopper — he ought to know, he got knocked unconscious for his troubles — he had never actually met First Lieutenant Ross before the Dairut briefing. Even so, it was difficult not to like her. Her dark eyes were wide and friendly, almost too expressive, like she had never really taken to keeping secrets. She must have been the Captain's age, but when she smiled, the years seemed to fall away. There was a buoyancy in her heart-shaped face, a joy not encumbered by hardship and heartache like Riza's own. Even Falman — whose social skills were, according to his wife, adorably lamentable — had grown fond of Maria. The entire envoy seemed taken with her... especially one Lieutenant Breda, if their chess match was any indication.

She was the only one of them Heymans hadn't smoked in under five minutes.
Fuery smiled brightly at Havoc. "I kinda liked it, Lieutenant. Where'd you learn it?"

"Don't encourage him," growled Breda, but Falman could tell his heart wasn't really into it. Maria had snatched a rook: the gingery man had other things on his mind.

Fuery's good nature and indefatigably warm temperament was infectious. Even the Command Sergeant's stint in the southern theatre hadn't been enough to deprive him of it. Falman admired him for that. Fuery's face may have been unlined, his eyes bright, his disposition sunny, but the young man was as resilient as any hardened Briggs veteran. In many respects, even more so, because he had not allowed his kindness to be crushed by the burdens of combat. His grip on his humanity was tenaciously fierce. To Vato, Kain was like the clever little brother he'd never had growing up — a missing piece of his life the Second Lieutenant sometimes envied the Elrics for.

"Oh, it was before your time, Fuery," said Havoc airily, trying and failing to sound casual about the whole thing. His movements exaggerated and awkward, he tried to brush his blonde hair into some semblance of neatness. Falman thought he only made it look worse — prickly like an unkempt shrub. "Back when we used to do those joint training exercises with Northern Command. Our guys had a furlough and some time to kill after a sesh and, well..."

"Jean got obscenely drunk on the paint thinner that passed for Buccaneer's bootleg liquor," finished Falman dryly.

Havoc glared at him indignantly. "How would you know?! You weren't even there!"

Vato huffed. "Oh, I assure you, the Briggsmen remember. I must have heard this story at least a dozen times. My wife might be responsible for half of them."

"You turncoat, Falman..."

Vato continued: "Suitably boozed, Havoc tried to rope Charlie and some of the other Eastern soldiers into singing that ridiculous song outside Major General Armstrong's ready room, got caught, and were ordered to run laps around the fortress basement until the sun set."

"Except it was summer and the sun doesn't set up North in the summer." Breda grinned, not before snatching another of Maria's pieces.

Any laughter Ross reserved for Falman's story was cut off with a sigh. She considered the board mournfully. "That was cold, Heymans. You can't make me laugh then snatch a bishop. It ruins the joke."

Breda's grin lengthened into a penitent smile. "All's fair in love and war, right?"

Falman frowned at his choice of words.

"Well, I suppose that's what I get for not paying attention."

Fuery chirped, "You've already lasted far longer than the rest of us, Lieutenant!"

"Yeah." Havoc's eyes narrowed, suspiciously. His angular face flickered behind his cigarette smoke. "You have."

Ross arched a slender eyebrow, throwing a look over her shoulder, but mindful of allowing Breda any opportunity to take advantage of her distraction. "Are you saying you don't think I can hold my own in a chess game, Lieutenant?"
"Nah, I'm saying Breda plays like a man possessed by the devil," Jean paused. "And like the devil, he never lets a soul go free."

"Just because you can't last three minutes, Hav," murmured Breda. And, after a moment of consideration: "Actually, that might explain why you can't get a date."

Ross reddened. Fuery managed to hold his laughter in his mouth, bellying in his cheeks until he swallowed it. Falman sighed: the conversation had somehow maundered onto a topic he didn't care to touch donned in a hazardous materials suit, nevermind the ten foot long pole. For two soldiers of exceptional caliber, Jean and Heymans could act alarmingly immature.

Havoc spluttered, opening and closing his mouth like an affronted goldfish: "I don't see you pulling a Falman and flaking out on us anytime soon, either!"

Vato frowned again. "Hey..."

Breda smirked. "Jean, if I felt so inclined, I could pull ten times as many dates as you."

"Ten times zero is still zero, you ass."

Fuery let out a very undignified snort.

"Do I even want to know?"

Falman stole a glance over his shoulder. Riza stood in the doorway with her arms crossed. Her bangs were mussed, having just come through from the other railcar, where General Mustang had sequestered himself some hours before. Falman didn’t know why, and he knew better than to ask. Maybe he, too, had grown weary of Jean Havoc's singing, and unlike Falman, had the privilege of rank necessary to escape it.

"Hi, Captain," said Maria brightly. “Falman was just telling us about the Briggs karaoke incident.”

Hawkeye paused, her face set in her usual considered, careful mask, though Falman thought the subject matter hardly warranted her humour. When she finally spoke, he marvelled at how she managed to still sound so dignified:

"Was that before or after the incident where Lieutenant Havoc forged love letters in General Mustang's handwriting?"

Jean went white. Breda howled with laughter, Ross trying and failing to keep from joining him. Fuery let out a muted "Oh my" and Falman just shook his head.

Children, the lot of them. Even Captain Hawkeye.

Riza's expression remained carefully neutral, even resting her head on one fist, the picture of polite contemplation. "If I remember correctly, Lieutenant Havoc, you even burned one corner of the paper to emphasise General Mustang's quote, burning passion, unquote. Your dedication to your craft does you credit."

Havoc buried his head in his hands. "That was one time!"

"I've heard this one, too: General Armstrong punished you by turning you into a jukebox," deadpanned Falman.

Fuery's eyebrows arched. "Wait, what?"
Hawkeye seemed perfectly content to elaborate; she settled opposite Falman, pulling a crate up to the Second Lieutenant's makeshift desk: "The General, Command Sergeant, had Captain Buccaneer put Jean in a locker, then the Briggs soldiers spent the next six hours putting cenz through the slots to make him sing."

Breda was in stitches, bent almost double, sobbing with the strain. Ross had to steady herself with a hand on his arm to keep from knocking the chessboard, though Falman somehow doubted their minds were in the game anymore. Poor Fuery actually fell off his box.

"You're all heart, Hawkeye," muttered Jean, hanging his head dejectedly. Sitting on his crate like a spare plum, cigarette drooping from the corner of his mouth, while the rest of the envoy laughed themselves silly at his expense, the First Lieutenant presented a portrait of perfect misery. Even Falman found himself hiccupping.

Breda's voice had the slurred gravity of a very philosophical drunk, or someone so winded from laughter he could barely string a coherent sentence together: "My god... I had forgotten about that! We lost a small fortune on all the Eddie Cantor hits."

"I didn't even get to keep the money," said Havoc glumly. That earned him a few more cackles. "Yeah yeah, shuddup, Breda."

Ross turned to Hawkeye. "Are they always like this, sir?"

The corner of Riza's mouth twitched. Her amber eyes twinkled. "No... most of the time the Colonel is here laughing right along with them."

Falman arched an eyebrow, looking across the crate at the Captain. She didn't notice his attention, talking instead to Maria Ross. No one else seemed to have spotted the slip.

Roy Mustang hadn't been a Colonel for five years. Hawkeye knew that: of course she did. Falman was inclined to berate himself for reading too much into it, but, then, he remembered the person waiting for him back at Briggs. With Lynn's help, he was slowly beginning to learn to value his own fastidiousness. Though he tended to frame the world in facts and figures, reading situations like an engineer would read schematics, Lynn believed his attentiveness allowed him to see a little further than most. Even some things, she had warned him, others may not wish for him to see, or he didn't wish to see himself.

Perhaps Roy and Riza were one of those things. They were ostensibly simple people who continually bewildered him with their profound complications. Theirs was an alignment of opposites and a unification of diametrics: pride and selfishness muddled with strength and honour and fiercely belligerent loyalty, none equal nor similar; in fact, polar opposites, just like they were, a shadow and a ray of sunshine.

To Hawkeye, Mustang would always be Colonel. No longer just a rank; Falman imagined any of Roy's subsequent stations had seemed to Riza like one of those missing object puzzles, the kind with abrasions one could only pick out by searching the image from every angle, and even then, a few inconsistencies always managed to slip by. Mustang masked his weakness with his acquired personifications of power, afraid to love and to be loved because the love he knew tended to strip bare all emotional barricades. And without love, strength and loyalty were sums with deteriorating interest rates, prone to losing every bit of their worth until they were nothing more than empty tents pitched somewhere in the desert. An Ishval Roy Mustang had taken into himself.

Falman sighed. Here he was, reading far too much into a simple slip of the tongue.
No, the small voice of Lynn resounded in his head. *Reading far too much into a slip of her heart.*

Falman looked out the window of the train, the desert obscured under the granular wash of the sandstorm.

Why, he wondered, did teasing the threads of his superiors' lives have to be so damnably cumbersome?

A sudden gust of wind buffeted the railcar; Falman's tin of beans slash paperweight teetered dangerously. Lieutenant Ross looked up from her abandoned chess match. Falman could not tell from his vantage which of the two combatants had been nearest to victory. Breda, statistically speaking, and any other time, against any other opponent, Falman would have rested assured of his own deduction.

With Maria Ross, he wasn't so sure.

"Hell of a sandstorm, Captain," she murmured. "That last gust rocked the whole train."

Hawkeye looked out over her right shoulder. "The fury burns of Ishval are notoriously wild, Lieutenant. Fortunately, they don't last long. This one should blow over—"

Hawkeye nearly bit through her tongue as the train was rocked by an enormous explosion. The brightness of it, streaming through the siltstone particles in the air outside, struck something inside Falman's skull, sending him reeling; the afterimages made flashes all their own. His head thundered as though only inches from a crack of lightning. Each successive boom left an echo stuttering in the tattered noise of his ears.

The train screeched on its tracks. For a horrifyingly long moment, Falman thought they were going to derail; he could feel the floor tilting under his feet. Soon, the railcar righted itself, but he could smell cordite in the air, hanging low in a thick, greasy miasma.

“That sure as hell wasn’t the wind!” said Havoc angrily, leaping to his feet, Breda and Ross flanking him.

Captain Hawkeye was already moving, a blur of brown sand suit and blonde hair flinging open the door, stepping into the vehemence of the sandstorm without bothering to slip her mask over her face, and jumping the precarious gap to reach the next railcar. Falman understood in an instant: The explosion had come from General Mustang’s coach.

Falman didn't give himself time to think about it. The officers threw on their masks. Allowing Havoc, Ross, Breda to burst past him, he and Fuery took up the rear, sidearms drawn. The Second Lieutenant lurched out of the car; the shock of stepping into the storm rattled his back teeth. Even wearing his sand suit, flying dirt and detritus, coupled with the speed of the train, he felt as though his flesh was being pierced with a million tiny shards of glass; without the protective clothing, more than a few minutes outside would have been enough to scour the skin from his face. He was forced to close his eyes or be blinded, particles of sand finding their way between the filmy gauze. Fortunately, as he leapt the gap, he felt large hands — Breda’s — grasp his arms, hauling him into the next car, the last on the train.

"Ah, shit."

Falman didn't know who swore; he couldn't make it out over the roar of the train and the desert storm.
A ragged hole had been torn in the side of the caboose, the size and shape of the clock above Central Station. The aperture was plenty wide enough to let in the grit from outside, the wind howling inside the closed space. Falman could barely see through vortices of dust, his eyes stinging terribly, tears streaming down his face. He felt Fuery and Ross at his side, and standing in front of him, a glinting halo of yellow that could have been either Hawkeye or Havoc. He saw the blonde figure bend down, inspecting a dark mass curled up on the floor. He must have been flung from the wall after the bomb went off.

Something not unlike a bowling ball slide into Falman's stomach, anchoring itself there until he felt ready to sink to his knees under the weight.

Even over the fury burn, he heard Riza's cry:

"General!"

It was Mustang, then, sprawled on the floor. Ahead of him, Breda knelt beside the Captain, touching his hand to Roy's pale throat. Ross took a position behind Heymans, the underarm flaps of her sand suit flung wide. Falman realised she was shielding her fellow First Lieutenant, allowing him to inspect his superior's injuries without blinding himself.

"He's alive, Riza!" bellowed Breda, clutching the Captain's shoulder almost as desperately as she clutched Mustang's. "But he's out cold! We need to move him to the other car!"

Hawkeye got over her horror quickly. She said something to Havoc that the wind ripped away before it reached Falman's ears. The blonde man, cigarette long gone, the vague oval of his face devoid of his earlier humour, stomped over to Fuery.

"Kain!" he shouted, his arm flung across his mask, obscuring his expression even more. "Get on the horn to the conductor! This train doesn't stop! Understand? This train can't be allowed to stop!"

"Sir!" Fuery didn't question the order, or why they would continue to blast through Ishval with a whacking great hole in the side of the railcar and an unconscious commander. The Command Sergeant understood the gravity of the situation as well as any of the senior officers. If someone wished the General dead, or at least intended him grievously bodily harm, then stopping the train would be exactly what they wanted them to do.

Fighting for purchase against the wind, his eyes squeezed shut, Fuery fumbled for the emergency cord, pulling the receiver from the wall and bellowing instructions to the front car as Ross and Breda hauled Mustang to his feet. Falman steadied himself against the door, ready to step back through the gap and retrieve Mustang when they passed him over.

At first, no one heard the staccato rounds over the sound of the sandstorm. It was only when Fuery yelped, a bullet snickering through the air and into his arm, a fine spray of blood spattering his sand suit, that Falman realised they were coming under fire.

"Captain!" shouted Ross, yanking Kain to the wall and out of range. The Command Sergeant grimaced in pain but didn't cry out. "Shots from our seven!"

"Get away from the hole!" barked Hawkeye, already holstering her sidearms and pulling rifle rounds from her pack. "And get Fuery and the General out!"

Riza immediately fell to one knee, drawing her bolt action rifle slung across her back. Havoc, the other sniper, soon followed suit, leaving Ross and Breda to manoeuvre Mustang through the door. Peering through the gauzy material of his mask and the brown-out of the sandstorm, Falman saw
what looked like an army jeep pulling alongside the train, the passengers dressed in the same sand suits as Mustang's retinue. He noted the gun barrels protruding from the windows. Falman tried to pick out any relevant details — the make and model of the car, a number plate, registration — but the vehicle, whether by human hands or by the sandstorm, had been stripped clean of all earmarks of identification.

Using only his left arm, Fuery swung himself over to the adjacent railcar. Together, Ross and Breda hefted Mustang by his shoulders, grunting with the effort, the General's head rolling slackly to his shoulder. Once they were through, Falman turned to the two snipers. The jeep had drawn closer; one of the men had slung his leg over the side of the truck bed...

Riza fired two shots in rapid succession, upwards into his groin and abdomen, his own rifle lost somewhere on the tracks as her third shot took him in the head. The wind snatched away his scream. She dove for cover as his companion filled the air with bullets.

"Who the fuck are these assholes?!" bellowed Havoc, his voice muffled. Falman took the Lieutenant's position as he reloaded and fired blindly into the storm, trying to track the darting silhouette of the car in the dust.

Hawkeye didn't look away from her targets. "Enemies," she breathed.

In a moment of unsettling clarity, Falman, peering down the sight of his gun, realised Mustang's soldiers looked exactly like the men attacking the train, rendered down to human-shaped outlines by the sand suits and the fury burn of the storm. Nothing differentiated them; the protective costumes stripped them of everything, from their sex and size right down to the colour of their hair. In close proximity, they would have been completely indistinguishable.

Falman's eyes were drawn to Riza's sure, steady hands around her rifle, his line of sight snagging on a flash of bleached white amidst the blinding browns and yellows. For a moment he thought the tops of her hands were bleeding, as though she'd cut herself.

Was she wearing...?

Suddenly, just as Havoc brought his rifle up to fire on the driver, the jeep swerved into the side of a boxcar, shaking Hawkeye and Havoc from their crouches. Havoc fell back into Falman; the force of the impact knocked the air out of Vato's lungs. As the train shuddered, screeching again on its rails, the wheels momentarily losing purchase on the track, the two men were thrown into the crates in the corner of the car, limbs akimbo. Riza fell in the opposite direction.

The soldiers distracted, the jeep matched the speed of the train. One of the assailants stepped from the truck bed into the boxcar, bearing down on Hawkeye. Without time to reload her rifle, she rolled aside as his leg swept out in an effort to catch her. Beside Falman, Jean snarled savagely, leaping to his feet. A hail of gunfire shattered the wood beams just above his head, forcing him to duck behind the crates. Falman's head poked above his cover, and a bullet whizzed past his head, nearly taking his ear off. While the sandstorm had, unfortunately, provided the assailants with ample cover, Falman realised it was also tempering any serious attempts to aim properly.

Falman heard one of the man make another grab for Hawkeye, and a muffled grunt as Riza kicked him clear, her ragged breathing as she tried to go for her auxiliary guns. Havoc's face contorted in rage, infuriated by his helplessness, but every time he tried to raise his head above cover, the suppressing fire forced him to ground. Falman considered sticking his hand around the crate and firing blindly, but he couldn't risk hitting Hawkeye.

"God fucking dammit!" snarled Havoc.
Falman's gut summersaulted as Riza cried out in pain. He heard her drop to the ground, her boots scrabbling for purchase. Vato peeked through a hole in the crate, a crack barely wider than his eye. Hawkeye tried to lurch to her feet, even though she was terribly bruised and winded; in the ensuing struggle two more men had boarded the train. One man grabbed the Captain's foot and yanked her to the ground. Falman's head pounded, a high-pitched whine ringing in his ears, fury boiling in his gut as another man sank his fist into the face of Riza's mask, splitting her nose into grotesquerie. He could see the blood and mucus leaking through the gauze...

"Get off!" screamed Jean. He devolved into an incoherent stream of curses, snapping a fresh magazine into his sidearm. Someone fired a warning shot in their direction. "Get off, you bastards!"

As Havoc prepared to rise, the railcar lurched, the train picking up speed quickly; Fuery, probably, urging the conductor to go faster and lose the pursuers. The sudden motion threw Falman. His head cracked against the corner of a crate and colour exploded behind his eyes, pain surging from the point of impact. He fell face-first, smacking his chin hard on the floor. His mouth felt wet and slippery from chomping down on his tongue. For several agonising moments, he lay there, unable to move, unable to swallow through the swollen organ in his mouth. Falman tried to rise, tried to get to Jean, to Riza, but a vicious, slicing pain slammed into him. He gasped without air, feeling as though he hadn't drawn a proper breath in lifetimes.

He heard Jean moving somewhere to his right. "Vato... Vato, come on, get up..."

The delirium was a swollen mass inside his skull, like his brain was bleeding. His head ached. He wanted to sleep, curl up on the boxcar floor and close his eyes. Just lay down for a while and rest, but not sleep. No, not sleep. Wait for somebody to come and help him... wait for Lynn to patch him up...

"FALMAN! Get the fuck up!"

His eyes flew open. Vato found his throat tightening: Lieutenant Havoc had him by the collar of his sand suit, hauling him to his feet with every ounce of his strength. When he was finally standing, Falman realised, slowly, dully, the thoughts dragging themselves into coherence, the enemy bullets had stopped flying.

But Havoc wasn't firing back.

He was crying.

"Shit," he sobbed; he ripped his mask from his face and dug the heels of his palms into his eyes, screaming: "SHIT!"

The Lieutenant's tears came unbidden, carving muddy trails through the dust on his cheeks. The muscles of his chin trembled like a small child's as he looked towards the hole in the boxcar, as if the sand-streaked light and the steadily receding storm could soothe him.

The horror rose like indigestion, a tightening of Falman's chest. His lungs were suddenly unable to move against the heaviness of his ribs.

The sandstorm had begun dissipate. The attacker's car was gone.

And so was Captain Hawkeye.

He breathed. He blinked.
The realisation burned Falman like the friction of the siltstone, tearing into the soft underside of his body. In an instant, the true, savage, snarling tragedy of it all was clear to him.

And the only thing Falman could think about, as Havoc screamed his frustration and failure at the world, was the Flame Alchemist's ignition gloves on Riza Hawkeye's hands.

Chapter End Notes

I can think of someone who's going to be really, really unhappy when he wakes up
One of my academic colleagues: "Hoopy you've been very busy lately."
"Yup, I have a new prose project well underway."
"Oh cool beans, what are you writing about?"

... Uh

"A kind of guilt remains still, dangling over our heads like a bushel of apples, like that one story about the man who sacrificed his son and was punished by the gods for all eternity. He stood in a lake, and every time he went to take a drink, the waters receded. Fresh fruit hung above him, but every single one plucked from the vine turned to ash in his hands.

"You'd think it'd be the absences that'd get to me. I mean, the absences are what I noticed the most, just in my day-to-day life, walking down the street and seeing the same few faces. Parsing through regiments of blondes and brunettes and gingers, with the only white being the head of some hoary old goat. Blue eyes, green eyes, brown eyes. Never any red. It's as though we truncated the electromagnetic spectrum at a certain wavelength, and now we see the world as though through a pair of colour correcting glasses. We're left to contend with the distortions, and only we soldiers remember how it used to be. Nobody else wants to think about it. Some are pretending the past just doesn't exist. Some are pretending it's something so horrible, the death and destruction, senseless tragedy and everybody getting killed, that it might just as well not exist. I suppose it amounts to the same thing.

“But, in truth, it's not the absences that really sting. It's the opposite... the presences. The feeling of constant surveillance, as though the ones we killed have taken it upon themselves to hold our thankless vigils. It's a messed up inversion, the dead taking pity on the living. But I can't escape that guilt because I know I can't escape the Eyes, peering out from wherever it is they went after they died. Like a bunch of angry ghosts pressing at the edges of the world. Amestris tried to cut out Ishval like a surgeon picking at a carcinoma, but I think the cancer managed to metastasize in its own way. And it's slowly killing us.

"Maybe this new gig, this push for Reconstruction, will build homes and open schools and jumpstart economies, but I don't think it'll be enough to blinker the Eyes. The guilt brands us, marks us, just as surely as those few alchemists with their transmutation circles tattooed on their hands."
"Ishval is a regret we all share, and even our repentances for the wrongs we failed to right seem worthy of our collective shame. We have the freedom to look back and wish we could have done things differently — what, exactly, I can't say — but there are thousands upon thousands of our victims who no longer have the luxury of cogitating on what could have been.

"I think we were tempted, us few who knew the truth about Bradley and the Promised Day, to shed some of that guilt. When we learned of the huge transmutation circle and the devastating human cost it exacted, the possibility of exoneration presented itself. It would have been so easy to say, "It's not our fault." It's the fault of Father. It's the fault of the Homunculi. We aren't bad people. We aren't monsters. We were tricked by the monsters. We are not the man who sacrificed his son. We are the gods who ate the flesh and sought to punish the wrongdoer.

"Yeah, the son would say, but what good does that do me now?

"Maybe we can't ever atone. Maybe the world has conspired to make sure we never get the chance. God knows our luck sucks, after all. Maybe Reconstruction will help make things right. Maybe. Maybe. I don't know.

"I don't know.

"The clerk's flagging me and telling me I'm running out of time. Lemme see if I can work something out..."

Continued in Act IV: Dulce et Decorum Est
The girl had been staring at him for five minutes.

Not a girl, he supposed. She was one of the Professor's university students. A young woman, then, almost of marrying age, if that was something she was inclined to do.

He found he had a difficult time determining the ages of the Ishvalans working under Stokes's supervision. They lacked the profound solemnity he had come to associate with the refugees clinging to the margins of Amestrian society, the proud tilt of the head and a resilient grace that spoke of a thousand endured hardships. The students' faces were youthful, unlined, a buoyancy in their eyes. The girl's expression was one he had seen before, many times, but never framed by locks of white hair or accented with red eyes. There existed a gulf between them — of age, of experience. Of pain. She stood on the opposite side of a chasm he could never hope to cross himself.

In many ways, he supposed he retained a stronger kinship with the sand-blasted rocks and ruins of the Professor's fascination than the young woman with the wide eyes. He, too, was a relic of a bygone age. Already there were young ones running through the streets of Dairut and Kaava and Menleith with no memory of the blood that had once stained the sands under their feet. Generations to whom the Massacre was little more than a distant fever dream, a ghost story told by blind shamans and old washer women. All over vast tracts of the countryside, cut with sun and sandstorms, the monuments of ruin had begun to fade away, out of mind, out of memory. Daliha, situated on a tributary of the East River, had been levelled to accommodate crops and canals. Kanda — a place he refused to revisit, even after so many years — had been reclaimed by the desert.

The scars remained, but a subtle brush of foundation had resolved the agonies into abstractions.

His mind drifted away from the gawping girl and the communications station, looking towards the slopes of Mishaari. The sun bleached everything to white: at midday, there were no shadows to break the monotony. The ruins were like something obscured under smoke, its ancient streets and crumbling edifices pearled and pastelled; so much distance, so much time, bound by his limited line of sight, crashing up against the edges of the basin.

His leg felt stiff, the snarl of an old injury — young Mei had healed it to the best of her ability, but there were days when the pain flared up again, as though it delighted in reminding him of his hubris. He shifted his weight, causing the girl to jump. He regarded her out of the corner of his eye, which didn't seem to put her any more at ease. He remembered abruptly that her name was Annika.

And was reminded, just as suddenly, that he could no longer remember his.
In freeing himself of his own name, he had gained a purpose. In casting off his hatred, he had found peace. But he wondered if perhaps his identity, too, like the ruins of Kanda, had been buried so deeply in the sand that all its defining edges had eroded away. Sometimes he felt like something half-realised, a dream of the soul of his world, all scars and silence, all faith, some drifting paper person breathing into the darkness. He had been reclaimed by the land of his ancestors, the tenebrous cities of old Ishval: cities without name, without time, stark in the moonless desert nights, under chipped-glass stars that glittered in the hallowed dark.

He thought back to his arrival in Dairut, so soon after the Promised Day, buttressed by a vicious Amestrian general and accompanied by a soldier his people called *jazyiya*. Back when the buildings were bony and cluttered with debris, hulled with stone at their different heights. Window, lintels, cornices and sills patterned with cracks and fractures. The desert wind sweeping all the dust the archaeologists had overlooked, small squalls of sand rising from the pavement and erupting in tiny billows that always disappeared by the time he reached them. Like they only existed at a point fixed in some continuously retreating future.

Even then, the city had been beautiful, in a way only Ishval knew how to be. Stubborn, proud, hostile, but beautiful in its layered landscapes, red, brass, and white, even as its images grew distorted by the lenses that sought to correct for all the ugliness.

It was why his responsibility as Muhaddith was so important. He protected the past. He safeguarded the memory.

There were those who resented him for it. Even amongst Ishvalla's most trusted sons, some considered him a pariah, to be spat on and beaten, muzzled, until he could no longer speak the words that reminded his countrymen of their painful past. Some wanted to forget. Others, to never cast aside their ignorance. A few had begged him to simply stop reminding them.

But if there was one thing he had learned during his exile in Amestris, in his time spent amongst the alchemists, it was that Truth was sometimes unfair and often cruel, but never unnecessary. In time, he knew, the Massacre's last survivor would be summoned by Ishvalla, and if not for his own station, there would be no one left to remember. He had resigned himself to enduring any hardship so long as he was able to give testimony to the slaughter, and to work tirelessly to ensure such bloodshed never happened again.

Some hated him for it. But, then again, the hatred was nothing new. He would rather suffer their hatred than their pity. He would rather it come from Ishvalans than Amestrians.

He wondered, idly, if the young woman at his side hated him, too, this girl unencumbered by the weight of their people's suffering.

She was still staring at him, at any rate.

"How much longer is this going to take?" he asked gruffly. The girl's head snapped up, her braid smacking against her back.

"Oh, err..." she blinked two sherry eyes, "we—we don't have a direct line to the North, *sayyidi*, so the switchboard operator at the University in East City has to connect you through an outside line. I—I'm sorry, there's nothing—"

"I intended no criticism," he said. The girl fell silent. A short distance away, the radio hummed with static.

He sensed her muscles twitching and jumping under her tunic, as though her solemn, silent
observation of him had consumed her entire being, diffusing from her head to the tips of her fingers.

The Muhaddith sighed. It was a rough, abrasive sound summoned from deep in his chest. It made him sound incredibly tired. After the events of the last few days, he supposed he must have been. "What is it?" he asked.

The girl, Annika, rather than deny her attentions — which was just as well, as Scar could do without her dishonesty — shuffled closer to him. She pitched her voice low, muttering:

"Hal'a haqiqi? Ant qatal de al," she hesitated, her Ishvalan faltering as she cast around for the right word, "Alqadimas?"

Alqadimas... alchemists. He regarded her stonily, stubborn in his silence. She hopped from foot to foot.

"They say," she went on, in heavily-accented Ishvalan, "they say you're that Alchemist Killer from five years ago... they say you are Ishvalla's knight, given holy orders to punish the wicked. You are the one the apostates call Scar."

He felt the heat simmer through his cowl. "They say a lot of things," he murmured.

"Hal'a haqiqi?" Is it true?

He saw little point in lying to a direct question. "Nem." Yes.

He didn't think the girl had been expecting his candour. Her mouth opened and closed for a few long moments as she collected her thoughts. He left her to her considerations without comment.

"Oh," she said quietly. She jerked her head away from him, peering intently at the radio as though willing the signal to improve. She seemed suddenly very uncomfortable in his presence. "I... I'm sorry, sayyidi."

"What for?"

"That was a personal question."

"Yes."

"It was not my intention to pry."

"No?"

"What you did in the past is your business. Those were your choices — your mistakes — if you even believe they were mistakes. You don't have to tell me, sayyid Muhaddith, it's just..." Annika rubbed the back of her neck. She winced, agitating the sunburn below her hairline. "Some of the faculty working here are alchemists."

"Do you worry for them?"

"A little, yes. You preyed on such men."

"Are they state-certified?"

"Pardon?"
"Do they carry titles and silver pocket watches?"

"Yes..."

"Then there was a time when they, too, would have been my enemies."

"But no more?"

Scar released his breath in one long, resigned murmur, "No."

She looked up at him again. "What changed?"

He didn't answer her right away. Instead, he looked towards the medical pavilion.

The Muhaddith thought about the man who hid his red eyes behind snow-blind glasses... the soldier whose unwavering faith in him — in his capacity for redemption — had suggested that the past need not necessarily predict the future, provided lost souls such as his could learn from their mistakes. Who had understood, as he didn't, that an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life, was how the wheel of blood was set in motion, and how it was ultimately destined to crack and splinter, if someone did not dare to bend it into the slightest adjacent curvature.

"A man," he said, after a moment's thought, "who believed I was worth more than my sins."

He arched an eyebrow as the radio crackled to life. Annika snapped to attention.

"The reception probably isn't very good," she warned him, passing him the headset. "Scouts report sandstorms in the area."

The Muhaddith grunted a circumspect acknowledgement. Annika retreated from the tent, leaving him to his call; she seemed relieved to be shut of him.

White noise hissed in his ear. He waited, and, finding nothing adequate to express his impatience, pursed his mouth into a tight frown.

"Speaking?"

Her voice hadn't changed in five years. Still as sharp as bladed steel. Still haughty. Still arrogant.

"General Armstrong," greeted Scar gruffly. He heard a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the radio.

"Is this line secure?" she queried one of her men. The answer evidently being in the affirmative, Olivier Mira Armstrong addressed the Ishvalan directly:

"Sayyid Muhaddith... it's been too long."

Not long enough, Scar thought with no shortage of resentment. Though she may have commanded Major Miles's heart and soul, she held no such sway over him. He was indebted to the General on account of her willingness to forgive his crimes, but the Muhaddith was well aware of the fact that her motivations stemmed less from a desire to see a resurrected Ishval and more to put her rival, the Flame Alchemist, in an awkward position should word of Scar's survival ever become a matter of public record. Miles trusted Armstrong implicitly. To the Muhaddith, she was just another Amestrian politician: aggressive, ambitious, disingenuous. He had actively avoided her company for five years.

Unfortunately, circumstances had changed. He may not have cared for Armstrong herself, but he
cared a great deal for her adjutant.

"I apologise for contacting you thusly, General," he said.

"No need. What can I do for you?"

"Miles."

He heard the frown, the tightening of her mouth as she paused to accommodate her internal musings. "What about Miles?" she asked, her words rough and clipped, almost impatient. She did not care for his circumnavigating around a direct point.

The Muhaddith steadied himself. In his usual brusque, undecorated manner, he explained the previous day's events: the temple pylons, the Door, the emptiness on the other side of the threshold. And, his words thickening slightly, he recalled the moment Miles had drawn too close, the black tendrils that had erupted from the darkness, the incredible strength they exerted, very nearly managing to drag the Major through the Gate.

How Miles had been forced to glimpse some small sliver of Truth, that vague idol fetishised by alchemists in hushed, forebidden whispers, shrouded in their darkest ponderings.

The Truth had taken Edward Elric. It had taken the boy's brother. It had taken their commanding officer, the Flame Alchemist. And it had very nearly taken Major Miles.

There had been danger in that temple, strange and intangible danger, and Scar had been afraid. But he had also been angry. The lurch of fear triggered by the sight of the Door had seemed a dull, dry-as-dust emotion, dogged and familiar enough to become almost unconscious. His anger — rather, the sheer rage at having to face a monstrosity he had believed buried in the ashes of the Promised Day, at being forced to contend with what he suspected was something too huge for his understanding alone — had simmered in the forefront of his mind.

"The Truth..." murmured Armstrong, sorting and turning the new information. She sounded unsettled, as she ought to.

He gave a quick nod, even though the woman could not see him. "I was able to pull him free of the Door. Just. He told me he had been confronted by Truth. Then he collapsed."

"I trust he's being properly looked after?"

"Professor Stokes directed the doctors in Dairut to our location. He suffered no external injuries, however... he has yet to regain consciousness."

A pause. "And what do you make of this, sayyidi?"

Scar confided in her what had haunted him from the moment they entered the temple: "The Door was familiar to me. I had experienced its vivid, scalding energy, similar to an alchemical transmutation, once before. On the Promised Day, when I watched Edward Elric and Roy Mustang taken from this world."

"And I Mrs. Curtis. Are you saying this phenomenon was similar? That the being, or beings, inside this Door attempted to snatch Major Miles?"

"Yes."

A humph. "Mrs. Curtis was one of those human sacrifices, as was Mustang and the Elric boy."
Miles is no alchemist. What reason would it, whatever it is, have for taking him?"

The Muhaddith had his suspicions, none of them particularly pleasant. There was a verse from the Sunda Kita that sprang to mind; although, Scar doubted General Armstrong would appreciate its wisdom as he did, so he did not waste it on her:

*Behold, I have put before you an open Door which no one can shut; Ask, and it shall be shown to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall open to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.*

"I believe the Door resembles the Portals that opened above our comrades five years ago," intoned Scar solemnly. "However... this Door is not the result of alchemy."

"Explain."

He bristled at the implied imperative. He was tempted to remind her that he was not one of her toy soldiers, nor could she order him around as such. However, for Miles’s sake, he held his tongue. “The Door is freestanding. No alkehestry arrays or transmutation circles. There was evidence of it having existed prior to the construction of the rest of the temple, suggesting the structure was built to accommodate the Door specifically."

Her tone was brooding: "Like rails erected around a natural landmark."

"Natural... yes. In the desert, we have silt hydrogels... layers of sediment saturated with too much water. The reduced friction means the surface can no longer support any weight. The pressure differential can cause one to sink. Miles came dangerously close to doing just that."

“You’re talking about quicksand,” finished Armstrong. “You’re saying this Door of yours might be a frictionless barrier between that temple and the so-called Realm of Truth?"

“Perhaps."

“In that case, Miles was being negligent. He put his foot in it... quite literally, if your quicksand analogy holds.” A snort. “He should know better. In the North, carelessness like that usually equates to falling through thin ice or triggering an avalanche. He's fortunate he didn't get himself and the rest of Mishaari killed.”

She was astonishingly callous, the Muhaddith decided, even by his standards. “Miles acted in the interest of protecting myself and Professor Stokes. He sensed danger. His instincts were not in any way impaired."

"Then he ought to have followed them."

"Morover," Scar pressed on, "the Major did not persist in light of any physical obstruction. The Door was open for less than thirty seconds. In that time, Miles was utterly overwhelmed." A pause. "We do not know if he will wake up."

The General considered his words. “And what, exactly, do you want me to do about it?"

He frowned, but said nothing. He found he didn’t know how to phrase his complicated thoughts with the politeness her station probably warranted.

Armstrong went on: “Briggs looses careless men every now and again, sayyidi. Any solider thick enough to get caught off guard or weak enough to lose the will to fight to save his own skin is one I don’t need dragging down the rest of my battalion."
His words had a sharp edge: “That’s well as may be, but Miles is not in the North anymore. He has made himself essential to us.”

"Central Cemetery is full of indispensable soldiers. The doctrine of survival of the fittest is called ‘universal’ for a reason. It holds as much validity in Ishval as the North."

Scar elected to hold his own council. He suspected General Armstrong may not like what he had to say.

He heard a huff of impatience. “Why did you call me, Muhaddith? Did you expect me to drop everything here and hop on the next train East like some weeping war widow?”

She said it to cut him — to make him angry, make him reckless. It may have worked on her underlings, but Armstrong should have known that he was far wiser to flashes of Amestrian viciousness than the common soldier. He decided he would not give her the satisfaction of his frustration.

He took a risk: “I called because Miles asked me to.”

“I thought you said he was unconscious?”

“Unconscious, but not silent. He has been muttering about Fort Briggs for most of the night.”

“If the experience was as traumatic as you suggest, then he’s probably rambling. I remind you, Muhaddith, that there are more than a few Amestrian pencil pushers who would have your head, and mine, if they overheard this call. Perhaps the next time one of my men fails to exercise the proper caution—”

“‘I am going to die,’” recited Scar stoically, not waiting for her to finish. He cast his mind back to the blackness of the medical tent, the miasma of abject misery radiating from its single, wretched occupant. “‘Just like Lydia. I have to get her out of there. Olivier...’”

"'I have to save her.'"

The General went very quiet. The wind howled through the dig site. Detritus fell from the canvas flap of the tent. He heard pebbles and sand in the ruins complaining down rocks, and stuttering, and whispering — all far louder than the woman's hushed breathing on the other end of the line.

He felt another twinge of apprehension waiting for her response. He searched himself for some physical sign that would render his disquiet corporeal: the quickening of his breath, a pounding heart. But nothing made itself known. His unease seemed as transient and insubstantial as General Armstrong’s distant presence, as Major Miles's pained mutterings. A disjunction of the soul.

“Does anyone else know about this?” she asked finally, her voice hushed.

“Professor Stokes was a witness to the episode.”

“How much does she know about the Gate of Truth?”

“Not enough.”

“Good. If you value Miles's privacy, his pride, in any capacity, then it had best stay that way. Make sure the rest of Stokes’s little snot-nosed chain gang stay well clear of that Door. The fewer people who are aware of its existence, the better. General Mustang is due to arrive at your location shortly. You’re to disclose this information to no one save him. Flame has dealings with the Gate
of Truth; he will know what to do. Let him help Miles.”

Scar’s brow furrowed. Perhaps the woman was not as intransigent as he thought.

“And I’ll withhold demeriting the Major for the time being. At least until he’s well enough to withstand the tongue lashing he has coming to him.”

Or not.

"Look after him, sayyidi. Replacing good adjutants is a nuisance. Replacing Miles is impossible. Good afternoon.”

She hung up, leaving the Ishvalan alone with the thrum of white noise and his questions. As the Muhaddith removed the headset, Annika scampered into the tent to retrieve them from him.

“Sayyidi,” she exclaimed breathlessly, “the Professor tells me that the Amestrian soldier is stirring. She ordered me to fetch you.”

He tilted his head in her direction. That was how they referred to Miles: the Amestrian soldier. The Amestrian major. The uniformed jaziyia. His rank. His station. His office. His allegiance. They did not see him as a man of two souls, two hearts, two unreconciled strivings: two worlds in one body. It was, decided the Muhaddith, one of the few things he could truly fault his people for: that they had welcomed him, a murderer, an embittered killer, into their midst without question, but had continually scorned their brother in Amestrian blue.

“Thank you,” he said simply. Then, leaving Annika to watch after him, made his way to the medical pavilion.

Professor Stokes was there waiting for him, leaning against a tentpole as though it was the only thing propping her upright. Her face was shadowed under a floppy sun hat. Even from a distance, Scar could see the bruised crescents under her eyes. She, like him, had been unable to sleep since pulling the Major free of the Door. The experience haunted them both, but unlike the Muhaddith, Winnie didn’t know why.

“What did she say?” asked Stokes, in flawless Ishvalan. The Professor didn't need to specify who she was talking about.

“She expressed her disappointment with the Major's conduct.”

She frowned. “That’s rather harsh. The man has been unconscious for more than a day, muttering in his sleep like a lunatic. It’s not as though he’s kicking back and napping...”

“I doubt General Armstrong feels the medical particulars fall within her sphere of concern.”

“But he was muttering about her—”

“A consequence of the trauma, Professor.” Scar kept his own hypotheses to himself. He doubted Miles would thank him for voicing such things aloud.

“And the Door?”

“Stays shut,” said the Muhaddith coldly, in a tone that did not brook contradiction. He gave Stokes a look intended to close all avenues of conversation.

She did not, however, infer the conclusiveness in his words. Or, more likely, elected to ignore it.
“Hold on one second, *sayyidi,*” she said, switching back to her native tongue in a sudden fit of pique. “We can’t seal off the entire dig site!”

Scar’s expression hardened. “Why not?” he rumbled.

Stokes drew herself up to her full height, which was still barely higher than the Muhaddith’s elbows. “My team has been working on this excavation for the better part of a year, on the preliminary research for even longer. This is archeology: we’re no strangers to danger. Ishval has always furnished us with harsh environmental conditions. Intense heat during the day, freezing temperatures at night, high winds, the fury burns… trust me, at times, some of us yearn to work in a cube farm! Not to mention the wild animals… snakes, spiders, scorpions, all of whom I can’t imagine are very fond of us poking around in *their* dirt! Every day we contend with the risks of spraining an ankle, Lyme disease, valley fever, malaria… packing it all in and shoving off home after one mishap — a mishap on the part of a soldier, no less, not a member of my dig team — risks undermining the bedrock of our profession and throwing away months, no, *years* worth of work!”

The Ishvalan found himself steadily losing patience with her. He sucked in a breath, trying to muster some sufferance where at the best of times, there wasn’t much to be found. “This is not a sprained ankle, Professor. That Door is more dangerous than you can possibly imagine.”

“Well, I just have to take your word for that, don’t I?” she shot back, eyes narrowing shrewdly. Ah… Scar understood. She was not being stubborn. She was trying to leverage the information out of him… “Being as you won’t actually tell me what the Door *is*… or why it turned the perfectly hale and hearty Major Miles into an invalid in the space of thirty seconds!”

He maintained a persistent silence. He could not tell this woman about the Gate of Truth. While he had no qualms about going behind General Armstrong’s back, he found he could not bring himself to go behind Miles’s.

Faced with his stubborn taciturnity, Professor Stoke’s russet eyes flashed. She wore the anger awkwardly, her warm, careworn face crunching like starched cloth. He didn’t think he had ever seen her upset to such a degree. She seemed brittle, jagged, like a krater riddled with cracks. It was possible the incident with Miles had affected her even more than it had Scar.

“Tell me what that Door really is, *sayyid Muhaddith.*”

Red eyes bore into brown. “No.”

“Then the dig stays open.”

A part of him grudgingly admired her tenacity. Another part of him, the much larger, far saner part of him, suspected she was going to get herself and a great many other people seriously hurt. “I could invoke my station as divine Scholar, Professor. The people of Ishval could bar you from Mishaari.”

“Are you threatening me, Mister?”

“That depends on your intentions.”

“Well, don’t waste your breath. Ishval is still an Amestrian protectorate territory and this basin falls outside Amestris’s borders. You have no authority here, religious or otherwise. And I wouldn’t bother ringing Miss Armstrong again, either… unless you intend for her to declare martial law and reinvoke this land…”

The prospect was unfathomable. Scar was offended the Professor would even suggest it.
No. If the dig were two kilometres further West, within the Dairut city limits, then perhaps something could be done. As it was, Mishaaari was the stomping ground of Stokes and the Anthropário Organisation. Scar’s hands were tied.

Seeing the severity of his expression, his grave reluctance, the Professor's voice softened slightly. "Sayyidi, believe me... I’m not trying to be obstinate. I understand your reservations, and I care about Miles, too. Of course I will cordon off the Door, keep my team well away from the pylons until we have a few more answers. But we will continue to work here in Mishaaari. Keep the big picture in mind. Al’Arshif... the restoration of Ishval. This is bigger than you and me, sayyidi. We can't turn our backs on it now."

He suspected pushing the issue further would be a waste of his breath. Even so, Stokes seemed surprised when he offered no rebuttal. She gave a small "oh" of disbelief when Scar merely turned away from her and entered the medical tent. After a beat, he heard her scamper off to make the necessary preparations. Scar knew she had every intention of keeping her word. She had been there when Miles was pulled through; she understood the danger the Door presented, and Scar doubted she was in any hurry to see her students suffer the same fate as the Major.

The stifled darkness of the tent absorbed the sound of his presence, absorbing the echoes. To the Muhaddith’s surprise, Miles was sitting up in his cot, staring at something on the floor. He didn't seem to register Scar's presence. He looked pale with fatigue, stringy from insufficient nutrition, but otherwise unhurt. He had even managed to pull his hair into a tail, though patches of white still stood out in various untidy directions.

The Muhaddith followed Miles's line of sight. There were ventilation pores cut into the canvas of the tent. The high, hot sun streamed through the holes, soaking into the ground; Miles's gaze jumped between the dappled motes of light. He started when the sides of the tent breathed, rippling as the archeologists passed by outside. Each gust of wind emitted the desert's stagnant warmth and sound and stink, the whispers of a world both Miles and the Muhaddith were entirely too tired to face at the present.

Scar cleared his throat. Miles blinked, then peered in his general direction, squinting. The Muhaddith suddenly remembered Colonel Mustang losing his sight after his confrontation with Truth and panic flared across the Ishvalan's sternum like a branding iron.

"Sayyidi," greeted Miles, his voice hoarse from disuse. The alarm abated as quickly as it came.

Scar regarded his slighter counterpart. "How are you feeling?"

Miles considered, cocking his head. "One night on the mountain," he muttered thickly, "a bunch of us spent an evening with a platoon of the boys from out East. We got disgustingly drunk on the rotgut gin Buccaneer used to brew in a distillery under his bunk. I remember waking up the next morning with my mouth feeling like a scorpion's nest and a pounding in my skull like a turbine engine in a tank." The Major lent his head back, squeezing his eyes shut. "Right now, I miss that morning."

The Muhaddith grunted. "You are fortunate you feel that well."

"Oh, that's easy for you to say."

Scar's lips pulled back from his teeth and his face creased with something like consternation. Then he shook his head.

Miles furrowed his brow. "What?"
"Do you remember what happened?"

"...yes."

Neither man said anything. Miles bunched the bedsheets in his fists, but he had taken to staring at the islands of sunlight again. The Muhaddith crossed his arms, baring the twin set of arrays tattooed on his radial muscles. Due to his familiarity with both alchemy and alkehestry, Scar could sense the fretting of transmutational energy in the earth, the occasional trebling of the air, like an ever-present background hum.

But, in that tent, there was nothing for him to feel. He could imagine he was floating in salt water, his senses deadened, the sounds and smells and sights trapped in bubbles that spiralled lazily to the surface.

"And no," amended Miles quietly, jarring the Muhaddith from his thoughts. The Major blinked rapidly, as though trying to resurrect something in his mind's eye. "It's vague. There are edges against the darkness, like outlines, and every now and then a flash of colour streaks out of the gray. But I can never really grasp any of the slivers of memories that emerge. It's as though a part of me is trying to reject them."

"I think that is probably wise."

"Do you?"

"Just because the Truth exists within a certain reach does not mean all should seek to grasp it."

"In my defence, I didn't exactly have much of a choice." Miles tried to feign petulance. Scar was not fooled, but he humoured the Major anyway.

"According to your commander, you had every choice. You just made the wrong one."

Miles groaned. "Oh, sayyidi, you didn't tell her?"

"I did."

"Why?"

Because you were crying for her, he thought, but elected to keep the comment well to himself. He suspected that particular nugget of information would embarrass Miles at best. At worse, it would shame him.

Scar did not understand _why_. After all, it wasn't as though the Major and his superior presented a unique case...

"It seemed the correct protocol at the time," he decided.

A deep breath. Miles still didn't sound particularly happy about it, but he admitted resignedly, "I can't fault you that, I suppose. Did she say anything else?"

"She berated your performance."

Rather than defend himself, Miles nodded slowly. "That's to be expected."

"Is it?"

"She has high standards."
"Ishval does not fall under her jurisdiction. It is not her place to have standards of any kind."

"But I remain her adjutant," the soldier argued. "I am her representative in this country... and my every decision is a reflection of her authority."

A long, narrow trench erupted between the Muhaddith's eyebrows. "You are both very strange people."

"You're not wrong about that, my friend. Who knows... perhaps my own standards are a bit skewed." Miles scratched absentmindedly at one sideburn. He was steadily becoming more lucid; the Muhaddith imagined the rest must have done him a world of good. "Is Professor Stokes all right?"

Scar's expression must have soured, because Miles straightened in bed, suddenly the picture of military poise. "What happened?"

"She has refused to seal the temple."

The Major's face swung towards the entrance to the tent, rupturing in disbelief. "What?"

"There is little you can do about it. I suggest you put it out of your mind."

Miles responded by completely ignoring him, swinging a leg out of bed. The Major took a few meaningful steps, teetered, then clutched his head. Scar, sighing in resignation, went to steady him, but Miles just smacked the proffered hand away. "Where is she?" he demanded.

"This is a waste of time, Major."

"Where?"

"She's—"

"Sayyid Muhaddith!" At that moment, seemingly oblivious to the urgency of the two Ishvalans, Annika burst through the tent, white braid trailing behind her like the tail of a comet. She carried the communications equipment in a pack on her back. Scar thought it made her look like a tortoise. A sweaty, overextended Ishvalan brat and the world's strangest tortoise. "The Youswell train has arrived in the station!"

Rather than acknowledge the news himself, the Muhaddith deferred to Miles. The Major took a few stuttering strides towards the girl. "General Mustang's party?"

Annika's eyes flicked between the two men. Scar tried not to look too annoyed by her insistence in addressing him rather than the man actually responsible for such administrative nonsense. Fortunately, she eventually settled on Miles, though decided to stare somewhere above his right collarbone. "Uh, yes." No honorific, noted the Muhaddith, irritated. "All six of them, including the General."

Miles's pasty pallor darkened considerably. "Six?"

"Y-yes, the Flame Alchemist and his ret—"

"There should be seven," the Major interrupted: "Mustang, four men, and two women."

Annika shook her head. "No... there's only one woman in their party."

Miles blew an errant strand of white hair out of his face. "If Grumman insists on altering the crew manifest at the last minute," he grumbled, "he could at least tell me that he elected to keep Ross
"Oh, I think you're mistaken jaz—sir. The Ross woman is present and accounted for. As are, uh..." she checked a small list attached to the headset, screwing her eyes together to decipher the shorthand, "Breda, Havoc, Fu-eery, Falman, and Mustang."

The Muhaddith glanced at Miles, who was at that moment glancing away, his expression creased in worry.

Something was wrong.

The Flame Alchemist's woman...

"Anything else to report?" asked Miles sternly, shelving his concern.

"Yes... the train was also carrying a secondary party in addition to the envoy from Central City."

The Muhaddith sucked his teeth in annoyance. It was just like the Amestrian military to conflate a seven-man envoy with an entire squadron. If half of Central Command had arrived on that train, Professor Stokes would be apoplectic; Scar doubted he'd be in a particularly cheery mood himself. With Miles's condition tenuous and the Door still a very real threat, a large military presence was the last thing Dairut needed.

"Just two of them," Annika clarified, sensing the trepidation in their expressions.

Miles frowned. "Who are they?"

"I saw them at a distance, but I didn't catch their names," she explained. "Two alchemists, going by the state of them. Eccentric. A bit of an odd pair: a golden-haired boy and a tall woman... although she may have been a man. It was difficult to tell."

Golden-haired boy... and alchemist. For a moment, the Muhaddith entertained the welcome possibility that their luck was about to change. A sidelong glance at Miles told him the Major was mulling over the prospect as well.

"Yes..." Annika went on, piecing her memory back together, more for her own benefit than for theirs. "A boy in a dark cloak, and a thin, pale figure with black hair, tied in a plait, wearing a hat. With transmutation circles on their hands."

"They never found his body."

"No one has seen him."

"Died in the attacks?"

"Just disappeared."

"Fled to Xing."

"Living."
“Dead.”

The duality fought for dominance within him, the diametric threatening to pull his insides apart: terror experienced as rage and rage as an ugly, mutant anticipation. The Muhaddith's pain and fury manifested in the rolling of his gut and in a throb above his eye, a nerve spasm in his shin. Strong enough to dismantle both the sun and his heart.

He opened his eyes to the blinding desert light, the stench of burning.

Scar's voice was dangerously calm when he ordered Annika, "Take me to them.

"Take me to the two alchemists."

Chapter End Notes

I'll be honest, this wasn't my best chapter. There are only so many ways you can write a rigid Ishvalan monk silently reacting to things
A Quitted Rook

"You notice everything," he seethed, glaring up at his subordinate, green meeting grey. "You used to pass judgement on our dress blues if there was so much as a ribbon out of alignment! So how in the hell did you not notice the Boss's gloves?"

Falman shrunk away from his anger, well and truly cowed. He stared at the floor as though begging it to swallow him. "I-I thought I did, sir, but with the dust and the commotion, and coming under heavy fire—"

"We couldn't see shit in there," muttered Jean dejectedly, cutting across Falman's stammer. Havoc sat away from the group, his rifle braced on one knee, every inch of him caked in clay. "Even Ri didn't spot 'em until it was too late."

Heymans Breda clenched his fists until his knuckles cracked. "How could this happen..." he muttered, each word sizzling on his tongue, "how could we have allowed this to happen..."

"We were outgunned," said Ross, a quiet presence at Breda's side. "Outmanned. Outmanoeuvred."

Heymans ran a hand through his red hair, his breaths coming out in laboured puffs, like they did after a few too many shots of whiskey, which, incidentally, he would have murdered a man for at that moment. The guilt was like gasoline in his guts, his insides eroding slowly in the toxicity. Like oxygen in the Boss's transmutation, it needed little more than a spark to set it ablaze.

No words seemed adequate. He wanted to shout, to have a tantrum and beat his hands on the ground like a toddler. The bite of helplessness was tearing and vicious.

Havoc had broken the news, but it was Falman — the resident savant, and the man whose express purpose in being there was to notice, to observe, to compile — who had borne the brunt of Breda's anger. And, of course, the Second Lieutenant had made no move to defend himself, hanging his head, nodding mutely as Breda heaped recriminations upon what was already a massive aggregation of shame of Falman's own fashioning. But Heymans knew, in some distant part of him, that the entire monumental fuckup was his fault. He was Riza's direct subordinate, and as such, he was responsible for the safety of his comrades. He was the one who had mobilised the troops. He was the one who had carried Roy to the adjacent car. The Boss's arm has flopped over Heymans's shoulder, for chrissakes, and Breda still hadn't registered his commander's bare hands, devoid of his trademark ignition cloth. He tore into Falman for failing to notice the obvious when Breda ought to have directed his anger at someone else entirely, at someone far more deserving. At himself.

A terrible misery crept into him like damp into bare timber, like the strange, claret-coloured twilight left in the wake of the sandstorm. It seeped into his pores, travelling to his heart. Even the clattering of the cars and the huff of the steam engine came to him as though from a deep well rather than a few hundred years along the rails.
The more Breda orbited around his memories, the more he replayed the events over and over again in his mind, the more the details crystallised in their clarity. Riza must have removed the gloves when they found Roy's body. Obscured by the wind and the blowing sand, no one noticed when she slipped them on. Breda hadn't been paying attention. He hadn't been careful. He hadn't—

He felt someone move close to him: Maria Ross, her shoulder pressed against his.

Breda took a shaking breath, held it until his head felt light, released it slowly.

He'd screwed up. He'd made a grievous error of judgement; they all had. But he allowed himself to accept the reality of it. He swallowed its bitter tonic. Though the anger squeezed his brain, threatening to swamp the strategic thinking he so desperately needed in that moment, he forced himself to focus on his men. He had to get tough and start listening to his conscious... middle ground guilt and peevish frustration was no good to anyone, especially not to the Boss and his Captain.

He looked at each member of the envoy. Havoc refused to meet anyone's eye, staring dully at the side of the railcar. Every now and again he crossed and recrossed his legs, easing the pins and needles in his muscles, a sobering reminder of his too-recent paralysis. The old injury tended to snag when Jean was under heavy stress. Breda knew he must have been in some pain, but he hadn't said boo about it since he returned with Falman in tow.

Vato leant against the wall, his head rocking with the motion of the train, as though someone had cut a stabilising tendon in his neck. He frowned mournfully through the film of dust plastering his face. He, like Havoc, had been wretchedly quiet since their return, silently enduring Breda's outrage.

Fuery, poor kid, seemed the most shaken. He'd been stripped of his sand suit and sat in his undershirt, his arm swathed in bandages. Pale, hunched over, wide eyes blinking behind his glasses, which rested slightly askew on the bridge of his nose, he looked tragically upset.

Then there was Maria, an outsider in many regards, but no less wounded than the rest of them. It went far beyond any personal stake in the lives of her superiors, although that, too, existed in its own right. Riza Hawkeye had been one of her bunkmates at the military academy, and Roy Mustang had saved her life after she was implicated in the death of Brigadier-General Hughes. Maria had fought with them on the Promised Day. In the midst of the battle, she had been the Boss's voice, declaring the Flame Alchemist's cause to the people.

In that moment, Breda knew Maria felt their pain as her own, perhaps, in a way, to even greater extent. She had always been sensitive — even Ed Elric, who had the emotional insight of a tree frog, had seen it. She absorbed their pain like a sponge, took it into herself, as though in an attempt to bleed the suffering from the air. Stolid and silent at his side, Maria was Breda's ministry of grace. She didn't attempt to reassure him with false, saccharine sentiments. She granted him the dignity of his own process, so practical in her quiet humanity, so simple and honest.

He fought the sudden urge to squeeze her hand.

Instead, he stiffened himself into military posture and cleared his throat. All four of his men shifted to compose themselves.

"Falman," Breda managed, his expression schooled into some semblance of calm and control, "do you remember anything about the truck... any identifiable features at all."

Dust was flung from grey hair as he shook his head, causing the Second Lieutenant to cough. "No,
sir. It was a standard four-wheel-drive utility vehicle, a leaf spring suspension, military surplus, perhaps. No license. No logos. I could barely make out the model through the sandstorm."

Breda nodded, filing the information away. "That's still something to go on. Thanks, Lieutenant."

Vato looked up briefly at Breda's attempt at conciliation, perhaps passive apology, but did not comment on it.

"Fuery," Breda addressed the Command Sergeant, "when we reach Dairut, get on the horn to military police headquarters in East City, see if there's been any reported carjackings of vehicles matching Falman's description. Circulate details with the local authorities... see if these bastards signed a lease or checked into an auto shop anytime recently. You two collaborate on that, yeah?"

Fuery murmured a soft, "Yes, sir."

“We'll have a long chat with Major Miles, as well. Word may not have reached our ears in Central, but we need to determine if there has been any recent escalation in terrorist activity in Ishval, from whom, and for what reasons. And, if necessary, rake some asses over the coals. Jean, you'll be in charge of coordinating a counteroffensive if it comes to that.”

“Yup,” muttered Havoc.

Heymans blew out a breath, crossing his arms. “In the meantime, people...” he began, looking between each of his men, "we need some answers. This was supposed to be a glorified exercise in library science, and we've managed to botch it up to the royalist degree." And when Roy wakes up you better believe they'll be the devil to pay, thought Breda grimly. "What went wrong? Fuery?"

"Sir?"

"Could those guys have intercepted any communiques pertaining to the Dairut envoy?"

"I-I mean, sure, sir... the General's visit was a matter of public record." Fuery cleared his throat. "But the exact date and time of departure was kept very much under wraps to prevent just this sort of thing from happening. Only Führer Grumman, General Armstrong, Major Miles, and a small group of Dairut officials were aware the exact details. That kind of information wouldn't have been bandied around on outside lines, sir."

Breda considered. "Could someone cross-reference our departure with the rail schedule?"

"It's unlikely," provided Falman: "According to all public transit records, the final station on this line is Youswell — Dairut lacks the necessary population size to qualify as a "town" on any zoning permits. Those men would have no way of determining which of the many trains on the Eastern Rail was bound for Dairut."

"Besides," said Ross quietly, "the Captain's kidnappers weren't putting out proverbial horses. It's not as though they've been hitting random trains for the past week trying to get lucky, otherwise we would have heard about it. They coordinated their attack, waiting for the fury burns to roll through before striking. They were expecting us. They knew the Captain was going to be on this train."

"They had everything planned," agreed Falman solemnly.

"Except they weren't after Hawkeye."

Everyone's eyes swung over to Havoc. The blonde man stirred in his corner, pulling himself out of
the dark borehole of his thoughts.

He went on, his words grim: "It's why she snatched his ignition cloth. Those bastards weren't after
the Captain. They were after the General. They took plenty of pot shots at me and Vato but once
they saw those white gloves, Riza didn't have to dodge so much as a single bullet."

Breda pressed his chin against his chest. He suspected Havoc had reached the meat of it, and the
Lieutenant's account confirmed what few suspicions Heymans had been cultivating since the
attack: if those assholes had wanted the lot of them dead, they would have lobbed their IEDs at the
engine, or taken a lesson from old man Grumman and blown the East City bridge. Killing the
General hadn't been the intention. Outside the bulwark of Central Command, Mustang was
vulnerable, and en route to Ishval, his retinue lacked any legitimate means of shoring up their
defences. If Breda were their squad leader, he would have hit the train during the sandstorm, too,
when Roy's vision would be too impaired to attempt Flame Alchemy, and even the General's
famous sharp-eyed bodyguard was rendered blind. It was a classic case of hostile extraction,
executed with frightening efficacy.

"Then why take Captain Hawkeye?" asked Fuery meekly, peering around at his superiors. Jean
snorted.

"They fucked up," he said with all the tact and finesse of a sledgehammer. "It's the sand suits,
yeah? We all look the same in 'em. Hawkeye probably figured they were after the General when
the rear car got blown to hell, so she took the Boss's gloves and hoped the sandstorm would be
strong enough to cover for the fact that she bears about as much resemblance to Roy as I do to
Alex Armstrong."

"But there's only a marginal discrepancy in their height," said Maria, puzzling through the details,
"and both are them are on the slimmer side. With the suit mesh obscuring their eyes and hair..."

"They're ostensibly identical," finished Breda. "Wouldn't have worked for the rest of us... Falman
and Havoc are too tall, Fuery was injured, and Maria and I were otherwise busy lugging the
General to safety. And once she had his ignition gloves, it wouldn't have left her attackers in any
doubt."

Fuery looked up, dazed and sad, and mouthed: "She was trying to protect him..."

Breda scrubbed a hand over his face.

Of course she was.

That's what she always did.

He wanted to be angry with her, but the brazen act of self-sacrifice was so frustratingly in character
for her that it didn't come as any particular shock. They felt Riza's absence acutely — she was their
Queen, after all — but the motivations were what they had come to expect from a woman of her
single-mindedness. It was her mission imperative, some strange messianic prerogative, a
consequence of her own self-reflexiveness — Riza Hawkeye was a being carved from her
devotion, that breathtakingly fierce loyalty she reserved for the man she held closest to her heart.
The tragic irony of it was that Roy was as much her protector as she was his. They were reciprocal.

Idiots, Heymans thought suddenly, resentfully, the pair of 'em. Couple a' idiots, following each
other into hell like two suicidal morons, willing to die to protect each other.

Breda was a very intelligent man, but sometimes people — especially people as mythologically
perennial as Mustang and Hawkeye — managed to confound him. He didn't understand it: hopeless romantics like Jean Havoc were always saying to him that love is being ready to do that sort of fool thing, to die for each other. But with so much bad shit in the world as it was, Breda didn't reckon it was healthy to add something as good as love to the list of things that could kill you.

Perhaps their stations had denied their having any choice in the matter, and indeed, against his not inconsiderable good judgement, Breda was beginning to find himself on the unfriendly end of similar emotional entanglements. Perhaps he would go on being confounded, but once, just once, he longed to see the sort of devotion that demonstrated a willingness to live for each other.

Carrying on, enduring, even when your heart is breaking... that was the stuff that took real courage.

Breda peered past Maria's shoulder, to the slumbering figure on a musty old bedroll.

Roy would be waking up soon. The looming inevitability frightened Breda quite beyond any fear he had ever felt before.

Roy’d failed to protect her. They’d failed to protect her, and those bastards had stripped the Flame Alchemist of his shadow. Someone was slated to make restitution for it; Breda prayed it wouldn’t be him.

"What..." Fuery swallowed, breaking the heavy silence; he cast around for the right thing to say, a way to phrase the question everyone had been thinking about but no one had dared voice aloud: "what will they do when they realise they have the wrong person?"

"We're not gonna talk about that."

"But, sir—"

"We're not," snapped Breda, harsher than he'd intended. Fuery flinched away from him. He was so determined to avoid any talk of Riza’s fate, Heymans didn’t even apologise.

"The Captain can look after herself," the First Lieutenant insisted with as much conviction as he could manage, putting the nauseating possibilities out of his mind, for the sake of his own sanity if not for that of his men. "And she wouldn't want us wasting our time worrying about her. She’d see it as slacking off or something.” The joke fell flat. Breda persevered regardless: “Our immediate concern should be reaching Dairut and marshalling our strength. We do it by the book: contact Grumman, mobilise Major Miles's forces, and bring the Captain home."

Able to work out of a permanent base of operation, and with the backing of the Dairut garrison as well as the local Ishvalan officials, Breda knew they stood a better chance of seeing Riza alive again. As much as he wanted to stop the train and get his nose to the ground, pulling the emergency brake in the middle of the desert, searching blindly for tire tracks that would have been scoured clear by the sandstorm, and chasing after an unknown enemy operating outside the purview of the law, Breda knew they’d get their asses handed to them, and very likely make the situation worse for Hawkeye.

But the attackers couldn't risk too many moves; their carefully calculated hit on the train was evidence enough of that, as was the conservative size of their vehicle and the small number of men in their ranks. In Dairut, the Amestrian forces would have the weight of numbers and resources. Then Mustang's men would take the battle to the terrorists... on Mustang's terms.

"Ow..."
Breda tucked his hands under his armpits. Speak of the devil...

Roy’s black hair stuck out in sandy, sweat-crusted tufts. His mouth was bruised from being struck by a piece of debris, his dark eyes unfocused. Concussion, Breda warranted. Like Fuery, he’d been stripped down to his undershirt; his sand suit having doubled as a particularly scratchy pillow. Breda thought his commanding officer bore a rather striking resemblance to Riza's mangy little beast… a dirty, dusty, bonked-on-the-head Black Hayate.

Heymans did not miss the irony in that. Somehow, it made him dread the forthcoming conversation even more.

Roy made the truly herculean effort of trying to sit up, crunching his sore abdominal muscles and more than one tender rib, if the bruises were any indication. Breda counted himself strangely fortunate the General hadn’t had anything to eat since Central: if there was one thing worse than sharing an enclosed space with what Heymans suspected was soon to be one very upset Flame Alchemist, it was that same very upset Flame Alchemist being sick all over himself. Roy scooted over to the nearby wall, his trousers skating softly against floorboards. He blinked away the sweat, reeling from the bright after-light behind his eyelids. Every time he moved his head, he winced. His hand hovered above his mouth

"Is there something on my lip?" he muttered thickly, the sound muffled.

Breda was trying not to stare at the Boss's mouth, but his line of sight kept betraying him. One moment his green eyes were obediently on his commanding officer's black ones and the next they were rested on the purple, swollen mess that had been a perfectly ordinary bottom lip only a few hours before; so ordinary, in fact, that Breda could not recall what it had looked like.

"You got knocked by some shrapnel, General," supplied Maria gently.

"You won't be kissing anyone anytime soon, sir," said Havoc, brutalising the tense atmosphere with his sarcasm, in an attempt, Breda figured, at keeping the General from counting heads...

Heymans didn't know why his friend bothered. It wasn't like the Boss wasn't going to notice.

Roy groaned, nursing his jaw. "Now you might actually stand a chance, Jean." After working out the pain in his busted lip, the General asked, his voice taking on a far more serious tone, "Was the train attacked?"

Breda steeled himself. "Yeah... and you caught the full force of it. Typical: you always gotta be the centre of attention, sir." Now he was doing it, too, trying to distract their commander with flippancy. Breda didn't know why they insisted on torturing the poor brute; it wasn't out of kindness. Cowardice hit a little closer to the mark.

"I’m not about to break the habit of a lifetime.” The Flame Alchemist's eyes wandered, attention drifting between his officers. "Was anyone else hurt...? Oh, Fuery..."

"Just a graze, sir," said the Command Sergeant, a little too quickly. He tried to shuffle his bandaged arm behind his back, winced, then let it hang limply. “I'm fine.”

Curiosity and alarm resolved themselves into a quiet mumble, consumed suddenly by his own dark introspections: "Nothing was supposed to happen... this was supposed to be routine."

Roy's expression turned stony. The General could be a right bastard when the mood suited him, but he could switch from silly to serious so abruptly it caught people off guard — which was rather the point, Breda knew from experience. In matters requiring his serious engagement, Roy Mustang
became one of a quiet, contemplative stock with whom mauldering conversation was always scant, as hard to catch or protract as the half-life of some transient element. He didn’t suffer diversions or distractions gladly, whether they came from his enemies… or his allies.

Breda maintained his usual composure, resolved to affecting some outward appearance of calm, but inside his guts were beginning to churn. He felt the first hairline crack in his mask when Roy peered up at his strategist and asked:

"Where’s the Captain?"

Breda felt the brush of fingertips — Maria's — on his wrist and stiffened his hand. She was as silent as the rest of them; but, out of the corner of his eye, he saw her head jerk forward as though to say something, before retreating again as her nerve failed her.

Roy was sat up straight, every muscle — and there were a lot of them — in his pale, stringy body going taut. The General took a long, slow breath; Breda fought the urge to cower under the fervent focus of those black eyes.

"Heymans," said Roy, his words dangerously soft, "where is Hawkeye?"

The question didn’t fall into the silence so much as plummet. Falman opened his mouth, closed it again. Havoc began the old ritual of crossing and recrossing his legs, massaging one thigh. Maria turned her head to her shoulder. Breda felt his courage dissolving into discomfort.

"They took her, sir."

Everyone turned to look at Fuery. The young Command Sergeant stared back defiantly. His eyes, almost as black as Roy’s own, were unwavering.

“Captain Hawkeye tricked the attackers, General. She saved your life. But… they… I’m sorry, sir, they took her.”


Stupid kid.

For a moment, Roy seemed to them impossibly far away, floundering in the black waters of some distant, crushing ocean. And Heymans did not know how to reach him, how to bring him home. Riza did... but Riza was gone.

Breda had been witness to Mustang's suffering a few times before, already a few times too many, and each one felt just as destructive, unprecedented in the history of the world. The grief and devastation fissured into Roy’s face was so strident, so unexpected in its intensity, that fear surged in Breda's chest. He was suddenly terrified his friend and commander was going to do something stupid. It wouldn’t be the first time. Breda would never say so, but it was the hardest thing in the world, being intimately aware of the extent of the Flame Alchemist's pain.

Breda dared to throw a glance at Maria; it suddenly seemed very important that he could see her face, that she could his face. When their eyes met, briefly, they seemed stricken. Maria knew of the General and the Captain’s closeness — everyone did; they’d been working as commanding officer and adjutant for ten years, as superior and subordinate for even longer, since Ishval. But for all — or perhaps, for the lack of — Maria’s assumptions regarding the level of intimacy between such diligently private people, she had never before considered just how vicious their loyalty was. Breda himself had once believed their love heroic, but the events of the Promised Day had shattered such delicate paradigms of pathos, crushed them underfoot into a fine white powder. Looking at Maria,
he could see a similar veil rising from her eyes, a glimmer of true understanding as some light was thrown into that dark, dark place.

But then Roy sagged, the conflagration of emotion in his eyes suddenly sputtering out as he nodded in weary acceptance. The loss and resignation on his face before he bowed his head and turned away lacerated Heymans’s heart almost as much as the utter devastation and rage a moment before. He never felt anything halfway, the General. He was a lot like Fullmetal in that respect. And, like Fullmetal, he was a slave to the sheer efficacy of his emotions. Burning bright and burning fast. Fitting for the Flame Alchemist, even if it was brutally sad.

“They,” muttered Roy, bracing himself against the side of the train as he lurched to his feet; everyone in the railcar knew better than to lend their assistance. “What do you mean, they?”

Breda chose that moment to spare Fuery any further acts of fearlessness. “A small group of unknown assailants attacked the train during the fury burn,” he relayed, staying as objective as he could manage. “We reckon you were the intended target, Boss. The Captain acted in the manner she thought most appropriate. Unfortunately… seems there was a case of mistaken identity. They took her... thinking she was you.”

“Manner most appropriate,” parroted Roy, utter disdain in the words; the contempt stung. “Keep it up, Heymans, you might begin to sound like her.”

Breda did not take it as a compliment.

Mustang went to run his fingers through his hair, and seemed to realise, for the first time, that his hands were bare. He froze, staring at the heels of his palms like he was trying to decipher his life lines. Breda could only watch, helpless, as what had until a moment ago been a strong supposition crystallised into certainty.

“She didn’t…” he muttered.

Havoc sighed in resignation. “She did.”

The General rounded on the blonde man in a fury, his raised voice slicing the stagnant air like a razorblade: “And you just let her?!?”

“I didn’t know she was wearing them!” snapped Jean, tension uncoiling at the base of his spine, blue eyes blazing. “It was all we could do to keep your sorry ass from getting hole punched!”

Roy grit his teeth. Continuing to glare at his First Lieutenant, he instead addressed the Command Sergeant: “Fuery,” he growled, “go get the engineer and the telegraph operator. I want to know how far we are from Dairut.”

Meek, mild Falman shifted his weight. “Uh, sir… if my memory serves me—”

Breda riveted Vato with a look that could have melted the snow on Mount Briggs.

“Go, Fuery.”

“Sir!”

Kain leapt to his feet, almost jarring his injured arm. When he had passed through to the next car, Roy turned and glared at Breda. He glared at the rest of them, too, but Heymans, his new SOC, seemed his primary focus.
“Whoever is responsible for this,” said the Flame Alchemist, his black eyes boiling in the red half-light like fire in obsidian, “and I don’t care who they are… and I don’t care about whatever she might have told you about holding me to the righteous path. Understand this… they will not live through this if she does not.”

He looked to each of them: Vato, eyes uncharacteristically wide; Maria, clamping down hard on her fear; Jean, pained expression indicative of his being very familiar with Roy’s rage; and Heymans, silently hoping whoever took Riza had more common sense and control rattling around in their skulls than their commanding officer. Because if they didn’t, and the General did some predictably rash and undoubtedly destructive… Breda didn’t think Hawkeye’s spirit would ever forgive him.

The climate of barely-suppressed anger, humid and cloying, suddenly burst with the sound of a very high screech, coming from the next car.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!” shouted Kain, powering through what threatened at any minute to rupture into a squeal of surprise.

“WHAT THE HELL DO YOU MEAN, WHAT AM I DOING HERE?! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?!”

“Could we use our inside voices, please?”

Breda’s eyes widened. That second shout…

As Roy Mustang strode forward, face rented in a snarl, Edward Elric burst through from the next car.

The kid — though hardly a kid anymore, Breda realised in amazement, the Chief was taller than Fuery — came to a grinding halt just shy of barrelling straight into Roy. The two alchemists regarded each other in silent, stunned disbelief. It had been years since they’d last seen each other: Mustang had still been a Colonel. Ed had still been five foot four. He was pushing five-eight, now, easily. It suited him, decided Breda. He no longer looked like the scrawny, hyperactive little squirt who spent most of his waking moments parading around in garish clothing and pestering his commanding officer… when he wasn’t performing feats of alchemical genius. Aside from his height, the wardrobe had changed: a tweed blazer over a maroon shirt, slacks, a pair of Chelseas instead of those steel-toed black boots that used to stomp around the halls of Eastern Headquarters. He still wore his blonde hair long, but pulled into a tidy ponytail instead of a braid. Sans the beard and the spectacles, Ed was the spitting image of his father.

“Ed!” cried Falman and Ross at the same time. Havoc jumped down from his box in surprise. He stifled a yelp as he jarred his legs.

Roy did not share their enthusiasm.

“Why,” seethed Mustang, his words acidic, “why are you on my train, Fullmetal?”

The Chief, true to form, fixed the other man was a contemptuous sneer. “Your train? Only the Führer has his own train, bastard, and you’re not quite there yet.” Ed frowned. “What happened to your mouth? And why aren’t you wearing a shirt?”

He supposed he hadn’t changed that much, admitted Breda grudgingly. He was still a little shit, if attitude if not in stature.

A vein stood out like a cable on Roy’s throat. His fingers twitched.
“That sounds like General Mustang… oh. That’s because it is General Mustang.”

Breda gaped as Major Miké strode in behind Edward, the wind catching her black hair and ruffling her clothing. It leant her an air of gravity that unsettled rather than impressed.

“Major!” gasped Ross; Heymans felt her stand to attention beside him. “What are you—”

“Major Miké,” Mustang immediately turned his attentions to his subordinate officer, ignoring Edward completely, which made the Chief redden, “care to explain what you’re going on my private charter?”

The tall, severe woman snapped a crisp salute. “Sir!” she rasped; she sounded like she smoked more than Havoc. She didn’t, of course; she merely shared the same voice as a certain genocidal maniac. “We were ordered to board this train by Führer Grumman, General.”

Roy’s eyes narrowed. “Grumman… what for?”

She hesitated. “It’s…” she stole a glance at Edward, who hadn’t stopped glaring at the General.

“Don’t look at him, Feldspar, look at me!” growled Mustang, his narrow chest beginning to rise and fall heavily. He glowered at the woman who looked far too much like her evil sonofabitch of a brother for Breda’s comfort. “What are you doing here?”

She took a deep breath, holding out her hands, palms up, flashing those snarled transmutation circles as though wishing for something to materialise in the middle of them. Some object of appeasement, perhaps. “We can’t tell you, sir,” she said softly. Her hands remained out — in supplication or forgiveness, Breda couldn’t say.

Roy’s eyes blazed, burning brighter. The other officers grew uneasy. The railcar suddenly seemed far too cramped, the enmity bubbling between Mustang’s retinue, compounded with the addition of Ed and the Feldspar Alchemist, threatening to boil over.

“Major,” he ground out, his swollen jaw lending him a mutant, misshapen appearance, his voice fleshy and thick, “this train has just been attacked an unknown terrorist organisation. My communications expert is injured and my adjutant is missing, presumed POW. Unless you want to find yourself facing summary court martial on the god damn station platform when we arrive in Dairut, you will tell me what you and Edward Elric are doing on my train!”

Ed’s golden eyes widened. “Hawkeye…” he breathed, the full seriousness of the situation sinking in with all the elegance of an anchor. “Hawkeye’s missing…”

Feldspar grimaced. “Sir… I am so sorry. But I’m under orders from his Excellency. I can’t tell you.”

To her credit, Major Miké looked truly pained. If she was faking it, she was a damn good actor. Breda still didn’t trust her as far as he could throw her, but still…

At that moment, he spied Maria in his peripherals, squirming like someone in a wool sweater. Pasty-faced, frowning profusely, she seemed distinctly ill at ease, her eyes shifting from Ed to Major Miké to the floor. Abruptly, remembering that Major Miké was her direct superior, Breda realised Maria knew. Whatever had landed the Feldspar Alchemist and Edward on their train, the Lieutenant knew the reason why.

At least… she knew the reasons she had been told.
A nasty suspicion congealed in Heymans’s brain like an aneurism. Once lodged, he couldn’t seem to shake it away.

“General,” said Breda, choosing his words carefully, but otherwise doing very little to warm his sudden coldness, “the men who took Hawkeye knew to target this train, specifically the rearmost railcar. They knew the exact time and location to hit us. Like Falman said… that’s not deductible information. That’s specific intel, likely from someone on the inside.” His green eyes levelled at Feldspar. “Yesterday, when I went to fetch Lieutenant Ross, Major Miké was also at the estate of Madam Bradley… on alchemy business. She neglected to be more specific.”

Major Miké deferred to Mustang on account of her title-conferred rank, but Heymans was her underling. She retained no such formalities for him. “Lieutenant Breda,” she scowled at him, “if you mean to accuse me of something, you could at least do so directly.”

Maria rounded on him, startled and perhaps a little hurt. Heymans didn’t look at her.

“Directly?” Havoc slapped the feeling back into his thighs, overcome suddenly with the worry over his commander’s dangerously thin temper, the grief at losing Hawkeye, and the pain in those goddamn legs of his; if he had been nursing a cigarette, he would have bitten right through it. “I’ll give it to ya directly then, Major. I’ve never been one for flowery talk.”

Falman muttered urgently, “Jean…!” but Havoc wasn’t listening.

“Your appearance here looks real crap after we just lost our Captain.”

Ed stabbed a finger at Havoc. “The Major’s been with me the whole time!” he protested angrily. “She hasn’t been communicating with any terrorists, and she wouldn’t dream of harming Hawkeye!”

Her sibling had no such qualms, remembered Breda bitterly.

“And how would you know that, Fullmetal?” snarled Roy, still slightly taller than the former alchemist and doing his utmost to emphasise the fact, even if the difference was near negligible. “Last time I heard, you were down in Resembool trimming the verge! What would you know about Major Miké’s dealings?”

Ed barred his teeth, pitching forward on the balls of his feet, making his automail leg clank. “Because she's part of the reason I'm here, you ass!”

“Then tell me!”

“Fine,” snapped Ed. “I will. I’m not gonna sit by and watch you torch some innocent woman just because you couldn't keep track of your bodyguard!”

Roy's face twisted into something ugly. Danger suddenly pressed fiercely upon the back of Heymans's neck.

“Edward…” murmured Major Miké, much in the same way Falman had done to Jean. Breda suspected she wasn’t warning the Chief against disclosing sensitive information, but rather about antagonising an already thoroughly antagonised Flame Alchemist.

“We’re here because of Selim Bradley!” the kid said. “Another Portal has opened, Col—General. We’re gonna close it.”

Roy froze, his furious grimace unfurling. Everyone did went ominously quiet, save Major Miké,
who just sighed. It was a deep, exhausted sound, the piano-wire tautness of her body uncoiling. Breda almost felt the bottled-up energy diffusing into the air.

“Another Portal?” repeated the Flame Alchemist, not masking his scepticism. “Another attempt at Human—”

"No."

"Then what..."

"It would take too long to explain," he said irritably. "Just trust me on this, Colonel."

"General."

"General, whatever. Look, we’re headed for the ruins of old Xerxes." Ed's temper began to calm to a simmer. “Kim — an unknown force working through Selim suggested we’d find a freestanding Gate somewhere in the East. We don’t know all the details yet, either, General… but we do know that we can’t let this Gate remain open."

Breda could have snapped the stunned silence with a rubber band. He didn’t pretend to know the alchemical details — in fact, he’d be hard-pressed not to dismiss the entire discipline as pseudoscientific mumbo jumbo, if he hadn’t personally witnessed his commanding officer shooting flames out of his hands like a demented firework. Though Ed’s expression was inscrutable, his words precluded everything but the utmost solemnity. That in of itself told Breda he ought to be regarding the situation with complete seriousness. He knew enough to understand that the Gate of Truth functioned as a wellspring of alchemical knowledge, the entrance to God's domain, if one were given to believe in such things. Breda's interpretation rendered it as some sort of Akashic library, an ethereal compendium of all the world's knowledge. He also knew that much of Amestris's misery before the Promised Day was due to bastards like Bradley trying to force alchemists to open such Gates. If Ed seemed to think another one, a rogue one, had beached somewhere, then it spelled trouble. Major trouble.

At that comforting thought, Fuery returned from the front of the train, poking his head through the door.

“Sir,” he began, addressing Mustang, “the engineer says we’re 20 minutes shy of Dairut... but...”

Fuery's face fell, and he took a sudden profound interest in the floor.

Breda only just managed to stifle his groan. Just what they needed, he thought miserably, another goddamn problem. First Hawkeye...

“What is it?” asked Mustang, his voice urgent.

“Something happened in Mishaari,” murmured Kain. “A woman, a Professor Stokes, contacted the engineer some time ago via telegraph. The commanding officer of the Dairut garrison was seriously injured. He’s in a coma.”

“Major Miles?” muttered Roy. Ed started, alarm evident in his wide eyes, but Mustang silenced any forthcoming comment with a raised hand. Much to Breda’s surprise, Ed obeyed. “Did Stokes say what happened?”

Fuery looked pale. “Yes,” he managed. “She said… she said... that right before the Major lost consciousness, he… I'm sorry, the Professor didn't know what it meant, she wasn't very clear in her telegraph...”
“What?” pressed Ed.

“Major Miles said... he said he saw the Truth.”

Chapter End Notes

Roy: If something has happened to Riza I will unleash Hell the likes of which humanity has never seen before or will ever see again... because everyone will be burned to charcoal.

Breda/Havoc/Falman/Fuery: *solemn nods of understanding*

Maria Ross: What the fuck is wrong with you people?
Act IV Scene III: Dulce et Decorum Est

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry for the late update; my research involves astrophotography, which often takes me to locations bereft of internet. And mobile signals. And running water. And civilisation of any kind.

Anywho, this chapter's alternative title is Riza Hawkeye and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She couldn’t breathe properly.

At first, she thought there was something pressing on her face, something damp and heavy, and for one terrifying moment she expected to wake up in the middle of being waterboarded. It would explain her consciousness, and why, when she tried to draw a breath, she couldn’t seem to find an ample amount of oxygen. But even though her face throbbed, the pain radiating from the bridge of her nose right through to the back of her skull, her skin felt sticky and distended instead of damp. There was a film of dark gauze across her eyes — the mesh of the sand suit. Every time she attempted to work out the kinks in her jaw the fabric pulled, that awful viscousness tacking her skin to the material of the mask. There was blood in her mouth, sour and hot. Her teeth ached. The swelling around her nose had squeezed her eyes almost shut. What little she could see was a vignetted blur, the edges soft, the colours dull.

She was surrounded by four brown walls, without windows or furniture; there was nothing else to do but peer listlessly at the beams of timber framing her prison. To look at the splinters that had started to chip away from the passage of time or from fingernails, gouged by other captives as they tried to keep themselves from going mad with boredom, divining absurd meanings from the wall's blank stare.

Riza decided then and there that she would not remain imprisoned long enough to have to resort to wall-reading.

Carefully, she twitched her fingers. Curled her toes. When she tried to move her arms and legs the motion snagged, hands bound behind her back in pillories, the type of restraints typically reserved for alchemists. Her ankles were roped together. Her body ached. Her trapezius muscles howled in protest when she tried to inch herself across the floor. Despite the steadily worsening suspicion that she was in a great deal of trouble, despite the breathtaking pain in her nose and mouth, she couldn’t help but think how ridiculous a picture she must have presented: a grown woman in her shapeless, nut-brown finery, tied up with all the elegance of a lassoed calf and sporting a contusion on her face that must have made her look like some surrealist's fever dream.

Over the hammer blows of her heart pulsing in her ears, she heard figures approaching. Though her memories of the attack returned at their own frustratedly unhurried leisure, she rested fairly assured in her conclusion that she was no longer lashed down to the bed of their truck. Whatever
swaying motions she felt were entirely in her head, a consequence of the nausea. The advancing steps squeaked, and she felt the musty ground give way with every footfall. She deduced she was lying in a basement or cellar, since she couldn’t hear any sounds rising from beneath her, and the floorboards rubbing her cheek were slightly damp.

She kept her head resting on the floor, peering sideways at the wall, so as to feign her unconsciousness a little while longer. As she tried to blink her vision back into focus, two pairs of shoes swam into her peripheries. Black combat boots, steel-capped at a guess, which didn’t improve her constitution in any great respect, especially as they came to rest far too close to her broken nose.

“Got his gloves?” asked one pair of boots.

“Pythos has them,” came the dutiful response; though he was standing right above her — and the baritone of his voice predisposed her to concluding he was in fact a he — his words seem to come from very far away, like the sound was trickling through the silicon earplugs she wore to the shooting range. “He took ’em as soon as we got Flame loaded into the truck. Sand acts as a natural retardant, so I ain’t sure how much damage he coulda done… still…”

A low murmur: “D-doesn’t hurt to be careful.”

“No… especially so far as the Hero of Ishval is concerned.”

For a moment, the pain didn’t feel quite so exquisite. Riza Hawkeye closed her eyes. It had worked, then: they still thought she was Roy. Whether due to her facial injuries or in their hurry to escape Havoc and Falman’s gunfire, they had not yet removed the mask of the sand suit. She was safe in her anonymity for a little while longer.

“Is he awake?” asked the first voice. The sex of the speaker was difficult for Riza to place: the words sounded high and flighty, almost fragile, as though at any moment they would shatter into hysterical laughter or hysterical sobs.

“Gettin’ there, I’d say. His breathin’s picked up.”

The androgynous stranger moved, made a deep sound like moaning; it could have been mouthed laughter.

“I w-wonder if he tastes like ash… I want to open him up.”

Alarm coursed through Riza with terrifying efficacy. It occurred to her then that the first speaker might spell trouble. As he — or perhaps she — shuffled closer, she — or perhaps he — hiccoughed a high, mad titter, the sound of someone in precious want of their wits. Even the Crimson Alchemist had never sounded so unhinged. Kimblee had terrified her because of his passion and piquancy — his single-minded focus that bordered on the obsessive — but more so because of his consummate discipline in maintaining control of himself, his sobering awareness of his own madness. His heresy, he used to call it.

This being, whose breath feathered across the side of Riza’s masked face, whose fingers lingered on her collar as though to tear the flesh there and scoop her hollow like a mussel, didn’t strike her as being unwilling to affect some outward form of sanity so much as unable to.

The second voice sighed resignedly. “Leave ‘im alone, Atreus.” The unknown man sounded as though he was well-accustomed to dealing with his partner’s peculiar behaviour. “Boss’ll be real upset if you hurt ‘im.”
Thankfully, she felt Atreus draw away from her. Riza didn’t know who or what Atreus was, but they made her distinctly uneasy. At least their companion seemed reasonable enough.

“Where is Pythos now?” queried Atreus; they sounded as though they had a grass reed for a tongue.

“That’s ‘im comin’ down now, I reckon.” Riza could hear the sound of approaching footsteps, steadily getting louder, as though descending down a flight of steps. Definitely a basement. “Behave yourself, mate. If Pythos thinks you’ve been foolin’ around with Mustang then we’re both in for it.”

“B-but… but he’s so beautiful…”

Riza swallowed. The motion hurt.

“He ain’t my type… ‘sides, Cassandra needs ‘im for somethin’. Maybe you can have ‘im when we’re done, but you gotta be patient, yeah?”

“Yes… yes, I will be patient. I’m sorry, Mr. Priam. I’m sorry.”

“S’okay. You don’t gotta apologise, just make sure you ain’t doin’ nothin’ stupid.”

“What stupid something would that be, exactly?”

A third presence cut across her limited line of sight: another man, Riza surmised. His voice was deep, but not heavy like Priam’s. It carried well, as though he was accustomed to sermonising. He wasn’t wearing combat boots. His brown brogues stood close to Riza’s chest; his ankles were very skinny.

“Atreus has taken a likin’ to our guest,” boomed Priam, with all the routine of giving a weather report.

A sigh. “Of all the people you could use to satiate your repulsive little urges, Atreus, why does it have to be the one man in the whole of Amestris forbidden to you? No, nevermind, don’t answer that. I probably don’t want to know.”

“That’s probably wise, sir,” said Priam. Atreus made a sad little sound.

The three of them fell silent as they considered her. The pair of brogues stepped closer, pacing in ever decreasing circuits between her bent knees and her bowed, splitting head. Priam and Atreus’s leader — Pythos, they had called him — struck her as being a quiet, diligent person, his measured politeness given entirely to observation. She imagined she felt his eyes on her — not quite undressing her, as Hakuro had done, and certainly not how Atreus would have liked to have done, but considering her with a careful attentiveness: a restorationist pouring over bent and broken books. Doubtless he would have pondered his catch more if not at that moment Riza heard him release a sharp little gasp. The brogues angled away from her to stand facing his two subordinates.

“Priam,” said Pythos carefully, “you have something on your sand suit.”

“Aye, I know, sir. It’s Menelaus’s blood… one of ‘em soldiers got ‘im during the fight.”

“Please, Atreus is positively caked in the stuff. I’m talking about this,” Riza thought she heard the dry rustle of fingertips against fabric, “stuck to your shoulder.”

Riza couldn’t see what it was that had caught Pythos’s attention, but she heard Atreus give a high
little yelp. Even Priam, evidently the more reticent of the two, grunted in disbelief.

“That,” Pythos went on, emphasising each word, “is a hair.”

“Aye, sir.”

“A blonde hair.”

Something caught in Riza’s stomach. Her shoulders began to tremble; she felt nauseated, and her head throbbed terribly.

“The General doesn’t have b-blonde hair,” murmured Atreus; it sounded to Riza as though he was whittling at one of his fingernails. “He has black hair like… like oil, like tar… like a hole in the jawbone after someone rips out a tooth.”

“Two of ‘is underlin's are blondes, sir,” reasoned Priam. “Maybe they’re the ones that got the gear together before headin’ off into the desert. Coulda left a ‘air on ‘im.”

Pythos sighed again. “Remove that mask.”

“Sir, ‘is injuries… if it reopens ‘is wounds then he could lose a lotta blood.”

“Well, you should have thought of that before you turned the Oracle’s face into delicatessen!” snarled Pythos, patience evaporating. “Take off the sand suit!”

To Riza’s horror, it was Atreus’s combat boots that creased as they knelt beside her. Thin, bony fingers with uncomfortably sharp nails scrabbled for a handhold on her mask. Finding the seam between the suit and her collar, Atreus tugged, ripping the mesh away. A band of pain snapped across Riza’s nose and she cried out involuntarily.

Her attackers hovered over her, studying her prone form sprawled across the floor, her body curled into a near foetal position, unable to speak through the swollen organ pulsing between her eyes. Her heart beat so fast she feared it would explode. For a few long minutes, they just stared.

Atreus, a beautiful young man who couldn’t have been any older than Edward Elric, with curly blonde hair and eyes the colour of cobalt, shifted his hands from her sand suit to cup her jaw softly.

“You’re not Roy Mustang,” he murmured. The grip tightened, carving into her skin, and Riza whimpered.

Above her, Pythos growled, “Leave her be for now, Atreus. We may need her to answer some questions and she can’t do that with a broken jaw.”

The boy considered her, and Riza craned stiffly to see his face. There was a burnished light in his eyes, like a thick sheen of polish; from the floor, they seemed to disappear, retreating under scabby lids.

It took Atreus a few moments more to release her mouth, during which time he bent his head towards her hair and took a long sniff.

"Smells like burning things,” he decided. He dropped her head, the motion jarring her broken nose and making her eyes water.

Atreus retreated to stand next to Priam. In his intense silence, his mouth fixed open, his cherubic face rigid, his fists clenched with blanched knuckles and the nails digging deeply into the heel of
his palms, Atreus somehow managed to scream without making a sound. It would have made Riza shiver, if the motion didn’t hurt quite so much.

Priam shook his head, muttering, "She was wearin' 'is gloves... 'em flame alchemy gloves." Priam was a mountain of a man, tall and heavyset, most of his face obscured by a bushy black beard, his eyes hidden behind spectacles so streaked with sand they were almost completely opaque. His accent sounded Drachmen.

"Well, I daresay you weren't to know better," said Pythos wearily, favouring Priam with a look of disdain but otherwise, so far as Riza could judge, not exceptionally angry. Disappointed, perhaps. "Mustang and his ilk are tricky. No doubt their general was squirreled away somewhere safe while his men took the fall for him.” Pythos's eyes, which he didn't blink so much as twitch, fixed on Riza's. "Is that about the long and the short of it, my dear?"

Riza said nothing, glaring at Pythos through the swelling around her nose. He cut a cold, ascetic figure, rail-thin and tall, with a strikingly gaunt face and a receding cap of slate grey hair. He looked a little like Falman, if Falman aged 20 years and spent the vast majority of them scowling down the bridge of a long, hooked nose. His lupine eyes were a strange shade of hazel, almost yellow. As he bent at the knees to crouch beside her, raking his gaze over Riza's broken face, two things occurred her: Pythos had the keen scrutiny of a raptor. He had the bearing and intelligence of her father.

"Miss Hawkeye, I presume?"

"It's Captain," she said cagily, her voice stuffy from the swelling, hoarse from disuse.

She received a swift toe in the chest for her impudence. There was a sharp burst of pain under her breast and she grunted. Her breathing became a shallow rattle under the fractured rib. Atreus leered at her, hopping from foot to foot. His leader watched the drama in silence, wearing an expression of utter indifference, as though his subordinate’s sadistic, gibbering glee was as normal for him as Havoc’s smoking was for her — a nuisance, certainly, but not a cause for major alarm. Atreus was almost smiling, as though something good were about to happen. Riza felt her bones grow heavy. Good for him, she thought tiredly, is likely bad for me. Very bad.

"I never took you for a pedant, Captain Hawkeye," said Pythos. “But I’ve always found it a very annoying trait in a person.”

“I imagine you would know all about annoying…”

Another kick, in her bicep muscle, right above the elbow. It probably would have hurt if Riza’s left arm hadn't been completely numb from laying on the floor.

“You’re not exactly in any position, metaphorical or otherwise, to be giving us cheek, Captain. That pretty face of yours seems as though it’s seen quite enough action already.”

“Well,” Hawkeye’s lips twitched in what was almost a smile; she hoped it looked suitably gruesome through the blood and bruises, “I would give you a nasty look for that but you already seem to have one.”

Riza heard a shuddering intake of breath — from Priam, she realised, as though the man couldn’t fathom her audacity. She also felt Atreus drawing close again and when she looked up, there was a tiny crease in his nose. Riza somehow doubted the boy was about to sneeze.

He shifted out of Riza’s line of sight. Before she could wonder where he went, she felt his hands
around her palm and fingers. Atreus pulled, jerking the digits swiftly to the side. She heard the sharp, concussive *snaps* even through the fog in her head.

Her vision blurred as tears filled her eyes. Her vision coruscated with violent taches of colour that moved and merged without pattern or design. She choked out a stifled scream as a foot — brogues, not boots — pressed her head into the floor. Blood seeped from the rends in her face, a steady but relentless current of crimson, stinging her eyes, soaking into the damp tinder of the floorboards. The throbb in her head and the splintered bone behind her back seemed to drag Riza deep inside herself, to some primitive place at the base of her skull where she knew how to cope with certain levels of pain — she had been there once before, when her throat had been slit. She had hoped never to visit it again.

Her tired eyes rolled up in her head, glaring daggers at the man with his foot on her cheek. Something flashed beneath the surface of his thin expression and Riza hurried to investigate the sudden shift. Exhausted and aching, the effort came too late. The emotion disappeared before she could identify it, like she snatching for an escaped balloon, the string dangling within her reach until the wind pushed it away, rising up into the sky and lost forever.

"I have to confess to a certain level of disappointment," said Pythos, regarding her from under his shoe. Riza could only glower up at him. Her amber eyes were hard and fixed, blazing. "Innumerable hours of preparation and thousands of cenz worth of equipment went into attacking Roy Mustang's train, and the only thing we have to show for it is one insubordinate little filly with a busted nose and a broken sniping hand. How terribly regrettable."

She knew she ought not antagonise him further, but the longer Pythos and that sadistic little kid spent beating the stuffing out of her, the more distance the train put between them and Roy. Rather than frighten her, the thought of these men torturing the General the way they were torturing her ignited a strident spark of strength in her chest, the stubborn compulsion to endure, if only to save him from her fate.

"I am a soldier, sir," she managed, her voice quiet but firm, "I performed my duty."

"Yes, you did, didn't you? I would admire your tenacity, Captain, but our time is limited, as is my patience. We'll need to start from scratch. Tell me... what is the defensive capability of Dairut? How many soldiers are quartered in the city, aside from Mustang's retinue and the tall Briggsman I saw with you at the train station? Are there any alchemists besides your commanding officer?"

Riza almost smiled. "I don't understand the questions, sir," she recited.

Atreus snarled, "Witless little bitch..."

Her eyes rolled slowly over to the rabid dog panting in the corner. "I've been called worse by better," she muttered drily.

Pythos's rested a little more of his weight on her skull. "Miss Hawkeye, you're a very intelligent woman and a very capable soldier. I'm sure you understand the questions perfectly well. And if you answer them for us, we'll be sure to tidy you up and give you something to eat. Let you rest. I can't imagine a pair of pillories and the floor is the best place to convalesce after a serious injury."

She hummed deep in her throat, a noise of thoughtful contemplation. "If you're going to be two-faced, sir, at least make one of them nice to look at."

Priam breathed in sharply again.
Pythos rolled her head to the side with the toe of his brogue, forcing her to peer up at the ceiling. Her muscles pulled painfully until Pythos gave her shoulder a hard shove, sending her over onto her back, until she was laying eagle-spread on the ground, the pillories digging into her spine. He crouched again; engrossed in his appraisal of her, he didn't notice when Atreus began to giggle... or perhaps he did, and simply didn’t pay the boy any notice. Riza's face was only inches away from Pythos's own, his chest pressed against her chest. Pythos tried to open her mouth to protest, to renew her insolence, but she found she couldn’t make a sound. The blood in her ruined nose dripped down into her throat, until it was all she could do to keep from choking on it, wheezing as her breathing grew laboured. Her head fell back, exposing her throat.

"We don't need you, Captain, we need your commanding officer," murmured Pythos, the words dripping like something syrupy sweet from the tip of his tongue. “For the sake of expediency and, admittedly, to make myself feel better, I have every intention of ending your life, but your rather irritating disposition makes me think we may get a bit of enjoyment out of you before you die."

The implication of his words was not lost on her. Riza's chest tightened as breathing became more and more painful. Yellow eyes glassy and distant, like beads of amber, Pythos reached under the collar of her sand suit, ghosted his palms across Riza's larynx, the livid white scar across her throat, down to her collarbone.

She tried desperately to hide how frightened she was. She could control the stutter of her breath to a degree. She could consciously will her body movements to be less stilted. She could force herself to feign indifference. But Pythos's palm was cold, like ice pressing onto her sternum, and Riza knew there were some things on her body she could not allow him to see...

"Sir," Priam's Drachmen burr snagged Pythos's attention, much to the latter's irritation; "I reckon we shouldn't be urtin' er."

"Mr. Priam, Mr. Pythos said we could play with her," whined Atreus, thoroughly put-out. Riza shuddered.

"Priam, if you're feeling squeamish, you're more than welcome to begin making preparations for a secondary extraction. We shan't be more than twenty minutes." As he considered, a wandering hand bandied with a lock of Riza's hair. Atreus had started sniffing again. "Make that thirty minutes."

"I don' care about er," said Priam, beard bristling. "But that there's Riza awkeye. She's Flame's second in command. You gotta see the wolves in the woods, sir. Mustang... 'e's a proper tea leaf, but 'e's plenty protective over 'is underlin's. 'e's gonna be proper pissed when 'e 'ears 'bout little girlie 'ere. If we kill 'er or do... other things to 'er, 'fore we know it, that slant-eyed bloke's gonna have an army breakin' down our doors, and we're gonna have ourselves a whole heap of miseries."

"Priam, if every military officer launched a full-scale counteroffensive over the disappearance of their aide-de-camps, then there wouldn't be an army left to fight any actual wars."

"You don' catch my drift, sir. 'im and 'er... they're proper close. Ten years together, I 'ear. Copper-bottomed. She ain't just 'is assistant, if you catch my meanin'."

"Indeed?" Pythos leered at Riza. The sight turned her stomach. "How terribly unprofessional, Captain. Seems a bit sordid for the likes of you, but then again, your commanding officer does have something of a reputation about him."

"You're mistaken," she muttered, coughing bloodied phlegm out of her throat. "The General will not jeopardise the stability of Dairut for the sake of one officer."
"Ah, you've gotten yourself in a bit of a catch-22, my dear: you can't hold your silence on the matter, otherwise I'll be forced to take my subordinate at his word, and you can't deny the accusation outright because it throws your guilt into sharper contrast." He rose to his feet, and Riza felt as though she could breathe again, no longer inhaling the scent of him, like dust and wet dirt. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised... look at you, a creature of sublime beauty in that Godsforsaken military. Then again, whatever thin replicas of carnality purportedly exist between two monsters such as yourselves is based more in desire and conquest than passion. In which case, I suppose it's a fitting type of lust."

"He isn't yours to love!" growled Atreus, biting out his vehemence. Riza realised, with a jarring abruptness, that the boy may have been more right than he knew...

"Calm yourself, Atreus," said Pythos, his mood brightening a fraction of a degree as he pondered the implications of Priam's information. A small, selfish part of Riza was thankful the two psychopaths hadn't taken what they wanted from her, even though she knew their distraction was only due to their dangerous attentions swinging back to General Mustang. In truth, despite how much the prospect terrified her, she would have rather them ruin her than lay a hand on Roy.

"If what you say is true, Priam, and I'm inclined to believe it is — the Captain's noble sacrifice is evidence enough of that, after all — then we can use her to get the General." Pythos's face fractured in a tepid smile. "This could very well work in our favour, gentlemen. We may yet salvage this abysmal situation."

"The General will not come for me," said Riza, firmly.

"Why not, girlie?" asked Priam.

"I would shoot him."

Atreus tittered. Pythos sighed again. He did that a lot, Riza realised, almost as much as breathing. He made him sound perpetually tired... a dangerous trait in someone as unhinged as he was.

"My dear, the most difficult challenge an honest man will ever face is having to choose between his duty and his love. The first creates a man of honourable character, a righteous pursuit, I suppose, but far too small in scope for a man like Roy Mustang. While the other... ah, the other creates a vulnerable soul, madly yearning for either death or immortality." He flashed his yellowing teeth. "You would lure the Oracle into Hell, Miss Hawkeye. The Risen would lead him into Eternity."

Riza tried not to relish the small concession of information, masking her triumph well under her bloodshot eyes and swollen face. Her injuries, she mused grimly, did most of the work for her. "That's the second time you've referred to General Mustang as the Oracle," she ventured, her voice the paragon of objective, professional detachment. "Am I to take it this operation of yours, a blatant act of terrorism that threatens the security of the Ishvalan region and the stability of the Amestrian state, has a religious motivation?"

Priam advanced towards her, his huge arms crossed across his chest. Riza suddenly remembered who he reminded her of: Captain Buccaneer from Briggs, except the massive Drachman retained none of the former's affability or unconventional kindness under his brutal exterior. Priam seemed hewn straight from the black stone and snow-capped peaks of his homeland's bitter tundra. What he lacked in Atreus's insane viciousness and Pythos's calculated sadism, he made up for in sheer, brute strength.

"You ain't to be askin' questions, 'awk," he rumbled. He left the warning unspoken.
Riza steeled herself. "If it's your intention to harm the General in any capacity, then know you have a suicide risk on your hands."

Pythos considered her over his laced hands. "You would rather kill yourself then see him hurt?"

"Yes."

"How terribly noble of you." The way Pythos drewled the words, like he was preparing to spit them, told Riza he meant quite the opposite. "Incidentally, we have no intention of harming your precious superior."

"We need him to speak the D-Dreams," murmured Atreus, who had taken to nibbling at his cuticles. "Sodden with liquor, sopping with sweat. Bathing in blood. Choking on the Dreams. We all love to drown, here. But not the Oracle. No... the Oracle can let the world breathe again."

"I don't understand."

"The Risen are older than Amestris," said Pythos coolly. "There are ancient verses tying us to the Xerxian civilisation, although our people were shunned by the heathens of their immoral state. We seek to resurrect the Oracle of the Theoi, the living Portal through which the gods can speak directly to the wayward souls and apostates of this godless country."

Riza felt a jolt in her abdomen, a tug like a chord pulling the base of her spine. "A Portal..."

Pythos's eyes glittered like pyrite. "Our divine teachings tell of a shepherd approaching a chasm in the desert, in the land that is now Ishval, and as he neared the window in the air, he noticed his goats behaving strangely. When he got close to the chasm he was affected with divine frenzy and began to tell the future. Word spread throughout Xerxes and others began to visit the Oracle to divine their own fates. Unfortunately, too many people fell into the chasm; it was decided that only one person would serve as Oracle, appointed henceforth by the Risen. And when the Oracle passed on to the Forevertime, the Regents, lead by the seer Cassandra, would dedicate their lives to finding the next incarnation."

"And you believe General Mustang is the person you're looking for?" finished Riza. She tried to sound as solemn as possible, and to her credit, despite her stuffy nose, even Father Cornello would have been taken in by her false reverence. She took some small comfort in dealing with religious zealots: they were always so keen to show off.

So long as Pythos was talking, she accumulated information... and kept them from going after the General.

"The Flame Alchemist has been to the Other Side, been to the Forevertime," said Atreus urgently, blonde curls bouncing around his too-young face. "He saw the Truth and then... then, then he saw nothing at all!" He stuffed his hand into his mouth. "Saw nofin' at'll."

Riza's chest ached and her head pounded, an image rearing unbidden — the memory of being the focus of two snuffed-out grey eyes. More followed, fragments of those difficult weeks after the Promised Day. In their shared solitude, together in their absolute aloneness, he had told her he could only see shadows of light and dark, that he knew day from night and his proximity to a window on a sunny day, but precious little else; once in a while, during their recovery, she would show him the smudge of the moon in a clear sky. Without colour in his world, he had sought solace in textures, in temperatures and fragrances; the dry abrasiveness of the books Breda brought him, the smell of crinkled paper, even if he couldn't read the pages themselves. The high industrial hum of the hospital lights. The scent of her soap.
She fought to guard her expression against Pythos's scrutiny as she remembered, suddenly, those first few nights. When, against her better judgement and every modicum of common sense she had carefully cultivated over the long, interminable years at his side, she had crawled into the narrow bed next to hers. She touched him — never intimately, she didn't dare, and never anywhere other than his face, his bandaged hands, his obsidian hair that fell in tousled locks. And as she did his hand would move around her middle, strong and soft, holding her to him. His warmth would seep into her stomach; he comforted her without ever opening his mouth. He had needed to be touched, to be wrapped in someone's arms, listening to the steady thud of their heart. Her heart, because in the small, dark hours of the morning, she had been all he had.

And there were nights, she remembered, when he dreamed in such vivid detail that when he woke he had been confused, forgetting for a fraction of a second that his sight was gone. For the minutes that followed, as he clung to her, he had felt the grief all over, the loss of things he had never even considered missing. And she had felt it, too.

She knew he had never been one to dwell on flowers, the colour of butterflies, the shapes of trees, passing clouds — he was a scientist, an alchemist through and through, and poetry had never been his calling. He'd been all action, all hero, all Colonel and Flame Alchemist, never slowing down, even for a day. Never noticing.

On those dark nights, once the sadness became less acute, he would sigh, reach for his cane, and slowly tap his way to the washroom, preoccupied with the ghosts of the things he could remember but no longer enjoy. She would watch him go. And she would love him so completely, so fiercely, and with every part of her being, even the broken parts, even the parts that were burnt, or scarred, or just terribly, terribly sad. Perhaps, with those parts most of all.

And in that moment, Atreus's words, his enthralment, seemed to soak into Riza's skin. It was beyond comprehension: the boy spoke nonsense, dangerous mutterings as fractured as a broken mirror, but suddenly Riza felt, looking up into Atreus's childlike face, as though she was studying the sallow wash of her own reflection in that mirror.

Roy, in his suffocating blindness. She remembered: he had seen the Truth.

She peered into the boy's blue eyes. His face was soft, finely-boned. There was a distant, thoughtful look in his rapt expression that immediately reminded her of Edward Elric, when that extraordinary mind of his would fixate on some vague alchemical arcana, lost in the world inhabited by Roy Mustang and Solf J. Kimblee and Berthold Hawkeye. A world she had never truly belonged to, and never would.

"You think it's General Mustang," she said softly; with agonising slowness, she shifted herself into a more upright position, pushing with her cramped upper arms, until she was on her knees in her own crusted blood and dirt and sweat, her hands still pilloried behind her back, "because he used human transmutation... and passed through his own Gate of Truth."

Pythos acknowledged the sagacity of her insight with a simple incline of his head. "The Flame Alchemist journeyed to the Forevertime," the realm of Truth, Riza theorised, "and returned. His sight was restored by the grace of the Theoi."

Or one very adamant Doctor in possession of a Philosopher's Stone, thought Riza, but for Marcoh's safety, kept to herself. "I have known several alchemists who have passed through the Gate," she said, "and none have ever prophesied anything. Aside from their newfound ability to perform alchemy without a transmutation circle, the Truth seemed to take away far more than He ever gave back. What has you convinced R—General Mustang can speak the Truth for you?"
Atreus cackled, a sharp whiplash of a sound that made Riza's head jerk on her shoulders. "We don't worship the Truth, silly Miss Riza," he chastised, "we worship the Theoi."

"The Seven Gods o' the Ancients," provided Priam, his voice rumbling through Riza's bones, "and the true Lords of this world."

"You should know, Captain," said Pythos silkily. "You've met them before."

Riza felt the bile burning her oesophagus. Her throat suddenly hurt, as though from the squeeze of hands... her back, burning as sandpaper-abrasive black tendrils skated across her skin. "Seven..."

"Yes, my dear. The Risen worship the Homunculi.

"And we worship Roy Mustang as their new Messiah."

Chapter End Notes

"What a bunch of posers." -- Solf J. Kimblee
Wow! It's been exactly one month since I began writing this story! What a fun ride so far, and with so much still left to go!

Also... 70K words in a month? Undirected writer's jitter is one helluva drug

I wanted to write a book, you know. Maybe a series of books. I got plenty of ideas, but precious little time to jot them down, and even less to craft them into any semblance of presentability. The stories are up here... but up here they're gonna stay. I think I'm gonna regret that, because I can't see my professional or personal life becoming conducive to writing anytime soon.

I've always enjoyed crime novels, mystery novels; Hughes used to tease me for reading those pulp magazines from the newspaper stand, you know, the weird menace stories, full of supernatural horror in the vein of those old Grand Guignol penny dreadfuls, which is pretty damn ironic when you consider the fact that I spend most of my real life, never mind any fictional life, fighting off monsters. The stories were tawdry and cheap and the writing was crap, but I loved them. They made me feel like a kid again, listening to those late-night radio dramas and hiding behind the sofa. And while Maes loved poking fun at me, he always made sure to have a dogeared paperback squirreled away in his luggage whenever he came to visit. The Brigadier-General was always more into the detective stories and legal thrillers himself. He liked the stories that featured a closed circle of suspects, and each had to have their own credible motive for and a reasonable opportunity to commit the crime. The central character was always an eccentric, brilliant detective who eventually solved the mystery by means of his wits and logical deduction, drawing from the facts that had been fairly presented to the reader as well as the investigator. Made sense why Maes liked them so much: he could have stepped out of a Hammett dime novel himself.

He was always badgering me about writing that book. Dropped hints all the time, asking me to give a shout out to Elysia and Gracia on the dedication page. Yeah, really. He even got me a journal and an inkwell for the Solstice. You all know how Hughes was: when he made up his mind about something, there wasn't a force in Amestris strong enough to distract him from it. He thought I had the makings of a novelist. He believed it with his whole being, like it was the most important thing in the world. Like he really, really cared, which of course he did.

Maybe it came from hanging around the state alchemists during the War, but Maes thought the act of writing was a kind of transmutation in of itself. And even though he used to annoy me with the constant pestering — as Hughes was wont to do — I reckon he had a point. When you're writing a book, it's just not writing your thoughts. It's creating people. It's creating worlds, deconstructing the details from the life you know and reconstructing them as new, alternative universes. Alchemy with a pen and paper instead of an array or a pair of gloves.

As an author, you have the power to destroy life, but also to resurrect it. You have the power to see the future and change the past, while the people you create are left wondering if you will ever allow them that same prescience. You are their God, their Truth. You have the ability to
make anything happen.

A part of me is prejudiced to admiring the more procedural side of writing. The analysing, manufacturing, inventing aspects of it. The whole process strikes me as being both a blessing and curse because while it brings the author a certain amount of satisfaction — like figuring out a match beginning on a king's pawn opening and ending on move five with the knight-takes-rook checkmate — it also reminds you of lives you don’t have, people you’ll never know, love you don’t feel. It creates a whole novel out of nothing, and it forces your investment. Meaningless exchanges become huge stages of drama that irritate you to the point of anxiety. But the worst part is, your worries aren’t even real: they’re literally all in your head or on the paper in front of you. They’re not real, it’s not real, but to you, that unreality is everything.

And it's breathtaking, when you realise just how much power that scope of feeling gives you. And then you're forced to ask yourself what you will do with this power once you have it. I think Maes was right: writing is alchemy. It’s the art of superhumans.

And me? Well, I ain’t ever been much of a superhuman. But I’m still gonna regret not writing that book, I think, so maybe I’ll try to make sure I live a life, and die a death, worth writing about.

Continued in Act V: Some Corner of a Foreign Field
I swear, if my autocorrect changes Breda to Brenda or Bread ONE MORE TIME

But on a more serious note, it’s finals season for me, so for the next few weeks these updates will be significantly less frequent. I apologise for the change in our scheduled programming.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"For mine eyes have seen the King..."

Ishval, Maria Ross decided, was hot.

Really hot.

While it hadn’t exactly been North City when she made the crossing to Xing five years ago, at least it had been during the cooler autumn months. Dairut, on the other hand, positively sizzled in the afternoon sun, the dunes obscured by the heat shimmers, the streets a semi-molten mirror under the haze. The desert at the foot of Mishaari was a vast undulating sea, punctuated by the occasional sliver of juniper and rosebush, like the masts of ghost ships tacking the sandy waves.

The station platform’s awning, at least, provided some tepid shade. Maria undid the first few buttons of her uniform and blinked the sweat out of her eyes.

She imagined Dairut, like many Ishvalan towns before the War, had once been a brutally spartan settlement, clean and unfussy and as white as the skeleton of a radiolarian. But a vast majority of the old siltstone tenements had been destroyed in the fighting, leaving empty lots of pressed sand where before there had been houses and temples and schools. While Maria noted the occasional construction team silhouetted against the cream-coloured sky, many of the old quarters had been overtaken by makeshift shantytowns, hovels and tents and shacks stacked side-to-side like lines of weatherbeaten dominoes, the smallest ones crushed to the dimensions of a broom cupboard. In a desperate attempt to partition the space, empty doorjambs had been hung with velum sheets that reeked of lanolin in the heat. Under colourful awnings, traders and vendors hawked their foodstuffs. Relocated Ishvalans lounged in empty windows and leaned on sagging lintels. Children chased each other through the gutters. They kept themselves to themselves: playing cards, reading, chatting, exchanging dirty cenz, drinking. Despite the ramshackle state of Dairut — which was, Maria admitted, to be expected under the circumstances — most of the townspeople seemed perfectly content.

A few, however, both Ishvalans and Amestrians, regarded the soldiers with a certain wary apprehension. Maria felt strangely exposed, standing around like a spare lemon as her comrades — though, mostly Edward… the boy was still as high-strung as a whippet — bounced around the railcars, unloading supplies and consolidating the gear that had been damaged in the attack. The platform was a sight less crowded than the shantytowns of Dairut, at any rate, where everyone was
pressed shoulder to shoulder and caught up in each other's faces: no personal space, no exceptions. But standing on the outside, looking in from the shade of the platform, there was plenty of space between her and the people… and somehow that made it all the more awkward. When a place was crowded, Maria absorbed very little information about anyone: they were reduced to so many blank faces, just obstacles standing in her way. Moving, talking, sometimes friendly, often not. Now the faces were looking directly at her. Thinking about her. Judging this girl who was far too well-accustomed to going unnoticed in the crowd, now propped up for display like a prime cut steak.

But she had been ordered to watch the perimeter, so that’s what she did, trying to ignore the red eyes that tracked her movements like an enemy sniper behind a crosshair.

Her superiors congregated near the rear railcars, inspecting the damage to the caboose, and trying to glean any trace of evidence that would yield the whereabouts of Lieutenant Hawkeye. Falman chattered on about blast radii and Edward rattled off the chemical compounds used in the explosive, all the while General Mustang listened intently, black eyes as hard as volcanic glass and brows pinched to a tight crease. Fuery had been rushed off to see a medic and Jean Havoc stood a little ways to her left, also on sentry duty. Major Miké hovered at the edge of the platform, resting against a supply crate with her arms crossed, watching the proceedings with a piercing intensity even as she allowed the General and his subordinates their space. Maria supposed it was for the best: the General was still plenty leery of Feldspar — despite Edward’s protestations to the contrary, Sofia’s sudden appearance on the train had done her no favours.

Speaking of…

The reason the entire envoy had taken to shunning Major Miké like she had hepatitis regarded Ross over the equipment he carried in his hands. His eyes looked rust-brown from afar, like his hair, but as he neared she noticed the colour was closer to that of emerald… a tarnished, metallic green.

Maria didn't even realise just how angry she was with him until she met his eye. She ground her teeth together and muttered something.

She hadn't intended for anyone to hear her, but Jean shot her a look.

“You say somethin’?” he asked. He chewed on the butt end of a cigarette but didn’t light it, which was just as well: Maria had asthma.

“It’s nothing,” she murmured. She pulled her collar away from her neck, grimaced as the starchy material clung to her skin. “Just a bit toasty, is all.”

Havoc smiled disarmingly. “Ishval is a bit toasty in the same way Olivier Armstrong is a bit of a bitch.”

“So… very?”

“Very.”

Ross chuckled despite herself. She liked Jean Havoc — he reminded her a little bit of Denny: uncomplicated. Kind. Honest. Loyal almost to a fault.

She looked him up and down. “How are you doing, Jean?”

Havoc’s smile faltered. He glared daggers at his knees. “Bastard legs hurt,” he muttered.

“Do you need to sit down?”
He shrugged her off. “Nah… they act up sometimes. Fight on the train musta messed ‘em up a little.”

His gaze drifted over to the railcars. Edward and Falman were locked in a heated discussion — probably over something science-y and complicated Maria wouldn’t know how to spell nevermind understand. She heard Ed shout something about nitroglycol before Vato threw up his arms in exasperation. Mustang had to separate them.

“Seriously, though, Ross,” said Havoc quietly, continuing to watch the other officers, “you’ve seemed kinda cheesed off ever since the Chief showed up.” Jean glanced at her sidelong, blue eyes narrowing with a shrewdness belayed by his easygoing exterior. “You knew somethin’ screwy was going on, didn’t you? That’s why Breda had to go pick you up from the Bradley place back in Central. Why you were on leave for a few days.”

Uncomplicated… and strangely intuitive, she admitted grudgingly… in his own irritatingly blunt way. The irritation resolved itself into a scowl.

Havoc recognised the look and laughed. “Yeah, I know, I’m about as delicate as a cinderblock. I’m not blessed with the same fine tuning other folks seem to have. On the plus side it makes conversations a little more straightforward.” He sobered somewhat. “So… what gives, Ross? Why is what should have been a goodwill mission turning into such a monumental cockup?”

She sighed. The air tasted gritty, like sand. After a moment of hesitation — during which time she realised it would be pointless to hide anything — she explained the situation to him: Selim’s breakdowns, Edward’s promise to Führer Grumman, the possible return of Pride. But beyond what few scant details she herself had been privy to, Maria didn’t know what, exactly, had brought Ed and Sofia to Ishval.

She cast her mind back. Major Miles saw the Truth, Fuery had told them. Maria wondered what that meant. It was obvious the alchemists, Ed and the Major and the General, all knew, and perhaps Falman had an inkling, but regular mortals like Lieutenant Ross were flummoxed. Truth be told, even after serving under the Strong Arm Alchemist for a number of years, even after helping Edward break into the Fifth Laboratory and watching the then-Colonel Mustang immolate a transmuted body in her stead, she was no closer to understanding just what alchemy was. Between the science and the mathematics rested a liminal sort of sorcery that defied all attempts by outsiders at rationalisation. It was, she decided, a type of magic, a synchronicity between things that should not have gone well together, but somehow did. A connectivity of logical coincidence.

She may not have been as intelligent as Falman, or as clever as Breda, but she supposed she knew at least enough of alchemy to understand that some things are too strange and strong to be bankrupt of any meaningful causal relationship. And indeed, talking to Jean Havoc, recounting the many apparent coincidences that had landed them in Dairut, Maria felt as though an apparition of foreboding had materialised out of the heat shimmers.

Like the distant slopes of Mishaari, it was no more than a distortion of the light, something cut out of colours that weren’t quite right. Where it moved, the things behind it appeared bowed and distorted. Then, as quickly as it came, it vanished, without leaving so much as an impression in the sand. But its memory remained, and try as she might, Maria couldn’t seem to shake it away.

“I knew something was the matter with Selim Bradley and I knew Edward had been tasked to deal with it,” she concluded. “But I hardly expected the Major and Ed to end up on our train.”

Jean mused, “The Chief said something about the Gate… the General isn’t exactly chatty about what happened to him five years ago, but if those Portal things have started popping up for no
apparent reason, my gut tells me the fat’s gonna hit the fire sooner rather than later.”

“I think you might be right about that.” Maria ventured, “But why? Why now?”

“I dunno. But Breda seems to think it’s somehow connected to those guys who took Captain Hawkeye.”

The vehemence in her voice surprised her: “Breda should learn when to keep his mouth shut, sometimes.”

“Hey,” Havoc held his hands up in mock surrender, “no need to bite my head off.” He paused. “You’re mad about what he said to Feldspar, aren’t you?”

“Mad?” Maria closed her eyes and huffed in annoyance. “He had no evidence. He had no precedent… god, he had no right to accuse Major Miké of orchestrating Captain Hawkeye’s abduction!” Her anger was an slow-burning explosion in progress, no reverse gear, no dampeners. Maria’s every word was clipped. Her eyes were narrow and hard-set: “Just because you lot have your own issues with Major Miké—"

“Look, I get that she’s your superior officer n’all, but you gotta admit it doesn’t look good, her suddenly showing up like that.”

“Edward can vouch for her. I can vouch for her!”

“That might not be enough, kid.”

“Why not? Why is my testimony worth any less than Lieutenant Breda’s?”

Jean looked at her through bright blue eyes, his mouth slightly open and a glisten of sweat above his cracked lips. She pressed on: “None of you can see it, what serving under him has done to you.” Maria didn't have to specify who. "It's like none of you are individuals anymore. You all operate as one creature, with the General at the head. If Lieutenant Breda pounces on Major Miké, you'll all pounce right along with him. If your commanding officer threatens to burn people who ought to be considered innocent until proven guilty, you'll all get the kerosene! When General Mustang said he was going to kill those men who took Captain Hawkeye, the look in his eyes at that moment... I thought I was listening to one of the Homunculi, not the Flame Alchemist! "

Havoc stared at her, his sidearm dropping to his side, cigarette hanging limply from his lip like a wet strand of noodle.

“We trust the General to do right by us,” he said, “and he’s never given me a reason to doubt that trust. Hawkeye don’t got a monopoly on following him into hell, Ross.”

“Jean, that man—”

“That man’s our leader,” Havoc finished firmly. “And my friend. Look, there are lots of folks who can talk the talk, but Mustang, he’s a guy who walks the talk — I trust him, I have faith in him because that kinda commitment isn’t spoken, it’s lived. The Boss ain’t a simple person, Maria, not by long chalk, but in many ways he’s sorta uncomplicated, too. It’s like this: he doesn’t care what you say, but he’ll sure as hell watch what you do, and if you show him he’s stepping off the path, he’ll gladly let you lead him home and not the other way around. He’s not perfect, but he don’t got to be perfect, and neither do I. All of us, we learn together. We grow together. We catch each other, like we’re gonna catch Hawkeye.”

“You can’t save everyone, Lieutenant. It’s not possible. Moreover, it’s dangerous.”
“Maybe. And maybe, yeah, I think we might hold more ideals than we can live up to... but so long as Mustang is walking that walk, we’re gonna keep walking right behind him, even if everyone is telling us his dream is only that: a dream.”

"Your loyalty to him," Ross shook her head, "there’s a point where you’re all going to be taken by it, crushed, swallowed, and digested by it. It's a living thing, Jean, and it's killing you from the inside. And it's... it's grotesque. It's misshapen. It's inhuman, this beast you allow him to become, and the monsters he makes of you."

“Sometimes, you gotta become a monster to fight monsters, Marie.”

Ross turned to find Heymans standing behind her, arms tucked under his armpits, his expression schooled, any outward emotion stubbornly scant. Usually Maria admired his composure. But at that moment, the anger surged in her stomach until it threatened to bubble up into her throat.

“Then how does that make you any better than Bradley?” she demanded.

Heymans didn't hesitate: "Bradley and his ilk did it outta hate. We do it outta love." He took a deep breath. “For both of ‘em. Because we gotta be there when they fall. It ain't pretty. Sometimes, it ain't even kind. But it's the right thing to do."

"The right thing..." Maria couldn't believe she was hearing the words, and coming from Breda, someone she cared about, whom she trusted, and who trusted her... "Is it the right thing to accuse an innocent woman of orchestrating an attack when she's just trying to help Edward? When you're so scared of losing Hawkeye you'd rather go on a witch hunt than get your facts in order? If General Mustang goes on the warpath and starts torching Ishval, again, are you just going to stand by and let him!?”

Breda huffed heavily through his nose, his breath raising the sand from his epaulettes. When his eyes found Ross’s again, they had hardened slightly, touched by frost — ironic, in the heat of that infernal desert. She could sense Jean shifting uncomfortably behind her.

“Major Miké… you don't know who she really is," muttered Heymans darkly. "You don't know what—"

"I know perfectly well," snapped Maria. "She's our commanding officer!"

"What, you and Brosch?"

"Yes!"

"Yeah, and Denny has always been such an excellent judge of character. A true paragon of intuition and insight!"

Maria felt the heat rising to her cheeks, and she didn't think it was due to the Ishvalan sun. Havoc had since made a hasty retreat to the other side of the platform. "You can't see beyond the name, Lieutenant. You don't know anything about her!"

Any forbearance evaporated from his eyes, his customary patience gone faster than moisture on the Ishvalan roads. Even Breda’s focus seemed somewhere on the town behind her, as though he could not stand to look at her. Maria knew she had crossed some invisible line. “And you don't know anything about him…” countered Breda, seething. His swallowed, hard. "You never saw what he did to us... to Riza…"

Maria steeled herself: “Major Miké is not Solf J. Kimblee!”
Heymans’s words crashed out unchecked, unaltered: “And how many more of my friends is it gonna take for you to see that you might be wrong about that?” Too late, the Lieutenant caught himself. His eyes widened.

The blood rushed in Maria’s ears. She couldn’t remember ever feeling so hurt. “How dare you…”

“Marie—”

“It’s First Lieutenant Ross to you!” she snapped. Her eyes flashed with indignity and anger, his with shame. He seems to deflate under the intensity of her fury.

Maria wasn’t a moron: she knew why the usually circumspect Lieutenant smiled at her. She knew why he hated Denny Brosch’s guts. She knew why he didn’t kick her ass every time they played chess. At anyone’s first glance, Heymans Breda seemed like the kind of guy you avoided spending more time around than was absolutely necessary, like he could eat you into bankruptcy all while telling crass jokes between swallows. And if a stranger ever spoke to him, his dry wit and brusque manner of speaking supported such prejudices.

But he had shown her, in small flashes of uncharacteristic vulnerability, that he was also the kind of guy who agonised over shōgi strategies to the point of anxiety, who spent hours sketching or writing the same things until he got it perfectly right, and, most of all, that he was the kind of friend who never failed to distract her from her everyday worries.

But that was where the thread had been cut, at his friendship. And she hadn’t told him, because she loved him in her own way, and nothing grieved her more deeply or pathetically than being forced to face one half of a whole that wasn’t meant to be.

However, in that moment, she considered it. She wanted to hurt him, their friendship be damned. She wanted to shock Heymans into seeing just how short-sighted and self-destructive, how stupid, he and the rest of Mustang’s men could be. And she almost did, but then she felt a shadow drift to her side…

“Everything quite all right over here, Lieutenants Two?”

Major Miké regarded them both placidly from under the brim of her hat — a tan trilby like something out of an adventure novel. Ross remembered abruptly that Edward had begged her not to wear it. Sofia, meanwhile, had apparently determined the risk of sunburn far outweighed the likelihood of bearing an uncanny resemblance to a certain younger sibling. The sartorial choice certainly hadn't helped Breda's ill-humour in any respect, but Ross found in that moment that she didn't particularly care.

“Yes, sir,” said Maria. Her words dropped like stones. “Lieutenant Breda was just leaving.”

Major Miké looked to the redhead. “Yes, well, I’m sure General Mustang could do with that analytical mind of yours at the moment, Breda. He’s just ordered a young Miss Annika Cotte to fetch the local cleric and Major Miles. Evidently, the Major has woken up from his coma.”

“That’s good news,” said Maria.

“Quite, although if Master Elric badgers the General with any more questions, something’s liable to catch fire in short order.”

"Yeah." Heymans looked at the Major coldly, almost contemptuously. "Yeah… and I should probably find where Havoc went, too…"
The Lieutenant stalked off, his shoulders bunched. Maria watched him go. She couldn’t maintain her look of anger, and her face fell to something more like misery.

“Trouble in paradise, Lieutenant?”

She looked up at her commander. “Sir?”

“Lieutenant Havoc came trotting over to the rear railcars like a rooster with his bum on fire. Your discussion with Lieutenant Breda seemed somewhat… heated.”

“It’s nothing, sir.” She sighed. “Everyone’s just a little on edge after the attack.”

“Mmm… if Edward hadn’t spent twenty minutes arguing with the engineer to stop the train we might have been able to lend our assistance.”

“I doubt there’s much you could have done, sir. The fury burn crippled us, and they weren’t trying to kill us anyhow. They just wanted the General.”

“But got his adjutant instead?”

Ross nodded.

“Such uncommon wherewithal,” muttered Major Miké, her tone wholly ambiguous. Her indigo eyes stared into the middle distance. “I’ve met Captain Hawkeye once or twice, and every time I was struck by her poise, her composure, her dignity of manner. I knew then, of course, that she was as fine a soldier as I was ever likely to meet — yourself nonwithstanding, Lieutenant — but I have never until this moment considered just how belligerently loyal she is. Right about now I imagine the men who took her are kicking themselves for their blunder.” Sofia appraised her underling. “Tell me, did Lieutenant Breda divulge any of his apprehensions?”

Maria’s shoulders slumped. “Sir—”

“He thinks I’m responsible, doesn’t he?”

She squirmed awkwardly. "They're upset, sir," she managed. "They're worried about Captain Hawkeye, and about the General. They're—"

"Quite right to suspect me."

Maria blinked. She didn't realise her mouth had fallen open until she snapped it shut again, her teeth knocking together painfully. "P-pardon, sir?"

"Lieutenant Breda is no fool," said Major Miké drily. "Quite the opposite, in fact. He doesn't trust me... well, very few in the military trust me, for obvious reasons."

Maria scowled. "Not obvious to me, sir. You shouldn't be held accountable for someone else's mistakes, no matter how many genes you share." She hesitated, then: "And at the risk of sounding impertinent, sir, for all the skeletons in your closet, I know for a fact that General Mustang's team have enough to fill a graveyard."

"Deflection, Lieutenant? That doesn't sound like you."

"I'm just saying, sir, they have no right—"

"They have every right," she muttered, tonguing the bitter aftertaste of her words like the dregs in a shitty vintage. "My brother was a vile creature, Ross. Brilliant, self-possessed… and absolutely
gut-churning. It’s painful for me to think about, sometimes, him massacring all those thousands of people with nary a change in his heart rate. Even hiding in Creta couldn’t save me from the stories: when he was released from prison, when he very nearly ended young Edward’s life up in the North. And Captain Hawkeye…” Sofia trailed off. Her pale face went a little green. She cleared her throat conspicuously. "Well... let's just say Heymans has his reasons. Being as it’s young Riza in such a dire state, it's little wonder my sudden appearance would enflame his past anxieties. He loves far too much, that boy, but cares far too little. They all do."

Maria bowed her head. If she was upset before, she was thoroughly depressed now. "They're going to get themselves killed, sir," she said quietly.

"Their devotion bestows responsibility, not right, Lieutenant. They give themselves entirely to the responsibility of keeping each other safe, but in doing so, they forfeit their right to selfishness. A trade. Like so many things, it all comes down to equivalent exchange. And, as you well know, equivalent exchange can be a very destructive thing.” Major Miké rested a long hand on Maria’s shoulder. "Take it from an old married woman, Maria Ross: love is like opening a book and finding a language you’ve never seen before... sometimes, the act of translation may be terribly arduous, and you may not even like what the words have to say."

"Wait... you're married?"

Edward Elric had materialised at Lieutenant Ross's side. Maria's eyebrows shot up. She hadn't heard him approach; without the clanking presence of Alphonse, sans the garish red coat, and with the footfalls of his automail leg muffled by the sand, he presented a far more subdued character.

Major Miké smiled. "Indeed I am, Master Elric. Eleven years. Lieutenant Falman and I are something of a rare species in this particular company, it seems."

With Ed's usual tact and good judgement, he blurted: "He must not be Amestrian... what with your family reputation."

Maria blushed scarlet. Edward was about as delicate as Lieutenant Havoc, and like Lieutenant Havoc, was going to get a smack upside the head before too long.

"No," Major Miké's mouth pulled into a long, thin smile; Maria thought she showed just a tad too many teeth, "no, she's Cretan, actually."

"... Oh."

Major Miké snorted. "Don't look so scandalised, Master Elric. It is the 20th Century, after all. You Amestrians are free to your puritan sensibilities, but the fact that your former first lady was married to a Homunculus says rather more about the sanctity of your nuptial institutions than legislation ever could."

Ed scowled. "Whatever," he muttered. "Look, if we're gonna find this Gate we probably need to get moving; all the General cares about at the moment is getting Hawkeye back. He’s not going to be a whole lot of help."

Maria frowned. "Do you think they might be in the same place?"

Ed and Major Miké stared at her. Flushing, Lieutenant Ross cast around for something to say...

"Well," she stuttered, with significantly less confidence than before, "if these two events are connected like Breda seems to think—"
"You mean, if the same bastards who nabbed Hawkeye are the ones who intend to use this rogue Portal?" Ed ground out.

"Uh... yeah. Perhaps, instead of you and the Major going off on your own, we could pool our resources. Find the link connecting both events."

Ed's golden eyes narrowed. "Find the link..." he parroted softly.

He rested his weight on his automail leg, the limb settling with a hollow *clank*. It was there again, Maria realised as she watched the boy: Edward Elric's deep, ponderous thoughts, his intense concentration fissuring lines into his forehead. She could almost see the clockwork gears turning and transmutation circles flickering in his eyes. The kid wasn't just a savant, like Falman, or even street smart like Breda and General Mustang. He was brilliant — the tender age of his certification left little doubt of that — but he was also *creative*. Edward Elric dealt in dreams and imaginings. Alchemy, to him, was more than arrays and chemistry and mathematics, more even than the transmutational power that had been stripped from him. It was an art that allowed his spirit to rise, to make connections between disparate people and places, to understand that even though he was peering through many lenses, he was still seeing the same whole. Although, unlike the rest of them, the path before Edward's feet was no longer blurred.

It was strange to think of the brash 21-year-old as *enlightened*, but that was as close as Maria could manage.

"Those bastards wanted the Colonel," Ed puzzled; Maria doubted he was speaking to them; he seemed not to notice their presence. Major Miké, while listening intently, allowed the Fullmetal Alchemist his stage. Neither soldier corrected the slip in rank. "And somewhere out there is a rogue Gate, like a dimensional portal, linking our world with the realm of Truth... and the souls on the Other Side speaking through Selim Bradley... the link... *a link*..."

Ed's breathing hitched when he finally stared back at Ross, the whites of his eyes glistening. He weighed on them with a crushing intensity. He looked taut and tired and so very grave, like he was in the middle of solving the world's most difficult equation, his face set in a gaze of anguish.

"There's an old Xerxian text," muttered Edward, "I read it once... the *Chronica Prophetica*. It told of a prophecy meant to be fulfilled at the approach of what some called the "end of days." In it, a man is contacted by a divine being. He is tasked with serving as an intermediary between God and Man. There's a verse..." He swallowed, closing his eyes and reciting perfectly: "*For mine eyes have seen the King. He flew to me with flame in hand. He touched my eyes and said, Behold, with this flame, your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven... you are become Risen...*"

"Flames..." murmured Major Miké, troubled.

"*End of days.*" Ross shivered. "That doesn't bode well."

"That's what they intend to do," breathed Edward, his eyes growing wide. His hands clenched. "They were gonna use the General as the intermediary. Their link to the other side. Their prophet."

"Not that I don't doubt your conclusions, Master Elric, but one convenient verse in a Xerxian manuscript is hardly conclusive evidence."

"But the General performed Human Transmutation," insisted Ed, working up to his premise, his golden eyes burning with an almost fanatical fervour. "He was one of Father's sacrifices! Kimblee had it figured out already; it's the Law of Natural Providence at work. It's easier to stuff the souls of the Gate Dwellers into a head that has already passed through! Using one of the Human Sacrifices..."
as a mouthpiece, those bastards could create their own oracle. A speaker for the dead.”

"Then why not you?" queried Major Miké shrewdly. "Or why not young Alphonse, for that matter? From what little General Mustang has elected to divulge on the subject, Alphonse was trapped inside the Realm of Truth for years. Surely he is the more qualified candidate, degrees of separation being what they are?"

Edward blinked at them. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Not to me it's not," murmured Maria.

"Nor I."

Ed pinwheeled his hands. The motion made him wince; like Havoc's legs, Ed's resurrected arm seemed given to snagging. “Mustang’s a Brigadier General! He's been gunning for the top for as long as I've known him, and now he's within spitting distance of the Führership! Come on, Lieutenant, Major, those guys who attacked the train weren't contemplative little monks. They were sporting military-grade automatic weapons and an army jeep! Falman says they used an IED slug to blow a hole in the train, for crying out loud! They're not looking for converts... they're looking for subjects! For people to rule! With Mustang as their messiah, they could conquer Amestris! And they wouldn’t even have to fight a war to do it... they’d just have to sit back and let that sparky-sparky bastard do what he does best... be ambitious.”

"Oh dear," said Major Miké.

"Yeah, oh dear!" mocked Ed. "These guys are Grade-A nutjobs..." The young man’s face paled; he seemed to wilt under Lieutenant Ross and Major Miké's scrutiny, "and now they have Captain Hawkeye. She's... she's completely useless to them. Shit..."

"We should tell the General—"

"As well as our company, I suspect," interrupted the Feldspar Alchemist, directing their attention to the heat shimmers of Dairut. "I see two Ishvalan gentlemen fast approaching... and one of them is in military uniform."

"That must be the Major!" exclaimed Ed.

Maria peered through the haze. Both men were tall, with the bronzed skin and ice-white hair of all Ishvalans, though the broader of the two kept his face obscured by the hood and chasuble of his robe. The other man Ross recognised from her few dealings with the Briggs Bears — occasions which had often resulted in bitter confrontations between her Armstrong and their Armstrong — but she had only ever seen Olivier's SIC at a distance. He had to trot to keep pace with his companion's long strides, swaying occasionally, as though his depth perception and centre of gravity weren’t quite calibrated. Little wonder, thought Ross, considering he was unconscious for over 24 hours. He was in his shirtsleeves, long and limber, white hair pulled back into a severe tail, with two sharp sideburns contouring the lines of his cheekbones. He seemed to be saying something to the clergyman, his brows furrowed over a pair of snow-blind glasses — a strange sight in the desert, Maria thought — his arm blading across his companion's path. Each movement made his shoulders strain against his shirt.

He was very, very handsome.

Maria was suddenly thankful for the warmth — Sofia, had she noticed Ross's blush, probably would have said something sarcastic.
"Major Miles!" called Ed, waving in their direction. Major Miké raised a slow hand in greeting.

To Maria's alarm, Major Miles, instead of acknowledging Edward's hail, tried to lay a restraining arm across the clergyman's chest and was roughly pushed aside. The roughness of the gesture sent the slimmer man stumbling.

Something was wrong. Some internal alarm blared like an air-raid siren in Ross’s head. The monk closed the distance between them in three huge strides, his hands clenched into fists. When he was close enough for her to see the pure, uncut rage boiling in his red eyes, Maria Ross went for her sidearm.

It happened so quickly.

In that interminably long second before the the monk exploded into his attack, Ross saw those furious red orbs shift from her to Major Miké. Unlike his eyes, the Ishvalan’s expression was inscrutable… no fear, no anger, no invitational smirk. But Ross saw the x-shaped scar. She saw the arrays as his sleeves slid down his arms.

"No, sayyidi!" someone bellowed from a distance. Miles, Ross suspected.

Before Major Miké could bend to touch her palms to the ground the Ishvalan had his hand on her forehead, grasping it with such strength Sofia cried out in pain. Her feet swung uselessly above the ground as the monk — Scar, the alchemist killer, the fugitive, the murderer — clutched her skull, pressing his fingers into her temples with enough force to draw blood. Maria felt the air smarting against her exposed skin, an electric hum like static from a generator. She smelled something like hot tin and solder.

Alchemy.

"Scar!" screamed Edward, his voice going shrill, his teeth barred in a snarl. "Let her go, you bastard! Let her go!"

Maria brought her gun to her cheek, flicking the safety off. "Release the Major," she demanded, the calm in her words revealing nothing of the terrible fright frothing beneath them. She could hear footsteps from further down the platform. Somewhere behind her, General Mustang began to bark orders. She prayed he wasn't about to turn the Ishvalan — and her commanding officer right along with him — into a pile of cinders. She had seen his flame alchemy at work, and it was something she hoped never to see again: it was a terribly violent thing.

Breda and Havoc drew their sidearms in her peripheries. Roy's baritone was a low, dangerous growl:

"What's the meaning of this, Muhaddith?"

The General was greeted with silence.

Major Miké clawed at the huge man's arms, but his grip remained unwaveringly tight. The Feldspar Alchemist croaked out a whimper and suddenly Maria felt as though her lungs were slowly filling with water.

My God, she thought despairingly, he was going to kill her...

"It's not him, Scar!" Ed continued to shout. He rolled forward on the balls of his feet but didn’t dare approach the rigid Ishvalan. "It's not him please... he's gone. He's gone! It's not him!"
Scar, or the Muhaddith, or whatever his name was, didn't seem to hear Edward. He didn’t seem to hear anything. He stood in the half-light under the awning, utterly still, staring as though tracing the contours of Major Miké’s face. His lips were pressed together, tight enough for brown to turn to white, his eyes dull with exploded pupils. He seemed as lifeless as the dust and sand that gusted around him.

Sofia blinked tears from her lashes. Her fingers dug into Scar's hand, as though it was the only thing anchoring her to the world, as she whispered hoarsely:

"Rahma," she mouthed through her bug-eyed terror, "rahma, sayyidi. Rahma..."

Maria waited for the Ishvalan’s arms to glow with alchemic activation, for Major Miké's blood vessels to rupture. Nothing happened for what seemed like an eternity, bound within a few seconds.

There was absolute stillness. No air stirred the sand. No clouds drifted in the milk-coloured sky. Even from the nearby city, not a sound could be heard. Maria's own breath seemed to die as soon as it left her mouth. It was an eerie sort of tranquility; she felt like the prey even though it wasn't her skull in Scar's clutches. It was as though the world had been encased in crystal, the little granules like fused glass that blew across their boots and scoured their faces.

It terrified Maria Ross more than she had words for.

"Rahma..." sobbed Sofia again. "Please... rahma..."

The stillness snapped, as sharp as a whip.

Scar dropped Major Miké like she had burnt him. The alchemist collapsed to her knees, drawing in desperate gulps of air. Aside from a few bruises on her forehead and temples, she seemed, miraculously, unharmed. Just terribly, terribly frightened. The Ishvalan monk stood stock still, though his shoulders began to tremble.

Breda and Havoc rushed forward to grab him but were stopped by Major Miké:

"It's all right," she croaked hoarsely. "It's all right. It was a mistake..." Ed put a hand on her shoulder. She must have grasped it tight enough to crunch the boy's knuckles, but he didn't complain. "It was a mistake. I’m so sorry, everyone. I’m so sorry... I’m sorry..."

The monk seemed frozen in shock. He turned towards a wan-faced Major Miles, but the motion seemed too slow, almost like Alphonse in his armoured body. When the Ishvalan faced his countryman, he opened his mouth to speak, but his voice trailed off slowly, like his words were unwilling to take flight. There was suddenly a profound sadness, a depthless shame, in his eyes, the red too glossy, the light distant, muted.

Without a word, the Major took the larger man by the elbow and led him away.

When Maria went to holster her sidearm, she felt a presence at her shoulder. Tall, casting a long, narrow shadow. She looked up into the gaunt face of Vato Falman.

"Lieutenant," she asked softly, "what did the Major say?"

Falman's adam's apple bobbed up and down. He blinked something out of his eye.

"Mercy," he whispered. The two of them watched General Mustang catch up to Miles and the Muhaddith, whose tremble had regressed into violent, bitter sobs.
"Sofia Kimblee was begging Scar for mercy."

Chapter End Notes

Truth be told, having a background in medieval manuscripts is really helpful in writing FMA fan fiction. Those d00ds were obsessed with alchemy, lemme tell ya.
A very good point was made in the comments section of the last chapter...

Regarding Kimblee, I often fail to differentiate my own extrapolations regarding his character from whatever Arakawa-san provided us. Regarding Breda's anxieties over Kimblee, it might be beneficial to read or at least skim "Acquainted with the Night", the FMA fanfic immediately preceding Dismantle the Sun. Those are the events Heymans is referencing. I have a rather bad habit of world building, in my own novels as well as in my fan fiction, so there will be references to events in previous works (with the exception of "Foregone", that one doesn't count)

also, uh, tw for this chapter

yeah

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Last Orders

A stiff blow below the vagus nerve cluster might be enough to induce muscle spasms.

A fist to the solar plexus. A sharp knee in the groin. She could clap his ears and rupture his eardrums. A stiff palm jab in his eyes might manage to shatter his glasses, blinding him...

"If I ain't back up in ten minutes," the man muttered, "Atreus 'as permission to come down 'ere and do whatever 'e wants to you. So whatever you're thinkin' about doin', don't."

In some regards, the broken nose had worked more in her favour than against it, distorting any outward appearances of doubt or worry. Riza's placid expression didn't waver. Her manner was pensive, almost calm, and the bruising made her look as though the shadow of a cloud had strayed over her face. She considered the other man languidly.

"I didn't realise I wore my intent so clearly," murmured Hawkeye, her voice stuffy through the gauze in her nostrils.

The large Drachman grunted, crouching in front of her stool until he was at her eye level. He shifted the cartilage of her nose back into alignment, which made Riza's eyes water and her head throb, before beginning the process of suturing the injury. His huge hands were surprisingly gentle, laying the adhesive strips with precision and care, mindful of agitating her swollen eyes or bruised jaw. His enormous size yielded no concession to his steady, delicate demeanour — there was, she supposed, something of Alex Armstrong in his touch. Priam seemed to Riza a man equally capable of smashing a block of marble into pieces before taking up a mallet and chisel to coax the fragments into a multiplicity of intricate, beautiful forms.

"You don't, 'awk," said Priam, referring to her stubborn stoicism. "It's your eyes. There's a sharp
light 'em, but marred with darkness 'round the edges. I seen it before, once, when a girl was about to die. The eyes of the checked chessmen. You may be beaten, but you may just as soon start a winnin' game. You're just waitin' for me to muck somethin' up."

Riza had nothing to say to that, because he was right, of course: she had considered over fifty different ways of incapacitating him. The failure to act did not stem from any inability to defend herself against a man many times her size — she had held her own against Buccaneer on several occasions during the joint training exercises with the Briggs battalion — but rather the uncertainty of what awaited her at the top of the cellar stairs. Priam had mentioned Atreus, who Riza suspected was just itching for an excuse to do something predictably unpleasant to her. And somewhere, she knew, the crane-like, salacious Pythos was padding around; she could hear the floorboards above her head creaking with his interminable pacing. Though the sound was discordant and irregular, without cadence or rhythm, Riza preferred the man's shoes stepping back and forth across the floor to stepping back and forth across her face. She still tasted the sour rubber from the sole of his brogues.

She looked past Priam's shoulder, surveying her little cell. Allowed to sit upright, deprived of pillories and the clinging mask of her sand suit, the room was far less spartan than she originally thought. On all sides of her, the walls were sundered on broken pieces of furniture, beams, wooden boxes, tent poles and flag staffs. In several supply crates, Riza saw oil lamps with smashed glass chimneys, rusty carabiners, line levels, trowels. The demarcation between floor and wall vanished beneath the junk. Even the staircase was littered with straw.

Riza had no idea where she was, or the layout of the building above her head. She knew of Pythos, Atreus, and Priam, but there had been several others in the train attack who had yet to make themselves known. Furthermore, she was unarmored, while the Risen had guns and IEDs. The dry heat, the stale, stuffy air, and the sand on the floorboards told her she was still in the Ishvalan prefecture, but she had no idea how far she was from Dairut. Even if she did manage to slip past her guards, without a means of transportation and without rations or water, she didn't fancy her chances alone in the desert.

There were too many unknown quantities to consider a calculated escape. Though Pythos needed her alive if he had any intention of getting the General's attention, she had demonstrated a remarkably high tolerance for pain. Necessity stayed his hand against any killing blows, but nothing prevented him from inflicting damage, and Riza had a feeling that the easiest way to tempt the possibility would be in trying to flee. While a prolonged stay in Pythos's delightful company nauseated her, she was in no hurry to whet his sadistic appetites over some harebrained, half-crafted escape plan.

Then, of course, there was the matter of her injuries. She glanced down at her right hand. The digits were swathed in bandages. Underneath the dressing, her trigger finger was bent at an odd angle. She felt its loss acutely. Riza was competent in her ambidexterity, but she derived a certain sort of peace and comfort from the familiarity of shooting a gun with her right hand. It was like the General continuing to use his ignition gloves in spite of the fact that his passage through the Gate of Truth meant he no longer needed a transmutation circle. He had never taken to Edward's clap alchemy. Like her, Roy was buoyed by the consistency of routine.

Severing her reliance on her trigger finger, her station, her strength... Riza may as well have lost the extremity altogether. Without it, she felt as useless as Roy in the rain.

Priam had attended to the broken bones first, before turning his ministrations to her face and nose. Though wary of his intentions, the medical care was not unwelcome. And, Riza admitted, the first order of business in considering escape was ensuring she was sound enough in mind and body to
avoid recapture.

She wondered if Priam had considered the fact that he was, in more ways than one, bolstering her strength. Pythos had seemed perfectly content to leave her languishing in her pillories, her injuries untreated, filthy in a sand suit soiled in blood and discharge.

"Are you a doctor, Priam?" she asked benignly.

"No." He glared at her, glasses catching the dim light and glinting ominously. "'old still."

After giving a small facial shrug, she did as she was told. As Priam began to wipe at her cuts and scrapes with a swab of disinfectant, she ventured: "Your leader, Pythos... does he know you're treating my injuries?"

Priam grunted, "Don't matter." The cold rubbing alcohol stung against the rents in her temples and Riza winced. "Can't 'ave you gettin' an infection an' dyin' on us."

"The prospect didn't seem to cross your boss's mind."

"That's why it ain't 'im who's treatin' you. Turn your 'ead."

She peered over her shoulder. Priam began to scrub her neck and clavicles with an almost martial determination. Riza frowned. She hadn't been injured below the chin: the sand suit had shielded her from most of the debris. The few bullet casings laying on the bed of the truck hadn't been enough to break the skin. But, when Priam threw the gauze aside, the material was rust-red, almost black.

Abruptly, Riza remembered Pythos's wandering hands, his cold palms leaving a freezing trail across her sternum. Working down from her face, he must have smeared the blood from her nose all over her skin, like some macabre finger painting. Priam, engrossed completely in his work, cleaned up the mess and rebuttoned her collar with a brisk, dispassionate efficiency.

Turning her head, Riza considered the quiet man. Despite his insinuating some deeper relationship between her and the General, which in turn gave Pythos a weapon to use against Roy, the big Drachman's mannerisms seemed strangely at odds with those of his colleagues. Though masking it well under stoicism and lack of complaint, he had struck Riza as being deeply uncomfortable with Atreus and Pythos's tendency to derive pleasure from the infliction of pain. He didn't seem to have the stomach, or the patience, for wanton violence.

"Why are you helping me?" she queried quietly.

Priam had all the emotion of wet concrete, his facial muscles grey and cloudy. There was no anger, no sadness, no spite or resentment. He almost appeared bored as he sat on his haunches, facing her. For all the presence he brought to the room, he might as well have been one of the cloth and straw dummies from the practice range back at Central Command.

"Because," he rumbled, "Pythos intends for the Flame Alchemist to come after you. And 'e will come for you."

"You're wrong. He has a duty to Dairut, to his soldiers—"

"'e will."

She breathed in sharply. "There is no manner of military or martial engagement that does not run the risk of suffering a loss. General Mustang knows this, and he knows it is a soldier's duty to take those risks, regardless, to accept them, to learn from them, and to remain pragmatic and focused on
the mission without doubt or reserve."

Priam growled into her face, his bushy black beard scratchy against her chin; he smelled, strangely enough, like pirogies: "Listen to me, girlie... I'm helpin' you because if that maniac gets 'ere and finds you in the state Pythos left you, 'e's gonna kill us all. Dunno 'bout you, Captain, but I don't wanna die. Least of all by bein' cremated. I know 'ow it works with you two. I've seen it."

"What do you mean," she began, thinking furiously; "I've never met you before..."

"You wouldn't remember. You were busy."

"I was busy..."

"Your commanding officer stabbed me," he intoned gravely, "because I tried to keep 'im from you." He waved away her wide-eyed stare. "I don't wanna die when 'e comes for you, Captain. So I'm lookin' after you. Can't promise nothin' for the others, but when the time comes, I don't wanna be at the Flame Alchemist's mercy again, 'cause I know when it comes to you, 'e ain't got none."

Captain Hawkeye opened her mouth to protest, staring hard into the opaque surface of Priam's spectacles; she couldn't see his eyes behind the glare. But before her angry words found their way out, Riza remembered...

The tunnels under Central. Envy. Poor, poor Maes.

Fire. The smell of cooking flesh, deceptively savoury. Screaming.

In her many and varied memories of the Promised Day, they were all alike in a few particular respects. In every one, he snarled at her to lower her weapon. In every one, his black eyes were featureless and cloudy, as hard as polished obsidian. In every one, her hand was shaking as she held her handgun to his head. The memories seemed to sustain themselves on their own cruel reincarnations, resurrected in many forms, on many nights. For years after the War, Roy, like her, had dreamt of the corpses he had created in the bone beds of Ishval, past horrors rearing unbidden from his nightmares. But, for a moment, in those tunnels, the nightmares had seeped into reality, and Roy had become his own horror, his own conflagration, lost in the labyrinth of his own hatred. And Riza couldn't save him. His fury was his worst fear, and her greatest failure.

Roy was a man who would take every risk, fight every battle, to protect the ones he loved, even though his heart drummed with fear at the thought of losing them.

But after Maes's murder, the need for revenge had been a rat gnawing at his heart, relentless, unceasing. It was an abscess on the skin of his soul that could only be cured by burning it out. Savage. Spiteful. A dish best served in a raging inferno. Unforgiving. He would bear a grudge until he died or took revenge, whichever came first. It had been so brutal. Vicious. Satisfying. Empty. Pointless. Destructive.

Riza hated to acknowledge the simple sagacity — and the ironic wisdom — of Priam's words. She hated that they replayed in her mind over and over again; but what she hated more than anything was her own begrudging acceptance — that, indeed, what she knew of the man named Roy Mustang proved Priam right. It frightened her, it angered her, to know just how thin his righteous path had become, and to be reminded of her duty should he toe the line.

So it was reasonable, then, Riza decided warily, for Priam to fear for his life.
The Drachman retreated from her, stretching the stiffness in his legs. Riza touched her nose tentatively. The cartilage smarted, but the pain was no longer excruciating. She sat on the small stool and watched as Priam rummaged for something else in his medical bag. Without a word, he removed a bundle of cloth and tossed it to her. Dust and sand billowed up from the floorboards.

"Put that on," he ordered curtly.

Riza eyed the pile: a grubby corduroy cloth cap, an old chequered shirt with two buttons missing and loose trousers that had seen better days. She scowled at the foul smell of cigarette smoke and stale beer.

"Sand suit's dirty..." he muttered, crossing his arms. "I won't 'ave you catchin' infection."

Riza sighed, picking up the shirt between a thumb and forefinger. She was halfway through unzipping her sand suit before she realised, to her indignation, that Priam was still watching her. Her hands, moving slowly down her clothes, turned up once, then fell.

"What are you doing?" she asked slowly, preparing for a disagreeable answer and reconsidering, suddenly, the force she would need to break Priam's glasses...

"Your restraints are off," he explained impatiently. "I ain't turnin' my back and havin' you stick one of those cracked lantern chimneys in my neck."

He made a fair point. All the same... "If you're so concerned for your safety from a concussed woman with a broken hand, Priam, you're more than welcome to wait on the other side of the locked cellar door."

Priam leant forward, glaring at her. "You want me to call Atreus down 'ere instead? Get dressed."

She scowled darkly, her cheeks hot.

An intensely private person, she couldn't bear the audience. The only other time she had been half-naked in front of man fully exposed to her vulnerability and pain had been nearly ten years ago under vastly, vastly different circumstances. She'd had her back to him the entire time, their eyes never once meeting. While this undignified little strip tease could hardly hold a candle to the former occasion, Riza was struck with the same feelings of physical shame and self-loathing, her beleaguered features laid bare for the scrutiny and study of a stranger.

How humiliating.

Riza slowly and cautiously undressed. She made sure to keep her back facing the wall as she peeled the suit off her arms, rolling it down her torso, letting it drop into a brown-beige puddle at her feet. Riza stole glances at her voyeur from under the fringe of her hair. Priam's gaze was not one of lasciviousness or leering, but rather half-lidded indifference. He could have been watching a really dry, really boring lecture for all the interest he showed in her exposure.

Riza pulled on the shirt. She buttoned the trousers. She left the hat.

Priam nodded. "Come on," he said gruffly. "Pythos wants to talk to you over dinner. You haven't eaten."

She frowned. "I'm not hungry."

"Uh huh. Come on."
Sensing this was a battle she was not going to win, and conscientious of the opportunity to survey her prison, Riza allowed herself to be steered by Priam, around the islands of debris, up the cellar stairs. She started when she saw Atreus grinning down at her from the landing. She didn't know how long the boy had been sitting there, inside the door. Perhaps he had been there the whole time. With a lurch of something not unlike vertigo, Riza wondered if the kid had peeked under the banister rail during her undressing...

The thought made her shudder.

"Dinner's ready, Mr. Priam," chattered Atreus. He pinched Riza's arm as her escort pulled her along. The cellar stairs were slapped against the chipboard wallpaper as though their design had been an afterthought. They fell too close to the door and were uncommonly narrow. Priam had to shuffle sideways. The rail was just a plank of wood supported by three mean spindles. As it juddered precariously under their weight, Riza worried it would come crashing down.

"Thanks, mate."

"I found a rat."

"Did you?"

"Yes! I folded him."

"You folded 'im?"

Atreus bobbed his head up and down, blonde curls bouncing in every direction. "Hmm mmm. It made a crackling noise, like... like, when you break dry twigs. But Mr. Pythos said my hands were dirty and I had to wash up for dinner." The boy pouted. "He said I couldn't eat the rat."

Riza had been lying before... she had been very hungry. She wasn’t anymore. Listening to Atreus, her growling stomach seemed to shrivel.


"That's what Mr. Pythos said!" For no apparent reason, perhaps out of sheer excitement, Atreus pinched Riza again. Priam ignored it.

Once out of the cellar, the Captain took in every detail of her surroundings. Beams of light streamed through the worn wooden slats. Thousands of dust motes danced and whirled in the light, splintering in the shards of crystal from smashed lamps; the refracted light spattered the shattered and worn white floor with an iridescent rainbow of colour. Despite the glow the light beams played upon the room, the depleted nature of the building was obvious. Grey, gritty sand mantled every surface. Cobwebs lay draped over cloth covered furniture; the smell of dry decay hung in the air like a thick, diseased miasma that had smothered the fruitful perfume of any lived existence. A house, a home, once loved, now abandoned.

Riza had seen it before — many, many times before.

She surmised they were in one of the old residential districts of Ishval: Dairut — is she was so lucky — Reshalla, Daliha... Kanda. In what little illumination the cracked crystal and wooden slats provided, she could almost picture the unfolding dramas of flight, of frantic packing and crying children, of mothers and fathers and spouses running from the advancing juggernaut of the Amestrian military, leaving in their wake the sad afterglow of their lives. The memories the house contained rotted right along with the mildewy wallpaper, trapped under the dust like a tragic still-life in a museum locker.
"Ah, there you are, Priam." Pythos poked his head out of what used to be a dining room, breaking Riza from her memories of the War. She looked over Pythos's shoulder; unlike the rest of the house, the dining room still looked presentable. "I'll take care of Miss Hawkeye from here."

"It's Captain," she intoned. Atreus stomped on her foot... hard. Riza grunted in pain.

Pythos sneered. "Unless you want a set of broken toes to accompany that hand, Captain... would you care to join me for some dinner? Without further pedantic annotations would be preferable."

Riza scowled. She would almost prefer taking her chances with Atreus — almost — but a broken foot was no good if she was going to be fleeing across the desert in the near future. Her arms crossed, she stalked into the dining room. The door closed behind her with a jarring bang.

She eyed the exit warily. With the relatively sane, relatively stable presence of Priam on the other side of it, trapped in the room with only Pythos for company, Hawkeye realised she had managed to hedge herself into a dangerous little corner. Every modicum of her instincts, every drill sergeant from the academy, every ghost of jaded warning from her crass, paranoid best friend Rebecca were all screaming at her to get out.

Riza considered listening to them.

Pythos gestured to the place adjacent to his own. "Have a seat, Captain."

Abandoning the radius of safety provided by the door, Riza inched her way around the table. Her eyes flicked over the assortment of foodstuffs... dry fruits and vegetables, mostly, some legumes and nuts. Stale biscuits. All delicacies she could have ripped from a ration packet, and nothing anyone would need any utensils to eat. Hawkeye dispelled any hopes she may have had of poking Pythos in the eye with a fork tine.

He made no move to pull her chair out as Riza sat, and the first thought that crossed her mind, bizarrely, was that Kimblee would have been absolutely scandalised. Perhaps it was the danger of her situation — trapped in an isolated room with a man quite clearly scant of sanity — that made her yearn for a type of psychosis that was, at the very least, polite.

Despairingly, Riza realised she must really be in a dire state if she was missing the Crimson Alchemist's company.

"Help yourself to nibbles," said Pythos amiably. Riza did no such thing. "I was just about to contact your superior." He gestured to an EE-8 field telephone, similar to the models of Fuery's fascination, and a switchboard shuffled into the corner. Riza understood then why the room seemed so much cleaner than the rest of the house: the dining table had doubled as their communications station.

"Well," Pythos corrected himself after a moment, a hooked finger propped under his chin, "more specifically, I was about to contact my representative within your superior's company."

Riza checked her anger against concern, but the checking only managed to make her sound more angry. "No one in General Mustang's company would betray him, sir." Her eyes flashed a warning, but dread at the prospect was a feverish heat in her stomach. "No one."

"Don't pretend to know each of their religious affiliations, Captain... serving in the military and worshipping the Theoi are not mutually exclusive, and their intersection doesn't necessarily equate to insurrection. Although," he chuckled, "in this particular case, it rather would, since my contact has been keeping tabs on your superior's activities for some time now, and helped us coordinate the
attack on your train. Well," he was still smiling at her but his eyes burned like two yellow suns, "until you put a hiccough in the whole thing, of course."

She placed her hands on top of the table. The tips of her black and purple fingers stood out stark against the crisp white bandages. "And who is this contact, Mr. Pythos?"

"That would be telling, Captain. Cassandra is rather particular about her anonymity."

"Cassandra," said Riza, glowering; she kept from curling her hands into fists, "is the name of a character from Xerxian myth. As is Pythos, Atreus, and Priam, for that matter. They're all pseudonyms. Furthermore, I have never heard of the Risen... or the Theoi, or an institution that worships the Homunculi. Everything about your little cult seems couched in enigma." She peered sidelong at him. "Forgive me if I doubt your credibility."

Pythos leant back in his chair, popping a grape into his mouth. He showed too many of his yellowing teeth when he ate, and he bandied with the white flesh of the fruit for so long, Riza was hard-pressed to suppress a shudder. He wore a small, sutured smile, even though Hawkeye had taken to glaring daggers at his forehead. It was unsettling, how his moods refused to match the situation. There seemed to be a fundamental disjunction between the world and his perception of it. Her father, Riza thought bitterly, had behaved in much the same way; after a time, he grew so distant and removed that he could no longer connect, or even care to connect, to the simplest of human emotions. Pythos seemed the type of person to look happy when others were in pain, to look bored in the face of suffering. To feel an inner surge of pleasure when others were hurt. Riza knew crueler children could behave in such a way during their more formative years, but in an adult...

It was disturbing. It was dangerous.


"No. You can't shoot a god and make it bleed. Make it feel pain. That's what I did to the Homunculi." Her mouth curved into an almost insolent smirk. "General Mustang and I killed your so-called Theoi, Pythos."

Her words agitated him; she could hear it in his ever-increasing rate of sighs. He fiddled with a button on his shirt as he said, "Within each Stone rested souls from the realm of the Forevertime, the place where we all go after our bodies return to the dust. In taking these souls into themselves, the beings you call Homunculi became Heralds, Messengers from the Forevertime, and Speakers for the Dead. But with their passing, the Risen knew the time had come to anoint a new Prophet, the holy son of the Theoi. Just as the ancient Xerxian apostates, those idolators, dared to create the first Homunculus, so too will the Risen use the Gate to usher the Forevertime into the realm of Earth. But, instead of seven voices, the Speaker of the Dead will have only one. He will become the perfect Messiah."

Oh, Roy...

"You're insane, Pythos... or whoever you really are."

"Oh, we all had names," he said softly. He seemed to consider the umbral bruises under Riza's eyes as he pushed himself out of his chair, skating his finger along the smooth tabletop, positioning himself slightly to Hawkeye's left. A hand brushed against her shoulder and Riza recoiled as though electrocuted, shoving her chair out and retreating to the relative safety of the wall. Pythos reclined against the table, chortling at her obvious discomfort.
"But as the Theoi are distilled in many bodies, in many forms," he went on, "and as the Oracle of the Forevertime is a mantle passed from seer to seer, so too have we, the faithful, discarded the singularity of our identities. The self," he spat the word like a curse, "is an illusion, a false idea of believing that you are defined by what you are or what you do. Your money, your career, your race, your sex, your loves, your hatreds. It is a backwards way of assessing and living life. Our worth is known only through prophecy and prayer."

"So, accordingly, you name yourselves after fictional characters and randomly select an officer in the Amestrian military to serve as your next messiah," finished Riza icily. "If by shedding identity you also mean shedding intelligence, sir, then I commend you for the fortitude of your devotion."

Though he didn't stop grinning, his pupils dilated, his eyes a pool of black where before there had been yellow. "For a soldier, you're quite impertinent, Miss Hawkeye."

"So... who were you before, Pythos?"

His smile would have gone on for a mile if it could. "How terribly forward of you, my dear. Why don't you try to guess?"

No thanks. "What about Priam and Atreus? Who were they before you roped them into this little cult of yours?"

"Oh, you've met Priam before."

"Yes," she ground out, "he mentioned that."

"If Priam's memory is worth anything, which I've found is more often the case than not, then the circumstances regarding your acquaintance were quite harrowing for you, my dear."

"I don't—"

"You had your throat slit. You were bleeding out on the floor before Priam's eyes."

He smirked as her expression went slack with shock.

"What..."

"Priam's former name was Führer Candidate Number Seventeen."

Hawkeye pressed her palm to the wall, steadying herself. "And Atreus?" she asked shakily. Her legs felt suddenly very weak. The white cable around her throat burned.

"His name was Jin." Pythos pushed off from the table, padding towards her in those awful shoes. "He has his father's eyes and hair, doesn't he, my dear?"

Riza felt the blood drain from her face, her skin growing ashen, her lips blue. A cluster bomb seemed to explode behind her eyes, making her nose throb. The world, she thought distantly, dimly, seemed so unpredictable in that moment, ruled by the forces of chance and coincidence, a science so unlike alchemy it was almost pagan and ungodly. Ugly. Reprehensible.

"Atreus's name was Jin Hakuro."

Hawkeye's senses snapped to icy lucidity, sharpened to a fine edge like a sabre. But before she could find the words, Pythos pounced.

Strong hands spun her around and pressed her into the wall. Her forehead smacked against the
screed, coming dangerously close to jarring her nose. He grabbed her bandaged hand — not hard enough to cause pain, but enough to make her blisteringly aware of the splintered bone clutched in his palm.

She felt the stirrings against her back and she fought the impulse to plant her heel in his goin. Riza released a shuddering breath. No, she urged herself.

Wait.

A chin rested on her shoulder. He breathed into her ear:

"You've caused quite a lot of problems for me, Miss Hawkeye," he said brightly, cheerfully, like he was talking about the grapes on the dining table. Riza squirmed under him. "I want to make sure, when we make contact with Roy Mustang, that he really, truly understands the urgency of your predicament."

Hawkeye snarled, "Go to hell."

"After you, my dear."

His lips clamped down on her ear. They were light at first, and then he bit down, hard. Riza grimaced. The teeth turned to a tongue, roving over the shell, nibbling at the lobe and the back of her jaw. Pythos released her broken fingers as two hands slid down her ribs and landed on her waist, just above the hem of those loose cotton trousers.

With her hand free and Pythos thoroughly distracted, Hawkeye uncoiled.

She dropped into a fast squat, shifting her hips. She flattened her left hand and struck Pythos's groin with the heel of her palm in three successive jabs. He yelped, clutching at his wounded pride. Riza lunged forward along the wall, throwing her elbow back into his belly. The blow drove the air from his lungs and he gasped, doubling over.

Hawkeye bladed her uninjured fingers and jabbed his throat before he could recover. She felt something give and his pharynx caved. As Pythos fell to his knees, choking, Riza punched him in the jaw. The sideswipe knocked his head against the leg of the chair, and he collapsed, unconscious.

She liked dealing with religious zealots, she affirmed. Keen to show off, indeed.

Riza didn't give herself time to catch her breath. She hopped over Pythos's prone form and made for the communications station. Her gaze swept over the switchboard but found the field phone disconnected. She thought back to her telecommunications training and Sergeant Fuery's seminars: the device must have operated on a point to point circuit, a local battery operation; a second phone ought to be connected directly to Pythos's line. And if that lunatic had intended to contact his spy, Cassandra, in Dairut, the connection must already be active, just awaiting Pythos's call.

She picked up the headset and whispered hoarsely into the mouthpiece:

"This is..." she took a deep breath, willing her heart rate to slow and her voice to steady, "this is the Risen. Come in, Dairut station. I repeat, please respond, Dairut station. This is an emergency."

The line fuzzed with snow. Pythos groaned on the floor. Hawkeye's heart was pounding so fast she was struck for a moment with the irrational worry it would burst.

"Come in, Dairut station!" she hissed. She closed her eyes. Please... "This is an emergency... come
"Erm... this is Dairut, over. I was told this was a line to East City. Who is thi—"

"Kain!" sobbed Riza, breaking into a smile despite herself. She could have kissed him. Fastidious, diligent Kain Fuery. Of course he had volunteered to monitor the communications channels.

The Command Sergeant gasped. "Captain Hawkeye! A-are you alright, sir? Where are you?!

"I don't know, Kain... I don't know. I'm somewhere in the Ishvalan prefecture but I can't give you a precise location." She swallowed; her mouth had gone bone dry. Her saliva had the consistency of sawdust. "Listen, Sergeant, I'm being held by a group of fanatics calling themselves the Risen. They're the ones who attacked the train, and they intend to apprehend General Mustang."

"Captain, he's been preparing an expeditionary force to rescue you! We'll have you soon—"

"Absolutely not," she interrupted firmly. "You cannot let him come after me, Sergeant. That is exactly what these men want. The General is their target."

"Sir, if you stay on the line for a little longer, I might be able to triangulate your location—"

"I'll make it an order, Sergeant!" snarled Riza. Fuery's mouth snapped shut on the other end of the line. Unlike the rest of Roy's team, Kain Fuery followed her orders to the letter. Without hesitation. Without question. "You do not come after me. Urge the General to monitor his ranks instead. Has anyone joined the envoy since the train?"

"Well... yes, sir, but—"

"Arrest them" she ordered, cutting across whatever Fuery was about to say. She already suspected it was someone close to General Hakuro. "I have received intelligence that this organisation has a mole within the General's confidences. It was how they anticipated our arrival in Dairut and how they knew which train to hit. You're looking for a person operating under the pseudonym Cassandra."

"Cassandra—?"

"Kain..." She clutched the headset to her ear, squeezing her eyes shut, crushing the plastic until she half.expected a web of cracks to appear. "These men worship the Homunculi as a pantheon. I believe it is their intention to use the General as a conduit, a way to communicate with the souls housed within the Gate of Truth, perhaps with Truth Himself. They mean to turn our commanding officer into a living oracular god. It does not matter what happens to me, but the General must not be allowed to fall into enemy hands."

"C-Captain..."

"Those are your orders, soldier. I'm trusting you to obey them."

"We can't just leave you, sir!"

"You will, Command Sergeant Fuery." She took a deep, shuddering breath, murmuring into the field phone: "I will be all right. You must protect the Colonel. Do you understand? Protect him from these men."

"Step away from the communications equipment, Sergeant."
Hawkeye's eyes widened. That voice...

Fuery's words was as hard and angry as she had ever heard it: "You...!"

"Step away."

"Kain? Kain!" Hawkeye's legs pressed hard against the table to keep herself from collapsing on it. "Who is that? Kain!"

"Put it down, Mr. Fuery."

"Tell me what you've done with Captain Hawkeye!"

Abruptly, the sound of a struggle crackled over the line, before a short burst of gunfire. She heard Fuery cry out before the connection failed and the line buzzed with snow. Hawkeye felt a thrill of panic race up her spine. She couldn't still her hands against a violent tremor.

_Maes... the phone call..._

"Command Sergeant!" she cried into the headpiece; she didn't realise her eyes were stinging until she blinked, hot tears rolling down her cheeks, stinging her cuts and scrapes: "Kain! Kain!"


_Died in a fucking phone booth..._

"KAIN!"

She only had time to hear the click of a dead phone line and the dry scuffle of brogue shoes before something made contact with the base of her skull, and everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

Here's a fun story after that frankly traumatic chapter: I was writing in the botanical gardens and came across three breeds of roses called "Hot Pants", "Military Brass", and "Red Flame" and I'm like... those are all the names of RoyAi fanfics I swear.

Like, "Hot Pants" would be the crack fic, "Military Brass" would be a team Mustang fic like this one, and "Red Flame" is totally an M/E-rated angst fic.

_Tell me I'm wrong._
The girl stood with a hip jutted to one side, her right arm draped across her body, clasping the elbow opposite. Her head rolled to one shoulder, throwing her white braid over a faded khaki shirt that was several sizes too big for her. She regarded him with bright red eyes, the corners of her mouth crinkling in a smile. She had dimples, he noticed, and a light smattering of freckles across her nose.

Oh crap, thought Kain; she was cute.

She was really, really cute.

He couldn't talk to cute girls.

Well, except for Captain Hawkeye, but only because she was his commanding officer and she would have shot him for insubordination otherwise.

He froze. Somewhere in the tangled mess of Kain's thoughts, he realised he'd inadvertently admitted he found Captain good-looking and nearly choked on his tongue.

Oh man, he thought, running his hand through his hair. Oh man oh man oh man. Fuery thanked his lucky stars the General's alchemy didn't extend to telepathy, unlike that creepy Rosin woman, otherwise Kain figured he'd be thrown right on to the barbecue alongside the assholes who took Riza. The thought made him sweat.

The really really cute girl gave him a funny look. "Are... are you all right?"

Kain said something really intelligent like "Uh?"

"I was asking if your shoulder wound was feeling any better."

"Oh!" Fuery swallowed, trying to banish the nightmare visions of the General’s ignition gloves. "Oh, yeah! Doc says it's just a graze. It burns a bit, but I feel fine."

"You looked a little distant... you didn't get a concussion, did you? I can go get the medic—"

"No, no, that's not necessary! I was just off in my own little world there for a moment!"

"Was I boring you?"

"NO! I mean, no... I'm sorry, I'm just very tired, and what with losing the Captain and getting shot at and everyone all worried there's going to be a fight and Edward's sudden appearance—"
She held up her hands, stifling laughter by biting her lip. “At ease, soldier boy, I was only joking!”

Fuery's mouth opened and closed mutely for a few seconds before he squeaked, "Oh. Sorry."

Her dimples deepened. "Don't worry about it." As she approached his cot, she removed the hulking piece of equipment that had been strapped to her back, setting it down on a table near the far side of the tent. Kain immediately recognised a 100 volt, 20 hertz hand-cranked ringing generator — the GN-38 model, he figured — in a case beside a TS-9-F handset. A field telephone, he mused, likely one of the older models, old military surplus, perhaps. The Ishvalan girl must have been the archeology team's communications expert.

Jeez... She was perfect.

Was this what Lieutenant Havoc felt like all the time? Kain wondered.

"There you go again," said the girl, her hands on her hips, watching him with something akin to amusement. "You look like you're a million miles away."

Fuery fought the urge to pull the sheets up over his head. An exercise in futility, as he figured his blush could be seen right through the white cotton anyway. "Well," he managed, "it gets kinda dull in this tent. I guess I'm just daydreaming."

"I could get you a book or something, Mister...?"

"Ah, Fuery." He remembered he wasn't in uniform and clarified: "Command Sergeant Fuery."

The girl scrunched her nose at the sound of his rank. Fuery's cheeks blushed bright red.

"I'm not a big fan of all that soldier stuff," she said. "But you have a name, right? I don't think your mum named you Command Sergeant. At least," she considered, "I hope she didn't."

The mousy communications officer blinked his surprise. "Oh." Answer her, you idiot, a voice that, for some reason, sounded like Jean Havoc shouted at him. "My name's Kain."

"As in, Abel?"

"Nah, as in, my mum likes K names. My sisters are Kaitlin and Keiko. My brothers are Kasey, Kaleb, and Kirk."

"I'm Annika," she said brightly. "Annika Cotte. I'm one of the Professor's students."

"A student?"

"Well, post-graduate. Doctoral candidate actually!"

“Oh! That’s great!”

“As soon as General Mustang footed the Reconstruction bill through the Congress, Ishvalans were allowed to apply to higher educational programs again. I tell you, I was on Eastern Poly’s doorstep faster than you can say education equity!”

Despite his sore shoulder and his gloomy mood since losing the Captain, Fuery found himself laughing.

Annika beamed. “I’m currently working on my thesis, the Ethnography of schooling, religion and ethnonationalism in the Ishvalan state. I guess my time here is something akin to fulfilling my
student employment obligation."

"As the Professor’s communications expert? Is that why you’re carrying a 1915 model of the EE-8?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed. "I shuffle between several sets, but that one there," she pointed to her equipment, "is a direct line to the switchboard guy at Eastern Poly. It’s not anthropology, mind you, but radios have always been a hobby of mine."

_Radios have always been a hobby of mine_… Fuery curled his fingers into the palm of his hand, not even feeling them dig in. He tried to summon his soldier’s poise and discipline, and under different circumstances it probably would have worked — he wasn’t a hopeless romantic like Havoc, _please_ — but suddenly he felt as though his mouth was full of sawdust and his brain was malfunctioning, the thoughts dropping in a slow cascade like he was drunk. For a terrifying moment, Kain couldn’t find his voice. He felt his cheeks flush hot as he floundered for something to say.

"I—I was always more of a Set TA-312 model kinda guy myself," he said. His throat had gone hoarse.

She cocked her head. "That's the only other analog 2-wire phone that can interoperate with the EE-8, but I've always preferred the analog switches over the push button operational interface."

"Why's that? The crank generator on the TA-312 has a much higher voltage."

"I always forget to push the damn button on the TA's before speaking! Honestly, I end up talking to myself before I realise the other caller can't hear me! It's so embarrassing."

Marry me, thought Fuery.

"Look..." she tucked a strand of white hair behind her ear, "I don't want you to think I'm here with an ulterior motive or anything, but I was wondering if you knew where I might find the tall woman with the hat? The one who always looks like she's smelling something nasty?"

Fuery frowned. "Major Miké?"

"That's the one! After that nice Jean Havoc—"

_Nice Jean Havoc._ Kain was going to throttle him.

"— escorted the _Muhaddith_ back to the Mishaari site, the Lieutenant sent me to find Major Miké because she needed to," she mimed Jean’s country drawl to such an accurate degree, Fuery had to keep himself from devolving into hysterics, ‘‘contact her superior officer for further instruction,’’ apparently. I don't really know the details... the military stuff is a bit outside my area of expertise."

"Well..." Fuery thought back: he'd been carted off to the medical pavilion in Mishaari almost immediately after the train pulled into Dairut. He wasn't entirely sure what Feldspar and Edward were up to… "Last I checked, the Major was still near the station."

"I'll run and fetch her, then. Make sure that phone doesn't walk off! I can't stand carting that thing on my back in this heat."

Fuery sat up a little straighter. "Yes ma'am!"

"I'll be back soon." Annika gave him a cheery wave before bursting through the tent, her braid trailing after her.
Fuery watched her go, sighing, a little wistfully.

Whenever Jean Havoc had a crush, Kain, along with every other person on the planet, apparently, always found the Lieutenant’s hopeless infatuations so amusing. Havoc, who always wore his heart on his sleeve, who believed in a romance that seemed a bit outmoded in that day and age, was always so easy to tease, especially when the girl was far out of his reach, or dumped him as soon as General Mustang deigned to show his face — oftentimes, Kain suspected, not due to any genuine interest in the girl, but for the sole purpose of putting a stake through Havoc's heart and with it, his meagre love life. Now that Fuery had his first serious crush, he felt a sudden swell of sympathy for all the torment they'd made the First Lieutenant suffer over the years.

Although... Kain ruminated, gritting his teeth, if Jean was being typical Jean and making eyes at Annika, then Havoc hadn’t yet known the meaning of true suffering.

*Nice Jean Havoc.* Please... he was tolerable, at best.

Suddenly, across the medical pavilion, the field phone fizzed to life. The sound brought Kain's jealous musings to a grinding halt.

Fuery eyed the set warily. Annika had mentioned Major Miké needing to contact her superiors. If there was a direct line to the switchboard operator at the Polytechnic Institute of East City, the technician could redirect the call to any number of stations, even Central, where Major Miké was stationed.

But... didn’t the Major need to phone Führer Grumman, and not the other way around? If the Führer didn't know about Captain Hawkeye being MIA, and provided Lieutenant Havoc hadn't managed to call beforehand... how would Grumman know to call them now?

Fuery got up from his cot and made his way over to the communications equipment.

He listened to the feed. The voice was awash with static, the remnants of the sandstorm and the frayed wiring of the set playing merry hell with the signal. Kain fiddled with a few nobs and dials as he strained to make out the voice through the interference:

"Come in, Dairut station——–lease respond, Dairut s———cy."

Fuery cursed under his breath; the resonator circuit was on the fritz. It was little surprise: the case’s insides were covered in sand, and the electrics looked as though they’d been attacked by a monkey with pair of wire strippers. Sighing and muttering to himself, Kain jimmed with the copper between the inductor and the capacitor before hitting the phone with his fist for good measure. One of the two things seemed to work, because the voice came through clearly:

"Come in, Dairut station... this is an emergency... come in—"

Kain cleared his throat; if it was someone from the Führer's office, he figured he could at least take a message for the Major.

"Erm..." Fuery adjusted the headset, "this is Dairut, over. I was told this was a line to East City. Who is thi—"

"*Kain!*

Equal parts shock and surprise soared in Fuery's chest. "Captain Hawkeye!" he cried into the receiver. "A-are you alright, sir? Where are you?!!"
"I don't know, Kain, I don't know. I'm somewhere in the Ishvalan prefecture but I can't give you a precise location."

Ishval? Annika's equipment was an analog telephone, and her communications line was on a closed channel. It was a circuit-switched network — there was no way for a random field phone in Ishval to piggyback the line.

Unless, Kain thought darkly, the phone line wasn't connected to East City at all...

Did Major Miké know that? he wondered. Did Annika?

"Listen, Sergeant," Fuery's attention ricocheted back to Hawkeye, "I'm being held by a group of fanatics calling themselves the Risen."

Before Kain could bombard her with questions, she continued hurriedly: "They're the ones who attacked the train… and they intend to apprehend General Mustang."

Under far less serious circumstances, Kain would have grinned. Whoever these assholes were, they'd made a huge mistake in taking the Captain. Fuery had seen how agitated Roy had become since Hawkeye's disappearance: white knuckles from clenching his fists too hard, gritted teeth in an effort to keep from snapping at everyone who so much as looked at him sideways. His hunched shoulders exuding an animosity that was like steam from a dormant volcano — hot, suffocating, a harbinger of something explosive.

Whoever stood between the Flame Alchemist and Hawkeye wouldn't last ten seconds.

"Captain," he chattered, "he's been preparing an expeditionary force to rescue you! We'll have you soon—"

"Absolutely not!"

Fuery froze.

"You cannot let him come after me, Sergeant," said Hawkeye. She sounded breathless, Fuery realised, and frightened; his heart clenched at the thought. "That is exactly what these men want. The General is their target."

Kain managed weakly, "Sir, if you stay on the line for a little longer, I might be able to triangulate your location—"

"I'll make it an order, Sergeant!"

The vehemence in Riza’s voice cut him to his core. Fuery knew there were quiet acts of defiance Falman could have managed, a riveting speech Heymans could have made, a grand gesture of insubordination Havoc could have orchestrated… something, anything, that would have made things better. That could have saved her.

It was a tragedy, then, that Captain Hawkeye was stuck speaking to him and not to any of his superiors. Kain clutched the field phone to his ear and squeezed his eyes shut, but considering the potentials served only to frame the measure of his helplessness.

He was not like the rest of the men. He was not like Roy Mustang. He wasn’t brave, or strong, or exceptionally clever, or prodigiously stubborn.

He was just Kain Fuery. He was ordinary, and he was useless.
“You do not come after me,” affirmed the Captain. She paused, then: “Urge the General to monitor his ranks instead. Has anyone joined the envoy since the train?”

He thought of Ed and Major Miké. "Well... yes, sir, but—"

“Arrest them,” she ordered before Kain could finish the thought.

His eyes widened. Arrest the Major? Arrest Edward? The thought was unfathomable. Fuery trusted the Elrics almost as much as his superior officers, and while the entire team seemed disinclined to extend the hand of friendship to Major Miké, Kain thought their treatment of her was entirely unfair. It wasn’t her fault her brother had been a deranged maniac. It was completely out of her control. Kain had been with Breda when they found the Crimson Alchemist in the tunnels under Central five years ago. He’d seen firsthand what Kimblee was capable of doing, and Kain had been abhorred by it. Even so, Fuery thought Breda’s enmity towards Sofia was completely out of line. Whatever he may have thought of Kimblee, Kain didn’t believe the man’s sister deserved the same disgust and horror.

But, at Hawkeye’s warning, Fuery couldn’t help but wonder if his idealised trust was entirely misplaced. After all, it was Major Miké who had needed to use the phone line… and an analog communications channel using the EE-8 models took a long while to set up. He reasoned the two phones, one in Dairut and one somewhere in the desert, with Hawkeye, had been connected for some time — well before Annika left the equipment in the tent, at any rate. Perhaps the Major had been expecting a call from Captain Hawkeye’s location... but not from Captain Hawkeye herself.

The prospect turned his stomach.

Riza pressed on: “I have received intelligence that this organisation has a mole within the General’s confidences. It was how they anticipated our arrival in Dairut and how they knew which train to hit. You’re looking for a person operating under the pseudonym Cassandra.”

A mole... a spy. But the name was unfamiliar to him. “Cassandra?” Wasn’t Cassandra a princess from a fairy tale? Falman would remember; Fuery filed the name away for later.

“Kain...” The Captain sounded so tired, so uncharacteristically shaken, in that moment, that upset and fear seemed to surge with Fuery’s every breath, never sufficiently soothed by his long intakes of air.

What had those bastards done to her?

“These men worship the Homunculi as a pantheon. I believe it is their intention to use the General as a conduit, a way to communicate with the souls housed within the Gate of Truth, perhaps with Truth Himself.”

It was far more information, with far bigger consequences, than Kain was equipped to deal with, so he just nodded mutely. Hawkeye took his silence as a cue to continue:

“They mean to turn our commanding officer into a living oracular god. It does not matter what happens to me, but the General must not be allowed to fall into enemy hands.”

Fuery’s chin quivered. “C-Captain...”

"Those are your orders, soldier. I'm trusting you to obey them."

In an uncharacteristic burst of indiscipline, Kain cried: “We can't just leave you, sir!”
"You will, Command Sergeant Fuery. I will be all right. You must protect the Colonel. Do you understand? Protect him from these men."

But that’s your job, Fuery wanted to say, his eyes misting. That’s why we need you, Riza.

He may have been the kid of General Mustang's retinue, but Kain Fuery wasn't completely ignorant. He knew as well as any of them that Roy's enthrallment to his emotions, his devotion to his men, meant that he was constantly teetering on the edge of a pit of grief and mourning. Every other commander Fuery had served under, every other senior officer from the southern trenches to the barracks of Central, seemed to cultivate a consistent habit of erecting barriers of blame around themselves, a blame directed towards others, towards grunts and subordinates... and that blame was their way of protecting themselves. Rather than owning the pain, they clawed and scrabbled for some higher ground to stand above it.

But not Roy Mustang. He blamed himself for everything... for the actions of his men, for the army's shortcomings, for the things he could control and for the things he couldn’t, because in line with some strange messianic imperative, he felt if he didn’t shoulder the burden, the burden would crush them. It didn’t seem to matter to Roy if it crushed him in the process. In his guilt, he had condemned himself. It was like he was constantly looking into a fractured mirror... and then blaming himself for the shattered image he saw therein.

But Hawkeye didn’t turn away from the shattering. She saw General Mustang's fractures, and instead of averted her eyes from them, she quietly, with unparalleled dignity and grace, began to piece them back together. Reconstruct them. It was like alchemy, in a way.

And it was a duty, thought Kain despairingly, he could never hope to do himself.

He was so subsumed by his thoughts, by Hawkeye's resignation to her fate, that he didn't hear the snap of a thumb safety until it was far, far too late.

"Step away from the communications equipment, Sergeant."

Fuery went rigid. He didn't need to turn around to recognise the voice. And the sound of a cocked pistol said more than enough in regards to his visitor's intentions. He cursed himself for leaving his holster and armaments near his cot...

He heard a pair of footsteps draw closer, soft in the sand. Fuery didn't know where the strident flash of bravery came from, but he kept one hand on the call button of the EE-8, hoping Captain Hawkeye would be able identify the voice over the line.

"You..." breathed Kain, his back as stiff as a board. He felt the prickle on his neck from the gun barrel pointed at it.

"Kain? Kain!" Each word rose a few octaves higher than its predecessor. "Who is that? Kain!"

The newcomer growled in displeasure at the sound of Hawkeye's voice. "Put it down, Mr. Fuery."

As Fuery ordered, "Tell me what you've done with Captain Hawkeye!" he rested a hand on the table. If he could leverage enough force behind the push, he figured he could propel himself into the newcomer's chest, knock the weapon away. The muscles in his arms tightened...

Suddenly, before he could move, the field phone exploded next to him. Kain yelped, jumping away as a bullet tore through the casing. His hands smarted from a few shards of plastic shrapnel; the heels of his palms began to bleed freely. He thought he heard Captain Hawkeye crying for him just before the line went dead.
He spun around, glowering at the woman holding his pistol. When the gun remained fixed on his sternum, he raised his hands in surrender, blood pouring freely down his wrists.

The way Professor Winnie Stokes squinted when she glared at him reminded him of a pit viper. Her face, which had once seemed so careworn and warm, weathered by the sun, was webbed with rage.

"I recognised your voice," said Fuery shakily, his face softening in sadness. "From when we talked over the phone about the desegregation legislation a few years ago, remember? I thought... I thought you sounded like my gran."

Stokes levelled the gun at his chest. She wasn't very tall, but then again, neither was Kain, and he knew even the most inexperienced gunman wouldn't miss him at that range. And something about the steadiness in her hands told the Command Sergeant Winnie Stokes was far from inexperienced.

Her deep brown eyes, so shadowed they were almost black, drilled into his. They flashed arrestingly. Fuery didn't think he'd ever seen such dark eyes with so much light in them.

"To be perfectly honest, Mr. Fuery, I don't really care who you thought I sounded like. Get your hands higher, boy. Don't try anything."

He complied, resting his palms on his head. He could feel the blood matting in his hair.

"You're Cassandra," breathed Fuery, eyeing the gun warily.

"I am," said Professor Stokes.

"How long have you been planning to betray us?"

"Well, I usually find the since before you were born line terribly melodramatic, but in your case, young man, I think it may be accurate."

"You knew to hit our train because you helped make the damn schedule!"

"The Muhaddith's knowledge of the alghadabs proved very helpful indeed... not that he was aware of the fact, of course."

Fuery's vision coruscated. He squeezed his eyes shut. "It was you... you, the whole time..."

Sighing, she admitted, "I only regret having to make introductions under these conditions, Command Sergeant, courtesy of the incompetence of my underlings... first that airhead Annika leaving the field phone lying around and, of course, my hunting dogs bringing down the wrong game." She raised the gun a little higher, shifting her aim from his sternum to his forehead. The small hairs on Fuery's neck stood on end when the Professor hissed with pained patience, "Imagine my surprise, seeing Roy Mustang step off that train this afternoon. He was never meant to reach Dairut, Mr. Fuery. I took great pains to make sure of it."

Fuery managed a weak smile of defiance. "Doesn't sound like your hunting dogs are very well trained."

"Not like you, eh boy?" she snapped witheringly. "You and the rest of Mustang's heeling poodles, especially that blonde shrew of a Captain." The hatred in the words made Kain grimace. "She came close to ruining everything, one recalcitrant little bitch who wanted to play at being brave."
"Oh, she isn't playing, Professor. Foiling your plans was probably as easy for her as breathing."

She barked a deprecating laugh. "If you're going to attempt bravado, dear boy, at least control the tremor in your voice."

Fuery swallowed; he felt like he had a lump of granite stuck in his windpipe. He demanded: "Who are you people? What do you want with General Mustang?"

"I don't think that's any of your business, do you?"

He opened and closed his hands. His palms were terribly sweaty. "What do you intend to do to me?"

Stokes chuckled. "Now that, on the other hand, is very much your business. You have options, Command Sergeant."

"How..." he gulped, "how magnanimous."

"I may yet surprise you. Now then, you may choose to remain here in the medical pavilion, out of sight and out of mind, which shouldn't prove too difficult for an insignificant little lickspittle like you. You won't utter so much as a single syllable of this little discussion to anyone, at least until our work here in Mishaari is finished. After which case, I don't suppose it will matter what you do."

He blinked rapidly; the strobing light made his head hurt. "And if I don't?"

"What side dominant are you, soldier?"

"What..."

Stokes took a step forward. Her hand was uncannily steady. "Not a difficult question, Mr. Fuery. Right or left... which side?"

"I'm right-handed."

"Well then," she began, "if you decide to be a nuisance, I'm going to spin you around, put this gun in your mouth, pull the trigger, and then place your weapon in your right hand. And when someone comes to investigate the noise, they'll find what remains of one suicidally depressed Command Sergeant."

Her voice was as coarse as fragmented rock in a hessian sack, the words grinding against each other. The sound seemed to complement her stony expression. She wiped her curly hair from her eyes and fixed him with a hard brown glower... "You served on the Southern Front, didn't you, Mr. Fuery? Awful place. And not just the mustard gas burns and hacked-off limbs. The dysentery, the typhus, cholera."

"Stop," murmured Kain through gritted teeth.

"Grown men reduced to snivelling, shivering wrecks."

"Stop it."

For a moment, Fuery was back: alone on night patrol before the fighting broke out, the darkness stretching ahead, as long as the trenches he'd dug near the treaty line, the mud in his boots the colour of charcoal and cold enough to crack stone. The birds had been silent, and no-one had
walked between barracks. The only sound had been the ever present rumble from the tanks that crumbled the streets to dark and dusty fragments.

"I imagine the screaming, the death, still haunts you," Stokes went on, coldly, "I imagine you still smell the blood and the mud and the cordite on your clothes, under your fingernails..."

"Stop it!"

"It's all too common, unfortunately. Post traumatic stress. Shell shock. A boy too young, who saw too much. There is but one way to silence the screaming and it is, I'm afraid, a permanent one, Mr. Fuery." Her eyes bored into his forehead. "If you don't do as I ask," she said softly, "then I'll turn you into a statistic."

He grit his teeth. "I dunno what you want with my commanding officer, Professor," he managed, his voice shaking, "but if you think he's gonna be this easy to threaten, you're in for a nasty shock."

"From this vantage, soldier, I like my odds."

"I'm nobody, Professor. Scaring me is chump change. We have two dogs of the military on our side. And Edward Elric, the Fullmetal Alchemist! You and your goons from that truck don't stand a chance."

"Oh, I don't know about that. There are rather more of us than you seem to think."

His blood ran cold. "More—"

"Enough." Her finger hovered over the trigger. "Now, Kain Fuery, what will it be? Convalescence in your cozy little cot, or convalescence with the rest of the Flame Alchemist's victims, out there in the desert?"

At the mention of the Flame Alchemist, Fuery's eyes went saucer wide and he gaped in horror at the entrance to the pavilion. "General!?"

Professor Stokes flinched, her head jerking to the side.

It was the opening Kain had been waiting for.

He darted out of the line of fire, ducking under the gun and driving the heel of his hand into Winnie's chin as he lurched back into a standing position. The gun went off, and something snicked through the fatty tissue of his hip. The sound it made was strangely limpid. Fuery choked down a shout. The bullet wound was small, ragged around the edges, bleeding profusely. The exit wound must have been on his thigh. He could feel his trouser leg growing warm and wet. Grimacing against the pain, Kain locked Professor Stokes's wrist in his hand, twisting until he felt her ulnar tendon snap out of alignment. She held onto the pistol with martial resolve.

"Drop it!" he ordered, his voice going high. "Professor, if you don't drop the gun I'm gonna break your arm!"

She barred her teeth, snarling in a language Kain didn't recognise. Fuery twisted harder. Something crunched under his hands, but as he tried to force the Professor to her knees, he made the mistake of underestimating the old woman's strength. With her free hand, curling her fingers into claws, Stokes gouged the bullet wound on Kain's leg. White light exploded behind his eyes. Fuery screamed. Stokes tried to angle the gun towards him, pulling the trigger two more times in the attempt. The bullets burrowed into the bottom of the tent, just missing Fuery's foot.
The Command Sergeant thought furiously, trying to navigate the fine haze of agony behind his eyes. He was loosing a lot of blood; the red poured down his trousers, over his socks and boots, staining the sand crimson. His head felt strangely light. Wherever he looked, the once-sharp contours of colour seemed to bleed into each other. The ground lurched, like the deck of a storm-tossed ship, until Kain realised it was just him, teetering at he struggled to keep his balance. He steeled himself; he couldn't afford to go into shock.

He had to tell the General about Cassandra.

He had to warn the others.

Gritting his teeth against the searing pain of chipped bone and shredded lateral muscle, he pivoted on his leg and with the opposite foot, kicked Stokes in the knee; he felt something cave, and as she crumpled, he planted his elbow in her nose. Stokes howled, clutching at her face. He didn't hear a crunch, but there was a smear of blood on his bare skin when he brought his arm away. By the time Stokes regained sense enough to fumble for Fuery's sidearm, Kain was already running as fast as he could manage towards the tent flap. Flinging the canvas aside, dragging his leg, trailing blood behind him like red petals down a wedding aisle, Fuery plunged into the Mishaari digs.

After the shadowy twilight of the tent, the sun seared the rods and cones of his eyes. The Xerxian ruins lurched in and out of his line of sight, like an avalanche of weathered white stone. His breath came in small spurts, hot and shallow and terrified. His panicked heartbeat was like thunder in his ears. At his sides, his bloody hands curled into fists, swinging in a desperate attempt to propel him forward. Wet sand and blood smeared his face as sweat dripped from his hairline.

"General Mustang!" he screamed into the ruins of Mishaari, throwing himself forward. His lungs and heart felt like they were going to burst; the thick, burning air of Ishval didn't offer any relief as he sprinted between the pedestals and pillars, his limbs trembling. When he cried out, the sound was almost a sob: “GENERAL MUSTANG!"

His feet slipped outwards on the shifting sand as he rounded a corner, the desert heat scorching his throat as he struggled to inhale deeper, faster. With each footfall, pain like a molten iron rod shot from the bullet wound in his leg. It hurt so much he could barely breathe, could barely think. Time seemed to slow to a molasses crawl of wet, heavy footsteps and his own panicked breathing. Everything happened so quickly, but it seemed to him like ages.

Distantly, dimly, and with a slow-burning horror that seemed to burn the lining of his stomach like indigestion, he began to take notice of the other archeologists scattered around the dig site. Amestrians and Ishvalans, students and staff, men and women young and old, were beginning to rouse themselves. Fuery brushed past a couple bent over their fire billies and saw, out of the corner of his eye, two shining sidearms appear from their rucksacks. He heard the sound of pursuit behind him, and somewhere in the distance, Professor Stokes crowing orders to her followers. Fuery felt the sick rising in his throat.

My god, he thought. It's all of them. The entire dig.

He didn't know if Cassandra was trailing behind him. He didn't know if she was shooting at him. He doubted he'd be able to tell even if she was. Maybe he'd already been shot. But he'd teeter upright until they blew out his kneecaps if that's what it took. He ran, stumbled, righted himself, bouncing between the boundaries of the broken streets like an erratic particle in a cloud chamber. His legs wobbled, his knees threatened to give out, and Kain caught himself from face planting in the sand. He couldn't afford to fall. They'd kill him. He had to find Roy. He had to warn him.
That was all that mattered.

"Kain get down!"

Fuery didn't give himself time to think about it. He collapsed in the sand, wheezing from pain and exhaustion. Somewhere in the distance, he heard Jean Havoc screaming something to the pursuing archeologists, a warning with a lot of cursing and furious expletives. Fuery couldn't make out the words. He felt as though his ears were full of sand. Perhaps they were. He pressed his head into the sweltering earth.

Suddenly, something in the air ripped the oxygen from his lungs, and he found he couldn't draw a breath. He gasped, clutching at his throat. Rolling over onto his back, he gazed up at the cream-coloured sky, ready to see Stokes appear approve him and put a bullet through his glasses. Instead, a plume of fire exploded over his head, the flame rolling outwards like it was being fuelled by gallons of accelerant. A subtle shift in the wind brought noxious smoke and ash raining down into his hair and eyes. The heat was oppressive; if he didn't have the oxygen cushion, he would have been cooked. As the fire licked through the ruins and burnt itself out, Fuery took heaving gulps of air. Each breath tasted like grease.

"Stand down, Flame Alchemist," someone said quietly, "Or I’ll kill him."

A figure materialised above him, silhouetted against the wafting smoke. Fuery recognised the voice. His eyeballs were sore as he rolled them back in his head, peering at the newcomer, standing amidst the remnants of the Flame Alchemist's conflagration with nary a crease on her face betraying the slightest trepidation or fear. Kain saw a glint of white hair, pulled back and twisted into a braid. And he saw the metallic glint of the pistol pointed at his head.

Fuery's eyes welled with tears. He choked down a sob.

He looked up at Annika Cotte with pleading in his eyes. She stared back at him with nothing but contempt in her own.

Kain felt his heart break.

"Surrender yourself, General Mustang," called Professor Stokes from a distance. "Or I’ll have Annika put a bullet in your Command Sergeant’s head."

"Don’t do it, sir," murmured Fuery, not tearing his gaze from the Ishvalan girl. He knew no one save Annika could hear him, and Annika didn't care. With every breath, he tasted ash; the slow, steady trickle of blood and sand into his throat made breathing difficult, like he was swallowing salt water. He was struck, strangely, with the sensation of lying on a wave-washed beach, the ground shifting beneath him as it was dragged back to the swaths of a great grey ocean. An ocean in the middle of the desert, a tide amidst the sand.

It was oddly comforting, the thought of slipping away.

Professor Stokes — Cassandra — went on: “You’re surrounded, General Mustang. There are 153 individuals in this dig site loyal to me. If you don’t stand down, we’ll start picking off your men, staring with young Mr. Fuery here, then Mr. Elric.”

Even under the blistering desert sun, Kain felt very cold. The tears slipped out before he could blink them away.

“Don’t… Roy, don’t,” he whimpered. Nausea rolled in his stomach; the shame was a feverish burn in his cheeks. His leg ached, and as he lay there it grew progressively more difficult to distinguish
Annika's face, the edges of the ruins, the hot, high circle of the sun. The world seemed to blur into wet smears, like watercolours with too little pigment. He didn't know whether it was due to the tears or the blood loss. He didn't think it really mattered either way.

Fuery felt someone kneel beside him. Though she didn’t lower her gun, the vague outline of Annika stepped aside.

“Fuery…” The dark figure brushed a fringe of hair back from Kain’s damp forehead. “Shit…”

“Sir,” sobbed Kain, looking up at Roy Mustang’s pale, stricken face, “I’m sorry… I’m sorry…” he wepted, his tears leaving red-brown streaks across his face, “I couldn’t do it, sir… I couldn’t be her, I couldn’t protect you… I’m so sorry…”

“Easy, Kain,” Roy murmured, "It’s all right. I’ve got you.”

The General looped one arm behind Fuery back and the other around the bend in his knees. Careful to avoid knocking the bullet wound, grunting with the effort, he held the Command Sergeant close to his chest, allowing Kain to tuck his head into the crook of his neck. The Flame Alchemist smelled clean and sharp, like ozone.

Fuery’s eyelids wavered. He felt himself falling. His perception of space and time seemed distorted, everything slowing down until there was no movement, no sound, no taste or texture, only him and the sky above, a firmament that seemed to swallow the desert whole. His hand reached out, reaching for it, grasping the endless crevasse of yellow.

Suspended in the air, Kain Fuery closed his eyes and surrendered himself to the infinite sky above.

Chapter End Notes

"It was you!"

Also, one of Kain's siblings is named after me because my capacity for coming up with creative names it not very versatile at the moment. Thanks Uni.
"I regret not killing certain people.

"Sometimes, when I’m laying awake at night, I wonder if thoughts like that make me a bad person. You’d think, being a soldier, and knowing my what I know about Ishval, it would be the other way around. But as awful as war is, it's my duty as a soldier to shoot the enemy. I don’t regret putting those Homunculi bastards and every snivelling coward who helped them into the ground. But the things a man regrets the most in life are those which he didn’t do when he had the opportunity. And that includes, in my case, killing people. Exacting revenge.

"Revenge is a bad thing. It's destructive, it's exhausting, but for guys like me, it's also a way of life. War is all about diametrics and binaries. Us against them. Black versus white. Kill or be killed. And within the paradigm of opposites rests some tacit law of reciprocity, like we’re constantly grappling with the need to get one up on the other guy. Revenge to a soldier is as natural, as instinctual, as breathing. When you’re crawling through the mud, watching your buddies get blown to hell, helpless as you navigate the mire of death and destruction, you can’t help but feel cheated in some way. We imagine how nice it would be to do something about it. I mean, ultimately it’s not the kindest of sentiments, but I’d be terribly naive if I didn’t admit that, despite our best intentions, a little mote of vengeance didn’t burn bright in all of us.

"And I wish I could have been there to see that bitch Lust burn. I wish I had been able to deal the final blow to Führer Bradley myself. I wish I could have killed Solf J. Kimblee.

"I mean, my first knee-jerk reaction would be offing him simply because he was evil and manipulative, and he didn’t give a shit about anyone. Not so unusual a trait in a guy like that, sure, but it’s indescribably dangerous for an unhinged alchemist.

"But his malevolence wasn’t the reason I wanted to kill him. I think I hated that man so much because he was so familiar to me.

"The worst flaw I have, I think, is self-deception. If I’m feeling good, I do good things, but if I’m feeling crap in any way, I tend to do bad things. And sometimes, I’m tempted to fool myself into believing my good deeds mean I’m a good person, an isomorphic relationship, but my bad deeds aren’t necessarily evil, but tangentially justified in some way, only I'll try to reconcile my reasons after the fact. But, when I heard of the Crimson Alchemist in passing, and then when I finally fought him face to face, I came to understand that our similarities are one truth I can’t escape.

"And in some way, even our aligned opposition worked to a certain degree. You gotta have an evil strategist to counteract the so-called good strategist, right? We complimented each other, balanced each other out. But I think, just as revenge and killing might seem simple on the outside, but terribly complicated underneath, so too was our situation far more complex than a binary
opposition. Because it’s simple, and it’s deceptively easy, to produce events and people in pairs and lean them against each other, and if you’re playing shôgi, then such a thing can even be helpful.

"But that’s not how life works.

"If life was like shôgi, then the people who are dark reflections of each other ought to remain equals in their equilibrium, neither one upping the other. But my life isn’t like shôgi, as much as I try to convince myself otherwise. And for that reason, I regret not killing Solf J. Kimblee when I had the chance."

Continued in Act VI: Break of Day
"Did you know?"

Miles didn't turn to look at him. The sigh that escaped the Major's dry lips was slow, like he was taking the time to process what had happened. His eyes remained fixed on the road, on the exact path Professor Stokes had taken a few hours before. The two soldiers walked without an escort, but they didn't dare deviate from the direction of Stokes's tent.

"I didn't know, sir," said the Ishvalan, in the Major's sombre baritone but with a most uncharacteristic forlornness. "I... I had no idea."

He knew it was irrational, perhaps unfair, of him, but in that moment, Roy Mustang's hatred of Major Miles was so potent it seemed to radiate from him like heat from a kiln, as though he'd set fire to everyone and anything that came within a foot of him. Despite the warmth that burned skin-deep, his words were as flat and icy as a sheet of rime:

"You have been stationed in Dairut for three years," Roy managed, his teeth grinding together, "working directly with these people. How... how could you not have known?"

Miles looked as though some vital cords in his facial muscles had been cut, leaving his expression vacant and slack. "I wanted..." he began quietly, but soon tailed off, his red eyes growing distant. Despite his enmity towards the man, Roy couldn't help but notice the Ishvalan's pale pallor, the sunken depressions of his cheeks and the way his shoulder blades jutted just a tad too sharply against his shirt. He looked ill, Roy realised: terribly tired and haggard, like a weathered offcut of sandstone, eroded to a brittle mineral skeleton. Under vastly different circumstances, Roy would have felt profoundly sorry for him.

"I wanted to believe," Miles went on, speaking quickly, as though afraid the General would try to stop him, "I did believe Professor Stokes's dedication to her work stemmed from a genuine desire to see the restoration of Ishval. Perhaps... perhaps because I have lived for so long without any hope of restitution, bereft of the consolation of the Amestrian people even as I strived for the tiniest assurance of acceptance, that I was rendered blind by the most fleeting of possibilities." He bowed his head, a few loose strands of white hair curtaining his face. "In my desperation to see too much change in too little time, in my greed, I allowed myself to grow complacent. I didn't bite the hand of goodwill when it presented itself, General Mustang, but it seems all I was really doing was allowing my handler to feed me after obeying her every beck and call. Evil people rely on the acquiescence of naivety in order to continue that evil. I was naive. I was careless, and in my carelessness, I have placed your men in grave danger."

Roy had never heard General Armstrong's second in command sound so wretched. It was unsettling, disfigured in a way that tried its damndest to defy explanation, as though he'd walked into a familiar room only to find every piece of furniture shifted a few inches to the left. The superficial ordinarieness remained, even though the reality under its gilded edges had been pulled in all the wrong directions. Miles, Roy realised, was as much a victim of Professor Stokes's machinations as the rest of them.
Mustang released a breath, and the tension in his shoulders seemed to dissipate slightly. "It's not your fault, Miles," he said quietly, allowing his irrational anger to diffuse into the desert air.

The Major looked down at him sharply. "General—"

"It's not your fault," insisted the Flame Alchemist. He explained, "During the drafting stage of the Reconstruction Bill, even before we drew up the plans for Al’Arshif, the Congress convened to discuss the candidacy of Professor Stokes as interim project head in the Dairut region. Though we were desperate for the resources her academic teams were able to provide, the delicacy of the Reconstruction effort meant we could not afford to be slipshod in the selection process. We conducted extensive background checks. We interviewed countless students, subordinates, and colleagues throughout the various university systems. I signed off on her suitability myself, well before you took over as commanding officer in this region, Major."

"Her record came up clean, then?" asked Miles with his customary competence.

"Squeaky," affirmed Roy. "Not so much as a poor course review. The notable exceptions were a few memos from staff at the Central City military academy. Stokes had earned the ire of certain Bradley loyalists during her sabbatical for condemning the Civil War in an academic setting. If anything, that merely strengthened her candidacy in my eyes."

"But how much of her pro-Ishval rhetoric is genuine?" wondered Miles. "She has demonstrated an astonishing capacity for deception."

"Perhaps..." Roy raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sun, fighting the urge to discard his uniform top. As they crossed Mishaari, the perspiration surfaced on his forehead, his cheeks, the bridge of his nose, running in rivulets down his face until his white collar was sodden and closer in colour to the sand. "Perhaps," he mused, "she has been sincere."

The Ishvalan frowned. "I don't follow, sir."

Roy's trained his eyes on a point across the basin as he considered aloud, "Not that I don't discount the efficacy of your instincts or your judge of character, Major, but I can fathom the possibility of Stokes misleading you to a certain extent. What I can't fathom, however, is her ability to mislead Scar."

Miles nodded slowly. "The Muhaddith would have sensed any disingenuousness. Either Professor Stokes is a prodigious liar—"

"Which, given the circumstances, she likely lacked the stamina to sustain over so many years."

"—or, at least so far as her concern for the Ishvalan people is concerned, she is telling the truth," finished Miles quietly. "Which invites the question of motive."

"You mean, what can her people, this cult of hers, hope to gain by pouring so much time and energy into rebuilding this region?"

"Precisely. Al’Arshif is no small endeavor, General. You know that as well as anyone. What would be the aim of such a long con?"

Roy eyed the Xerxian relics warily, as though trying to divine an answer from the glyphs and reliefs etched into the baking hot stone. "I suspect Reconstruction is merely a means to an end," said the General. "A gateway to some other, larger objective."

To Roy's unease, Miles went rigid. His red eyes widened to alarming proportions, and his mouth
pinched into a small, thin frown. He cast his gaze around the ruins until he settled on the largest structure, near the easternmost edge of the Mishaari crater, a pair of enormous, bone white pylons: two tapering towers, each surmounted by a cornice, blindingly bright under the high desert sun. Despite the heat, Miles spasmed with a sudden shiver, gooseflesh erupting on his arms.

The Major's eyes were deep pools of red, dull and muted, seemingly unable to focus on any present detail. Mustang recognized the look all too well: he'd seen it in the eyes of young soldiers after particularly vicious firefights. He'd seen it in Alex Armstrong during the Major's tenure in Ishval, and in Maria Ross after Roy cremated a pork corpse in her stead. Perhaps most alarming of all, Roy had seen that thousand-yard, glazed stare of shell shock in the golden eyes of a boy ten years his junior, after he tried to bring his mother back from the dead.

"Miles," ventured Roy, quietly, "what is it..."

"The gateway... the Door," breathed the Major. He rounded on Roy urgently. "She was searching for the Door!"

Understanding dawned on Roy with that same vivid, blood-red tincture as a morning sky before a thunderstorm. He remembered what Ed had said on the train, about the rogue Gate somewhere in the desert; the Flame Alchemist tried to dispel the sudden tingle of unease, a stinging that made his eyes itch. He pinched his lids as he said: "The Door... you mean a Portal of Truth, the one Fullmetal and Feldspar have been searching for? It's here, in Dairut?"

Miles pointed towards the pylons. Roy was shocked to find the man's hand trembling. "It's in there. I felt it, when we excavated the sight... I almost..." Miles fell silent, unable to articulate the experience. "It made me... made me feel as though I'm no longer entirely human... like I’ve lost something." He laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound. "There is an ironic justice to it, I suppose: I saw the Truth, and just like an alchemist who has performed human transmutation, something, it seems, was taken from me."

“It’s no loss of limb or sense, Major,” explained Roy gently, remembering his own journey through the Gate, “this is not equivalent exchange at work. I suspect it’s just your body’s natural response to the trauma. I’m guessing you’ve struggled to affect any nuance of emotion since the episode. Am I right?"

“Yes,” agreed Miles. “I feel nothing... or I feel too much. It’s maddening.”

The General nodded his commiseration. He was not usually an overtly sympathetic creature, least of which to the men under the command of his greatest rival, but Miles had experienced something no alchemist, nevermind no ordinary person, should ever have to suffer. “Feeling any emotion, Miles, beckons the suffocating stream of memories that come with it. Your mind has locked it out in self defence, and you’re struggling to maintain control of the mechanism.”

Miles seemed lost in his own recollections, his gaze distant. “When I close my eyes, General Mustang, I see thousands of my dead countrymen staring back at me. I see all the Briggs soldiers who died on the Promised Day, sighing gently as they slip away. And I... I see my commanding officer’s face: hurt, happy, dying, crying, sad, furious, grief-stricken. In pain. In love. All at once. Over and over, again and again.” He looked at Roy with such anguish the Flame Alchemist felt something in his chest tighten. “I have to feel nothing, sir, because anything more would kill me.”

"It's the sheer strength of the Truth, Miles, and that's why we can't let Stokes get control of that Portal," said the Flame Alchemist firmly.

He stole a glance over his shoulder, back towards the slopes separating Mishaari from Dairut, and
suddenly Roy felt the bile rise in his throat. He thought of the spartan tenements and clean white lintels and busy, ramshackle shanties. He remembered the sea of red eyes and white hair, an incoming tide in a flood plain long bereft of water. There were so many of them, rooted in the soil of their ancestral homeland, soaking in the high desert sun, their songs and prayers and laughter filling the streets, but they all seemed in that moment so delicate, so fragile. Roy was struck with the sudden urge to shield Dairut, throw a sheet over it, trap it in a singularity in time and lock it away from the rest of the world. He thought of that living ocean of white and red light and he cursed the sudden feeling of transience, his fear that if the tide receded again, it would no longer return in due course. The thought threatened to make his eyes well up, summoning the rain to that dry, dusty desert, where each grain of sand seemed to Roy a fine work of art, something he couldn't hope to create in a thousand lifetimes.

But he knew standing against Winnie Stokes, who threatened to undo everything Roy and Miles had worked for, to bring ruin to Ishval once again, would be a struggle unkind to such sentiment. A strange, misshapen protectiveness towards that harsh land was a weakness he could ill-afford.

Even so... "I don't care what it takes," said Roy. "I will not see Ishval fall again."

"Stokes has your men and mine under close surveillance," Miles reminded him gently.

"I know." Roy's words were heavy. "Fuery is in critical condition. Hypovolemic, and his leg might be infected. So long as he remains dependent on the blood transfusions and antibiotics the Dairut medics can supply, my hands are tied."

"And what of Feldspar and Fullmetal?"

"I... I don't know."

Roy hadn't seen Edward or Sofia since leaving the Dairut station for Mishaari the previous day. He knew it was probably too much to hope for Ed's safety. The kid's strengths had never rested in steering clear of trouble. More often than not, the little punk courted it. But Roy also knew Edward Elric's ability to wiggle out of tight spots bordered on the prodigious. Wherever he was, Roy hoped he had escaped the brunt of Stokes's counteroffensive, or, at least, didn't provoke retribution by acting needlessly stupid.

Because, Roy admitted to himself, he couldn't bear the thought of losing Fullmetal, too.

"Edward's a smart kid," said Miles quietly, as though reading the General's mind; the man had always been adept at inferring unspoken thoughts — part and parcel of being the Ice Queen's second, Roy supposed. "And, as much as it leaves a bad taste in my mouth, I have to place some small trust in Major Miké's genetics. Her kin's propensity for self preservation was extraordinarily versatile. Something tells me that woman will not go down easily."

Roy nodded in agreement as they reached a stark white tent, a few hundred yards shy of the excavation site at the pylons. The freckled Ishvalan girl, Annika, emerged from behind the canvas.

"Cassandra's ready to see you both," she said curtly. To Roy, her red eyes flashed a warning and she growled, "If we smell so much as a whiff of smoke, Sergeant Four Eyes is finished."

Mustang scowled at her — if he actually gave two shits about Stokes or her ilk, he would have been insulted, receiving threats from a girl Fullmetal's age. "You lose Fuery," he snapped, "you lose your bargaining chip. Don't waste my time with your hollow intimidation, kid."

Annika's lip curled. Her teeth were almost catlike, long and narrow and sharp. "That's cute,
General, but it seems to me you're forgetting about someone."

Roy felt a crack, snapping like brittle glass and thin ice, the shards threatening to tear at his guts. Something shifted in his posture. But before he could say anything — or envision the formula he needed to shift the oxygen concentration in the air — Major Miles steered him around Annika. Something about the Ishvalan's urgency and firm grip told Roy Miles knew exactly who the girl was talking about, and was doing his utmost to keep the General's temper in check.

"Off the record, Miles?" murmured Roy.

"Yes, sir."

"What would you do," he asked quietly, "if it was Olivier?"

Miles didn't meet his eye. "I would endure, sir, and carry out the mission irrespective of her status. That is what she expects of us."

Roy smiled grimly. "Are you lying to me, Major?"

"Yes, General."

"Then what would you do?"

"What would I do?" the Major's expression, which had been wan and sickly all morning, suddenly hardened. "I think, sir, I would do whatever it takes. The consequences be damned."

Roy didn't have anything to say to that. The two soldiers entered the tent side by side.

"Have a seat, General. Major Miles."

Neither man sat. Miles crossed his arms, hiding his hurt and anger under his placid exterior. Roy stared at Professor Stokes — a small, plump woman with ringlets of grey hair and brown eyes so dark they were almost black, like his own. It was all he could do to keep from kicking the offered chairs across the tent and turning the furniture into kindling. The chairs, Stokes's desk... and Stokes right along with it.

She knew his intent well enough, eyeing him critically like a dogfighter eyeing a snarling bull terrier.

"Gentlemen," she began; despite her civility, her words knicked like barbed wire, "we seem to have a bit of a problem. My men have been unable to find the Muhaddith. The Elric boy and Miss Kimblee are also missing. I should like to find out where they are."

"We don't know," said Miles stonily.

"I somehow doubt that, Major." She smiled at him warmly over her folded hands. Miles stiffened at the sight. "Give it your best guess."

He grunted. "It's possible the Muhaddith left to convene with other Ishvalan leaders in Dairut. Whatever your intentions, Professor, you know well by now that he will not act on his own recognisance without the counsel of the elders, which also means he will not, for the time being, act against you."

Roy commended Miles's patient assessment — whatever Mustang thought of Olivier, her men knew how to keep their heads.
"And the two alchemists, General?" asked Stokes, turning to him, her smile significantly less friendly.

"Edward Elric and Sofia Bel Miké are not under my command," said Roy severely. "Their business here in Ishval is their own. Given the Muhaddith and Sofia's strained personal histories, it's likely Feldspar and Fullmetal continued on their way into the Great Desert as soon as possible."

"On what errand?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Professor," he lied. "They are none of my concern."

"Perhaps they ought to be, General," said Stokes. Her expression was one of absolute disdain. "Because if the Elric brat causes trouble, it will be young Sergeant Fuery paying the price for it."

Roy bristled. He felt a twisting in his mouth he could not control, turning his frown into something hideous. Something ugly. He didn't want to see Stokes's anger. He wanted to see her terror. He wanted to see her kneeling on the floor screaming as her muscles crisped to a black charr.

"I noticed you haven't restrained my hands," he said instead, his voice just above a whisper. Miles looked over at him in alarm. Roy could sense the Ishvalan urging him to refrain from doing anything rash.

Unfortunately, Roy was in a rash mood.

"No," affirmed Stokes. "No, I've left the pillories at home today."

"You do realise... even without my gloves, I can still perform alchemy."

"Well, simply put, General, the health and safety of your men aside, it would not be in your best interests to attack me at this time."

"Then you had better give me a damn good reason, Professor," he snarled, "because I've just about run out of them."

"I think you'll find this sufficient..." she gestured to the telephone on her desk. "If I don't answer the call due to come through in approximately three minutes, someone is going to die. And that someone will not be me or you."

"I could burn you to charcoal before you had the opportunity to issue Fuery's kill order and chance the consequences."

"You could," she admitted, "but then it wouldn't really be you chancing the consequences, now would it?"

Miles *humphed*. "You seem prepared for any eventuality, Professor."

"Of course." She held her hands out. "The Risen has readied themselves for this moment for quite some time. An unprecedented sum of time and resources, and money, of course, has gone into ensuring our meeting, General. Granted, perhaps not in this location, and certainly not under these circumstances, but we failed to account for your adjutant's stunt on the train—"

"Don't speak of her!" Roy growled into her face, his hands crushing the edge of the desk. "You don't have the right... you don't have the *worth* to even mention her name."

Miles tensed beside him. With no small amount of difficulty, the Flame Alchemist forced himself
to calm down. Losing his temper wouldn't help Fuery... and it wouldn't help Riza, if she was still alive.

And Stokes had better fucking hope Riza was still alive, thought Roy dangerously.

The phone began to ring.

"Ah, there we are." Stokes went for the call button, ignoring the glares of the two officers. "Please remain here, gentlemen. This concerns you both."

She lifted the receiver and lay it on the table, the headset pointed towards Mustang and Miles. Roy heard a splinterly scraping over the line, what sounded like someone dragging chair legs across a wood floor. Someone indulged a deep sigh.

"Is that you, Dr. Bates?" asked Stokes amiably.

"I hear you loud and clear, Cassandra," came an oleaginous voice that reminded Roy of General Raven in the least complimentary respects. "The reception seems to have improved."

"As I understand it, one of Mustang's grunts took it upon himself to fix the field phone's capacitor before he was... well, incapacitated."

"How kind."

"What is this, Professor?" asked Miles coldly.

Instead of answering the Major, Stokes directed her attention to the man on the telephone. "Dr. Bates, I should mention I have General Mustang and Major Miles with me. Gentlemen," she turned to her two guests, "let me introduce you to my associate, Professor Lendel Bates, known to the Risen as Pythos."

Roy remembered his ancient Xerxian. "The Python," he said lowly, "in the mythological canons, the beast who guarded the oracle at Delphi. I'm sensing a pattern here, Cassandra."

"Then, being such a clever clogs, General, I assume you already know the proposition the Risen have in store for you."

"I have my suspicions, yes. My sensei kept copious notes on the oracular traditions of ancient Xerxes... the Delphic Augurs, the Eleusinian Mysteries..." Roy bared his teeth in a terrifying smile, "and, of course, the Risen, the pariahs of the ancient world, a murderous, bloodthirsty cult consumed by their interminable search for the Speaker of the Dead."

Stokes, ignoring his scathing denouncements, instead seemed rather pleased by his knowledge. "That's why I like you alchemists..." she mused, "you're always so well read. It's a common misconception amongst the classically-inclined that the Risen worship the creatures you call Homunculi. The truth is we are far more interested in their oracular functions, their capacity for individual thought integrated with the knowledge and wisdom of the souls housed within their Philosopher's Stones. The Homunculi were prophets, in some respects, but their disdain for mankind precluded their service as messianic oracles. Ultimately, their Stone cores constituted an extra, rather problematic degree of separation between their mind and the minds of those souls who have passed on into the Forevertime."

"But my team, working here in Ishval these past few years, has finally located the original cleft in the earth." Stokes's dark eyes glittered like spheres of boulder opal. "The Door we discovered between the pylons is a natural channel between our two worlds, the breach which enabled the first
oracles to speak their prophecies, the same breach that birthed the original Homunculus, called the Anthropário in the ancient tongue, and the one that will enable our new prophet to commune with the souls of the dead without the restrictions of a Philosopher's Stone."

"That Door is dangerous!" growled Miles. "You have no idea...!"

"Oh, we do, Mister Miles," came the oily voice — Pythos — from the telephone. "The reason we knew to excavate the pylons in the first place was an accident involving one of our younger alchemy students. You see, like you, the boy drew too close to the breach, and poor Jin was driven quite insane. Only certain minds can handle the experience, we've found. Minds that have already made the journey to the Forevertime, and have returned."

"Don't tell me..." seethed Roy.

Stokes recited, "For mine eyes have seen the King. He flew to me with flame in hand. He touched my eyes and said, Behold, with this flame, your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven. You are become Risen. I'd say you happen to fit the necessary qualifications, General."

"I'll pass, thanks all the same."

"You see," Winnie waggled her finger at him like a mother scolding a stubborn little boy, "I thought you might say that, which is why I've had Dr. Bates join us. Did you catch all that, Pythos?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Has your charge come to yet?"

"Ah, she's getting there." There was a sound over the line of a hand gently slapping a cheek. "Come on now, my dear, you should be standing at attention for your two commanding officers."

Roy's stomach dropped. Miles rounded on Stokes, fury burning in his red eyes.

"Professor," the Ishvalan muttered, "what have you done..."

"Let me speak with her," demanded Mustang. "I won't do a goddamn thing until you let me talk with my second in command."

"Did you hear that, Miss Hawkeye?" said Bates brightly. "You've been summoned." There was a tutting sound and a low chuckle. "Forgive me, General, she seems a little down in the mouth at the moment."

"You bastards...!" snarled Roy. Slowly, the Flame Alchemist turned from the phone to glare at Professor Stokes. He grated out: "Fire is the the most perfect of impartial arbiters, wouldn't you agree? It has no culture, no pity, no morality, no mind; the flame consumes whatever it pleases. The prey's only criteria is its capacity to burn. If fire can take an object and reduce that object to ash, then it will. The flames burn with no care for whatever will, or rather won't, be left behind. So when I imagine bathing this entire dig sight in flame, it isn't the burning I see. I see you, Professor.

"Understand this now, Stokes... you took something from me. Something valuable. Something precious. My shadow, my soul, my everything, was worth less to you than some pseudo-religious bullshit with no place in our world. Your beliefs are fiction, but Riza Hawkeye is real, and I am real. So when this flickering spark you've lit drops to the gasoline on the ground, I hope you know you earned the conflagration. More than that, you've paid for it in full."
"I'm holding your people hostage, and you're the one who means to threaten me? Your arrogance astounds me." Stokes sneered. "Well, let's have it then... the great Flame Alchemist, Hero of the Eastern Rebellion, here to raze Ishval to a cinder once again. Ready for Round Two already, Roy Mustang?"

"If it means taking you with me," he hissed, "then yes."

"Such animosity, General. You should really get that seen to. It's not healthy." Something acutely evil flickered in the Professor's eyes. "Especially when you don't have your Hawkeye here to pull you back from the brink."

In some distant part of his mind, behind the red that hedged his vision like blood from a burst artery, Roy realised he was shaking, his hands formed into fists by his side. The rage that possessed him then was suffocating. For a moment, the only things he could see were homeomorphic arrays in Euclidean space, topological manifolds, beautiful, terrible congruences and rigid motions directing the deconstruction and reconstruction of his flame alchemy. He saw the mathematics with a clarity almost inspired, divinely revealed. Enlightened. Something more terrifying than the prospect of the providential destruction happened in him: a hot, metallic wire sewed somewhere, suturing in small, sharp stitches.

He smiled at Professor Stokes and contemplated murdering her.

“Look at you,” she murmured, shaking her head. “Yours is a fury almost apocalyptic in scale, General. I can see it in those black eyes. But your hatred of me is nothing more than a transmutation of its own, of your shame and insecurities... it is all you hate about yourself but lack the courage to face. It is far easier to lose yourself in the theatrics of your mind, casting yourself as the victim of the Risen’s “machinations”, than it is to swallow even an ounce of your failure. As a leader. As her," she gestured to the phone, "commanding officer. As her colleague, her friend, her damned lover, whatever the case may be, the truth is, you made her into what she is, Flame Alchemist. She threw herself onto the coals for you. We are in this disagreeable situation — disagreeable to the both of us, mind you — because of you."

Mustang took a step forward. Miles muttered an urgent, "General, don't—"

"...General?" a second voice crackled over the phone.

"Hawkeye!" Roy shouted into the reciever; he didn't realise how hard he had been clenching his teeth until his jaw began to ache. "Captain... are you all right—"

"Sir, respectfully, there are more pressing concerns," she interrupted; her words were slurred and slow, like she was speaking through something viscous in her mouth, "the Risen, they intend to—"

"I am aware, Captain." He glared at Stokes. "I've been given all the details."

"Sir, you can't allow them. No matter what happens, you can't—"

Hawkeye gasped, pulling in a tight little breath as though trying to muffle the sound. Roy's throat seemed to constrict. Miles's mouth had gone grey from pressing his lips together.

"Captain, what was that? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Ah, not quite, General," corrected Bates. "I just hit her left kneecap with a cudgel. Isn't there some regulation against lying to a superior officer, Miss Hawkeye?"
A dull, wet *thud* followed by the sound of harsh choking drove a rod of ice through Roy's chest. His blood ran cold. He stood there, helpless, not knowing what to do, suddenly too scared to affect coherent thought.

"Those were her ribs. Say, Cassie, am I going to have to narrate this entire thing?"

Roy rounded on Stokes furiously, his hand poised to snap. Miles grabbed his wrist, his fingers like thumb screws.

"General, if you retaliate they'll kill her and Sergeant Fuery both," the Major urged him, his voice thick with upset.

"General, don't," wheezed Riza, her voice a wet rattle. "I'm fine, sir, I'm—"

There was a sharp, thick *crack*, like a bough breaking under snow, and Riza screamed, a renting wail that forced Miles to clutch Roy to him, holding the General's arms down at his side.

"Oh, I think that was her femur, Mister Mustang. The natural constriction of the thigh muscle inadvertently pulls the entire leg backwards at the break point like a bow string set too tightly, causing the bone to snap. Nasty nasty."

"Please, stop it," begged Roy.

A shuddering breath that had been held in Riza's chest broke away painfully. "Sir... your promise. It's not... about us..."

The words hit him like a kick in the sternum, crushing something underneath. It was agony; knotting under his breastbone and twisting in his stomach and pushing all the air from his lungs, so that he rocked on the spot and clutched at the edge of the desk, at Miles.

"As I understand it, General," said Stokes with devastating gentleness, resting her head on one fist, "five years ago, Bradley's agents attempted to pressure you into performing human transmutation using your erstwhile officer. I've... discussed the occasion with a certain subordinate of mine, and we both reached the conclusion that a double-or-nothing method of coercion creates an unnecessarily high-risk situation. The slicing of one's throat leaves very little to the imagination, and the coerced party is forced to make a decision under the not inconsiderable duress of a time constraint. Swift decisions are often careless ones. It's no different from a particularly zealous student rushing through one of my exams.

"But slow torture," she mused, brushing a grey curl from her eyes, "non-lethal injury teases out a certain piquancy to one's powers of consideration. The Risen want you to make an informed decision, General. Pythos has assured me, should you need it, you'll have ample time to consider our proposal. And from the sound of it, Miss Hawkeye, that tough little thing, should last quite a while."

"God damn you, Professor," breathed Miles, his voice quaking.

Roy looked between the Major and Professor Stokes, taking small, shuddering gulps of the humid desert. His mind blanked at the thought of Riza — kind, good, brave, loyal, beautiful Riza — her limbs bent in the wrong directions, bloody cudgels, broken bones. He couldn't articulate his terrible fear and his violent rage as he opened and closed his mouth, panting, fingers pressing into Miles's arms.

He just looked at the phone, feeling utterly empty. He didn't know what he was supposed to say. He didn't know what he was supposed to do.
That she mattered enough to him to grieve over was not made anodyne by her willingness to bear the brunt of their suffering.

Perhaps he was destined to forever fall for the one person he couldn’t have. Perhaps there were iterations of their lives set side by side in an infinite cascade of tragedies waiting to be played out. Waiting for him to experience the same impossibility over and over again. And with each recurrence, their entanglements had turned to rubble the walls they had erected around themselves, until Roy could almost imagine the dust and debris hanging in the air, spinning in tightly-knit pirouettes around his head. What he held in his heart for Riza Hawkeye — something vast and byzantine that eclipsed the face of what most called love — only deepened with her dignified endurance. A braver, bigger soul than his would have swelled with pride.

But his soul was not brave or big. It wasn’t strident. It wasn’t strong at all.

Roy just couldn’t bear to hear her in pain, suffering for his sake.

"I'll do..." he swallowed, then muttered haggardly, "I'll do whatever you want. Please... leave my subordinate alone."

Professor Stokes nodded sagely. She turned to the phone. "You heard him, Pythos. Leave her be. Make sure Priam gets her cleaned up—"

"Give her back," the Flame Alchemist demanded. He rubbed his stinging eyes, trying to dispel the pins and needles that threatened to turn into tears. His vision misted. "That's my only condition, Stokes. Give her back to me, and I'll do whatever the hell you want."

"For the time being, General, she's my security," said Cassandra, almost apologetically. She lifted her finger from the call button and the line went dead. Roy's complexion paled.

"But, I promise you, once the Ascension is complete, I'll personally ensure her return to your care. In the meanwhile, my people will look after her and treat her injuries."

"Is that supposed to mollify us, Stokes?" growled Major Miles.

"It's the best you're going to get under the circumstances, gentlemen."

The Ishvalan towered over her. "You will answer for this. You tortured an Amestrian soldier. There will be consequences."

"We'll agree to disagree."

Something seemed to snap inside Roy's mind and he stumbled to the corner of the tent, and with each step his stomach tightened and ached. He swallowed, trying to breathe, but his throat kept clenching. He couldn’t stop the warmth rising through his chest. As Miles shouted something at him, clutching at his shoulder, Roy tasted bile at the back of his mouth. He buckled over. A warm, clouded, cream-coloured liquid spilled from his mouth, sizzling as it splashed over the sand. His vision shifted and blurred. He felt the floor swaying. He suspected he was not long for passing out.

Miles's grip on his arm suddenly tightened. "The ground is shaking," he murmered incredulously.

Roy looked up, wiping at his mouth. Though his vision remained fuzzy, he distinguished the vague outline of Professor Stokes stiffening behind her desk. Miles was right: it wasn't just Roy's nausea. The entire tent was trembling. The table rattled like a freight train had just passed by outside. Then, all at once, the ground heaved with such force, Professor Stokes fell heavily, nearly knocking her head on the corner of her desk. Major Miles held Roy upright.
"What the hell is going on?" demanded the Ishvalan.

Roy's nostrils flared. What he mistook at first for the smell of sick resolved itself into something fouler... noxious and cloying like a miasma of rotten eggs.

Sulphur.

The ground trembled, and a rumble rose through the soles of their shoes, churning the marrow of Roy's bones. It was the General's turn to clutch Miles's shirt.

"We need to get out of here, Major!"

"What—"

"GO!"

Miles's eyebrow shot up under his hairline, but he didn't argue. Together, the two men sprinted from the tent, Roy trying to blink his eyes back into focus, tracking the sound of the Major's heavy footfalls.

The stench of sulphur was even worse outside, clinging to their skin like a sheen of sweat. The assembled archeology teams murmured in panic as the ground continued to buck up and down, cracks appearing in the ruins. Sitting figures scrambled to their feet but almost immediately lost their balance and fell again, reduced to crawling in the sand.

"General, what is this..." asked Miles uneasily, struggling to catch his breath. Roy pulled him to a halt when they were several yards up the side of the crater wall, well clear of the hub of the excavation site.

"Look," breathed the Flame Alchemist.

In the arcade between Professor Stokes's tent and the entrance to the pylons, a pillar of molten magma burst from a fissure in the ground, the rock around the new-formed crater ruched like a ball gown. Roy could just make out the lava flow bubbling black with vivid red veins, flowing lazily like treacle, the sound louder than a quarry explosion. In an instant his lungs were full of sulphurous smoke and he couldn't see through the constant streaming of his eyes. His throat went as dry as the sand under his boots. His head felt light and dizzy and the air grew progressively more noxious.

"Why... why is there a volcano in the middle of Mishaari?!" cried Miles.

Roy pursed his mouth grimly. "Sedimentary feldspar is formed from igneous rock, Major," he said quietly. "And igneous rocks are formed from volcanic activity."

"You're joking. Major Miké..."

"Created a volcano. Yes. She's able to contain the lava and pyroclastic flows through the use of geophysical alchemy, but unlike your typical vulcanism, the effects of the blast don't last very long. She's bought us perhaps twenty minutes before the air clears."

Miles grunted. "You're right... the smoke is already blowing thin from the desert wind. It won't take Stokes's people long to get over their surprise."

"Something tells me those bastards are more than capable of taking a rogue volcano in their stride." Roy steeled himself. "And we need to find Captain Hawkeye and Fuery before Cassandra decides
Feldspar's stunt was all my idea. We'll grab Havoc and the others once the ash clears enough to breathe."

"I think we should get going now, sir," said Miles. "There's plenty of light for navigational purposes, and we ought to move while we still have some cover from the pumice."

"Look, Major," began Roy, annoyed, "I don't have eagle-eyes like the rest of Armstrong's burly demigods, and I'm not about to go fumbling around the desert in the dark—"

"General," interrupted Miles, sounding very alarmed. "It's not dark."

"Pardon?"

"There is light enough to see by. It's not dark, General."

Roy froze. "That's not possible."

"General—"

"I can't see a thing."

"General!"

Roy let out a sound of strangled panic. "I can't see!"

"Mustang! Get a hold of yourself. You need to stay calm."

"I can't see! Miles..."

"Shit. The Door; it must be!"

"My..." Roy swallowed thickly,

"My eyesight is gone again."

Chapter End Notes

Hawkeye, my darling, I am so sorry

Roy, my darling, I am so sorry
Act VI Scene II: Break of Day

Chapter Notes

You know why I love Kimblee and Edward? Because they're so smart I can turn them into exposition machines and it doesn't sound weird.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The stars are not wanted now...

Elsewhere

The rain had pitted the gravel footpath. He was reminded, for a moment, of the scouring after a heavy snowfall, even though the ground under his boots was runny grey instead of white. Though it lacked the same pristine cleanliness, the fragrance of the rain-soaked soil and the dripping conifers blew fresh and clear. As he waited on the doorstep, he took a deep breath, revelled in the small moment of respite.

They were rare things, for him.

"Captain, Master Sergeant," he addressed the two officers flanking him, peering at them critically from over his spectacles, "you'll wait out here, please."

The Master Sergeant bobbed his head of straw-coloured hair in acknowledgement, but the Captain's mouth twisted in a frown. She eyed the front door warily.

"As your head of security, sir—" she began.

Führer Grumman sighed, accustomed to her pigheadedness. "I'll make it an order if I have to, Catalina. You and Brosch hold down the fort."

He thought he heard the woman grumble something, but being as she was often given to grumbling, he elected to ignore it.

The door cracked open, revealing the household's manservant and behind him, a small, middle-aged woman. Seeing Grumman, her eyes widened.

"Your Excellency...!" cried Mrs. Bradley. She gestured for him to enter, and Grumman brushed past the manservant.

"I'm sorry to impose, Deirdre," he said, removing his cap and tucking it under one arm, "but an urgent matter has come to my attention."

Mrs. Bradley gave him a measured look. She dismissed her footman then, forcing a breath through her teeth, she asked, "Are you here to speak with Selim?"

Führer Grumman gave a slight nod in the affirmative. "I would like to put some questions to him."

"Sir... with respect, he's just a boy. He won't know—"
"Not to Selim himself, madam."

Her face fell, her eyes fixed on the tassels of the carpet. "I see," she murmured. "You mean that other man... the alchemist."

"Yes, madam." At her grave expression, Grumman inclined his head, forcing Mrs. Bradley to meet his eye. "Deirdre, believe me when I say I wouldn't be here if I had any alternative. As a father and grandfather myself, I sympathise with and share your concern for your son. But—"

"But that won't stop you from interrogating him like a common criminal, will it?" finished Mrs. Bradley, frost coating the words.

"I will question the boy only so far as he is able to answer. The safety and security of Amestris may depend on it." Grumman ran a hand through his thinning grey hair before admitting, guardedly, "As well as the safety and security of my own family."

Mrs. Bradley frowned. "Your own...?"

"I have something of a personal stake in recent events, madam. I haven't heard from my granddaughter in quite some while. I am worried about her."

Mrs. Bradley gave him a noncommittal nod. "That Hawkeye woman?"

Grumman's eyebrow arched. "Yes... but that's not a matter of public record..."

"I can infer these things, your Excellency," she said wearily. "When you get to be our age, very little comes as a surprise anymore, and very many secrets cease to be as novel as their keepers might think. Besides, both you and Captain Hawkeye have the same nose."

The corner of Grumman's mouth crinkled. "Poor girl."

Mrs. Bradley smiled wanly. She bandied with the tie of her shirt waist. "I want to say no, your Excellency," she confessed, "and in any other case, I would. I reserve that right as Selim's mother. But..." Her careworn face creased with some inner torment, making her look even more anxious. "But..." she managed, "I don't think the boy in the study has been Selim for quite some while."

Without waiting to see if he was following, Mrs. Bradley made her way down the dim hallway. Führer Grumman fell into step behind her.

"So there's been no change?" he asked quietly.

"He seems content to keep his own counsel," admitted Mrs. Bradley wearily. "The truth is, he's lost in his thoughts most of the time. I can't seem to reach him. He sleeps until I wake him or remains awake unless he's ordered to retire. He either goes hungry or else eats until someone advises him to stop. Sometimes, I can't get a word in edgewise, and at other times he won't speak for days on end."

"Has he been aggressive?"

"No. When he does deign to speak, it's always very polite. Cultivated... measured, in a way. In some respects, he reminds me of my late husband. And I think..." she hesitated, twisting her wedding band around her finger, "I think our interests align to a certain degree. I want Selim back. He wants to return to wherever it is he came from." She forced her hands down to her sides, though her fingers continued to fiddle with the waist of her skirt. "Have you heard anything from Major Miké and Mr. Elric, sir?"
"Nothing. Not a peep from any of our Dairut garrisons. Not unusual in of itself, Major Miles being an intensely private person and something of a micromanager, but under the circumstances..."

"You're understandably anxious. Then I hope this conversation proves enlightening." Mrs. Bradley took a deep breath, the sound tepid and watery. "Because, well... because I don't think I can stand this much longer. I want my son back, not this... phantasm."

"I understand, madam," he said. The heavy solemnness in his words begged Mrs. Bradley to believe him.

Grumman paused before the study door. When Mrs. Bradley made no motion to move, he queried gently, "Would you like to come in?"

"I had better not," she said; the words sounded tired and brittle, riddled with cracks. "This seems more of a military matter, and I can't..." she swallowed past a lump in her throat, "and I can't stand that thing speaking with my son's voice."

Grumman nodded. Wordlessly, he let himself into the room.

A wood-fire blazed cheerily in an ample hearth, illuminating the Bradley's impressive collection of literature. The cases lining the wall were exquisite. The engravings were of trees and autumn berries and birds, so intricate they seemed to invite touch as much as sight. Grumman noted that certain volumes had been removed recently, judging from the lack of dust on their spines, the books read and returned again with meticulous care, not a title out of place.

Selim sat on a plush chaise longue in front of the fireplace, his feet tucked under his legs, peering listlessly at the flames dancing in the grate. The fire flickered in two thundery eyes, until the strange, purple-blue looked more green.

"Führer," greeted the boy without looking up, continuing to stare at the embers. His voice sounded heavy — heavy in reverberation if not in tone, as though the child's lilt were echoing around the walls of a very deep cave. The words were rich, silky, confident. The child spoke as though he controlled the world.

Grumman didn't waste time with niceties. "I just received a rather distressing phone call from the Xingese ambassador."

"Oh?" muttered the boy with reserved interest.

"Evidently, their prince regent has been having violent hallucinations... hearing voices. Nightmares."

"Perhaps he's been eating too much cheese before bedtime."

Grumman growled a low, "Kimblee..."

The child shrugged. "Ah, never mind... perhaps that was in poor taste. Tell me, Führer sir, is this prince regent the same boy who shared a body with the Homunculus Greed?"

"Yes," affirmed Grumman. He nursed a sudden twinge of unease, but not surprise. "Though it's poor strategic planning to jump to conclusions, may I assume the same thing that is happening to Selim..."

"Is happening to the Xingese prince? Yes, I suspect that may well be the case. Certainly, my... company has grown quiet. Perhaps the souls are spreading thinner. Swinging abruptly to a
different subject, he asked, "Have you heard from the Elrics recently?"

Grumman frowned. "No."

"No? Then perhaps you ought to exercise a little initiative and give them a phone call yourself, Führer President."

"For what purpose? The Elric brothers never played host to any of the Homunculi." Grumman thought furiously. "You said, before, that the Law of Natural Providence directed these so-called diffusions to beings whose essences came directly from this Gate of Truth. The Elrics, on the other hand, are very much a product of this world."

"Not in their entirety, Grumman. I seem to recall Edward having a rather robust right arm when last we met he had an automail prosthesis. Where did that limb come from, I wonder?"

"What, exactly, are you implying…"

"I'm saying diffusion across a semipermeable membrane is not necessarily one-directional." Kimblee knitted Selim's hands together. "I've been parsing through the particulars for a lack of anything better to do. It's all a matter of gradients, you see. If one deigns to consider space and time as a multidimensional geodesic structure as opposed to a limited polygon of classical conception, then these portals act as channels that mediate the conduction or diffusion of energy across realms, much as ionophoric proteins mediate the synaptic signals in one's brain. Indeed, Father's little scheme five years ago proved that one must regard the world as a living synergistic system, likened to any other complex organism.

"However," the child held up a hand to silence Grumman's forthcoming questions, "if you allow me to expand my metaphor slightly further, Führer, then these functions may also include the establishment of resting membrane gradients, shaping action potentials by gating the flow of certain energies across the dimensional nexus of our two worlds, whether those energies be of the physical, alchemical, or even spiritual varieties."

"So you're saying... what comes out—"

"Must also go back in again, yes. Equilibrium. Colour me surprised, it’s equivalent exchange again!"

"And what does this have to do with Ling Yao? Or with Edward Elric, for that matter?"

"Oh, not just them. Young Alphonse, too, perhaps in some even greater capacity. As well as anyone else who has ever had something... returned to them."

Grumman swallowed. "We haven't been able to contact Edward or Major Miké since their departure from Central two days ago."

"Well, barring any unfortunate accidents, Sophie is more than capable of looking after young Mr. Elric. Your primary concern, I suspect, ought to be your precious granddaughter."

Grumman felt a violent jolt in his bones. How in the hell did this monster know...?

"More specifically," Kimblee clarified; Selim's eyes seemed to glitter at Grumman's discomposure, "the company she keeps. Unless something truly unprecedented has happened, I assume she is still serving under the estimable Flame Alchemist?"

"Yes..."
"Then tell me, Führer Grumman..."

Selim's facial muscles moved a little too slowly, as though he were taking in every detail of his surroundings for the first time. Then he grinned. As he did, despite the roaring fire, the temperature of the room seemed to plummet. Grumman shifted his weight at the sight of Selim's bared teeth, the grin so wide it seemed to the Führer as though Kimblee wanted to eat him rather than engage in friendly conversation.

"What do you know of ancient Xerxian cults?"

Elsewhere

"This sucks."

Breda scowled, his head slumping onto one hand as he muttered, "Whatever would we do without your invaluable insight, Hav."

"I'm being serious!" Jean paced the supply tent like an agitated lynx, running his fingers through his shaggy hair. "We're Amestrian soldiers, the Mustang squad, for crying out loud! We've taken on rogue alchemists and terrorists and the Homunculi and here we are being held prisoner by a bunch of sweaty grad students with pick axes!"

"Something tells me the grad student thing is just a part time gig," said Ross glumly. "They all seemed pretty handy with those bolt action rifles."

Breda grunted in agreement. "Not to mention they've got Hawkeye... and Fuery."

"And they outnumber us fifteen to one," added Falman brightly. "We wouldn't last thirty seconds in an all-out fight."

"The life and soul of the party as usual, Bishop," muttered Jean.

Falman frowned. "I'm just pointing out—"

"What about our guys?" interrupted the First Lieutenant, ignoring Vato. "What about the Amestrian garrison from Dairut, Miles's boys?"

"Not to sound like Susie Raincloud here, but I spotted more than a few blue uniforms in Stokes's crowd," grumbled Breda. "If I had to bet my pension, I'd say most of the official personnel in this region are in on it. The first thing I'd do if I were that Stokes woman is replace all the top brass with my own guys."

"Or ensure her guys were stationed here to begin with," agreed Ross, giving Heymans a meaningful look.

"Wait wait wait, hold up a sec..." Jean found he had a difficult time grasping the full implications; they seemed to run contrary to everything he knew about the military. "Bunch of stupid, down-on-their-luck university kids are one thing, but are you guys tryin' to tell me fifty odd soldiers in the Amestrian army have been a part of a secret Xerxian death cult and no one's found out about it?"

"Why would they?" asked Breda rhetorically. "This sort of shit doesn't exactly cater to putting on a resume."

"Background checks!"
"Actually, sir," Falman chimed in, raising a hand, "the Amestrian military is a secularised institution, and recruitment offices are discouraged from enquiring about a cadet's religious affiliations. In fact, after Reconstruction, in order to encourage Ishvalan reenlistment, discrimination based on faith became a prosecutable offense. Furthermore, from what little I've read about the Risen, the cult isn't strictly sectarian or demoninational. They neither practice a codified system of worship nor adhere to any manner of scriptural authority. Even if the military had decided to screen for members, there exists no concrete criteria on which to base any admissible evaluations."

"And as you pointed out, Lieutenant Havoc, most of Stokes's archeologists are graduate students," said Ross. "They're all young. Even the turncoat soldiers can't be any older than Fuery. It seems to me they all enlisted five years ago, right after Reconstruction, in order to avoid the possibility of discovery. And because they were so young at the time, they were immediately shipped to the pits out East."

"It's what happened to Mustang after Ishval, and the rest of us, for that matter," Breda pointed out. "In terms of status and influence, Eastern Command is not a patch on the other border headquarters. It's where all the undesirables and brown-nosers get dumped."

Jean sighed. "Great. Just peachy. So Amestris basically mail ordered Stokes an army. She counted on the greenhorns getting stationed out here, since no senior officer in their right mind would want this assignment."

"Except Major Miles," said Falman. "Who volunteered."

"Except Major Miles."

"And now he's up shit creek without a paddle just like the rest of us," finished Havoc miserably. "That woman played us like goddamn violins."

"What do you think she's talking to the General about," wondered Maria aloud, perching herself on the edge of her wooden crate, the canvas ceiling brushing her head. The supply tent — a wrinkled, sagging, sad looking pyramid — seemed to match their collective moods. Ropes that should have been pulled tight had plenty of give in them and the tarpaulin underfoot was covered in a good two inches of sand. It invited pity, like some leathery-hided animal that had died and dried up in the desert, leaving nothing but the skin and bones.

"The usual shit," grumbled Havoc. "'Join us or we'll start picking off your guys.'"

Ross considered, tilting her head. "But no one's come to threaten us since we got thrown in here yesterday."

Jean fixed her with one of his hard blue stares. "It ain't us I'm taking about."

"Hav's right," said Breda.

"So good of you to say so."

"Shuddup. So long as that Stokes bitch has Fuery, much less Hawkeye, if she tells the Boss to jump, Roy'll ask 'How high?' He's not gonna be a whole lot of help."

"But Major Miké is still out there," said Ross. "And Edward."

"And now that we know the Feldspar Alchemist isn't the culprit behind all this," said Falman pointedly; Breda glared at him, "she may prove herself a useful ally."
"After that scare with Scar, Bel Miké probably got outta dodge as soon as humanly possible. Knowing our luck, her and the Chief are halfway to Xing by now."

"No," said Ross firmly. Turning to face Heymans, she insisted: "Ed had already begun to suspect a deeper connection between this rogue Gate of his and the people who took Captain Hawkeye. If he caught so much as a whiff of Stokes's little insurrection, there's no way he'd just abandon the scent. You guys know Ed; he's a magnet for trouble.

"Sloth didn't show himself at Fort Briggs until Edward and Alphonse arrived," remembered Falman, conceding the point. "If there's trouble, Ed'll be right in the thick of it."

"That's well as may be, but we can't rely on the Chief or Feldspar to help us," said Breda, crossing his arms. "One can't do alchemy and the other's still an unknown quantity insofar as her combat ability is concerned. 'Sides, state alchemists aren't exactly known for being full of the milk of human kindness."

"I'm with Breda on this one," agreed Havoc, rounding on the other officers. "I'm not about to sit here with my thumb up my ass while those maniacs have Fuery and Hawkeye on ice. We gotta think of some way out of this ourselves."

"We're open to suggestions, sirs," said Falman wearily.

Havoc looked between each of them: Breda, the best strategist in the military; Falman, with a mind like a goddamn abacus; Ross, hand selected to be one of the Führer's personal bodyguards. While Havoc wasn't exactly fish food himself, his underlings were the best Amestris had to offer. If there was a more capable squadron in the entire country, he couldn't think of them. He'd have taken that small group of Heymans, Vato, and Maria even over Olivier Armstrong's muscle-bound behemoths.

Besides, Jean reminded himself, they'd wiggled out of tighter spots in the past; compared to staging a coup against Bradley and half a dozen immortal monsters, taking down Stokes and her fucking teaching assistants ought to be a cake walk.

"Heyo, Falman," said Havoc, picking up a prism pole from a box of survey equipment, "we're not technically in Dairut at the moment, right? We're a little ways East."

Vato nodded an affirmative. "The Mishaari basin is just beyond the borders of the Ishvalan prefecture. The cartographic specifics are a bit hand-wavey, but for all intents and purposes, we no longer fall under Amestrian military jurisdiction."

"A basin, huh? I do remember sliding down crater walls coming in." Jean faced Breda. "A natural depression like this wouldn't be easy to secure, would it? To anyone attacking us from the outside, it'd be like shooting fish in a bathtub. If you were Stokes, what'd be the best way to shore up your defences? Where would you situate your troops?"

Breda answered immediately: "I'd secure watchposts around the perimeter, establish a defensive line at the cardinal points, with the bulk of my fighting force concentrated in the West, in the direction of Dairut. That'd be the point of engagement, so I'd also hide two heavy brigades in the ruins on the Western slopes. Once any baddies showed their faces over the ridge, my offensive line could execute flanking manoeuvres at oblique angles, which'd likely result in a rout of the enemy battalion. After that it's just a matter of picking off the stragglers."

"So you reckon Stokes expects company?"
"Yeah. Grumman ain't stupid. He's gonna figure something's up sooner or later."

"You said West, right? That's good for us," affirmed Jean, "cause most of the equipment depots are near the Eastern excavation sites, on the other side of the basin from Dairut. We may not have to chance the numbers. Falman, do you remember the layout of the ruins?"

"Of course, sir."

Havoc handed him the survey rod. "Draw a rough sketch in the sand."

Vato obeyed, and after a few minutes of doodling and muttering to himself, a vague grid of rectangles and avenues and map keys had appeared in the tent floor.

Ross put a hand on Falman's shoulder. "What's that large building a few blocks East of us, Second Lieutenant?"

"A pair of pylons," he supplied. "They're the largest freestanding structures in Mishaari."

Maria nodded fervently. "I remember spotting them from the top of the ridge. If I know my ancient architecture..."

"Wait, do you?"

She smiled at a puzzled Breda. "Every girl's got to have a hobby, Heymans. Anyway, the temple ought to have a streamline corridor running between the pylons, a less elevated section which encloses the entrance between them, a ceremonial causeway of sorts. If we manage to hole ourselves inside, then we might be able to use the entrance—"

"—As a choke point," finished Breda. He grinned. "Bottleneck the bastards. Best part is, medical is right near the pylons. We can get Fuery out."

"All we need is a distraction," said Jean firmly. "There are a lot of 'em, but these guys are all part-timers or greenies... you throw 'em into a big enough panic, they'll be running around like decapitated chickens."

"You could sprint through the ruins with your shirt off," suggested Breda mildly. "That's usually enough to terrify most girls you meet."

"You're hilarious, Heymans. Truly." Havoc looked at the crate Maria was sitting on. His eyebrows furrowed. "Do... do you want to blow up countless priceless artefacts?" mumbled Falman, sounding mortified.

"Okay, screw the dynamite. What else we got in here?"

They began to sort through the supply crates, throwing tufts of straw over their shoulders.

"Excavating tools, mostly," said Breda. "Uh... trowels, shovels, wire screens, plumb bobs. Unless you're planning to dig an underground tunnel to the pylons over the course of several months, I dunno how this is going to be helpful."
"I found lanterns!" called Ross, holding up a couple of glass chimneys.

"Got any oil in 'em?" asked Jean.

Breda peered at him critically. "If you want to set the tent on fire, Hav, you could just use your lighter, you know."

The blonde man huffed. "Yeah, thanks, that possibility had completely slipped my mind."

"Just sayin'."

"Look, I'm not grey-haired brainbox over there, but I'm not a complete idiot. In any case, a little flint wouldn't do jack shit against heavy canvas in this desert wind. We wouldn't be able to get a spark going. 'Sides, cultist bastards confiscated my cigs along with our weapons."

"But if we could find something to burn..." considered Falman.

"Then we might have our distraction. Look for anything with acetone in it, aerosols, linseed oil, gasoline for the generator. Hell, even some toothpaste and aluminium will do."

"Toothpaste and... were you a firebug in a previous life or something, Lieutenant?" asked Ross, scrunching her eyebrows.

"Nah," Breda assured her, breaking open a crate of first aid kits, "but Hawkeye's confiscated his lighters so often Hav can literally light his disgusting ciggies using a few unbent paper clips and a pocket full of lint."

"You jest, but it's true," said Jean.

"You know, Lieutenant, it might be easier just to quit," offered Ross.

Before Jean could offer his well-practiced rebuttal to that particular suggestion, Breda hollered, "I found some rubbing alcohol in the medical packs!"

As Heymans lifted the clear bottles out of the box, Falman provided, "Isopropyl alcohol vapor is highly flammable, and it has been known to form peroxides, which may explode upon concentration."

"Vaporises quickly and burns like a charm," said Jean. "And Maria, we can use those lantern chimneys to get a spark going... plenty of sunlight streaming in through the seams of the tent."

"On it."

Under Havoc's direction, Breda and Falman began to douse the sagging canvas in the rubbing alcohol, while Maria twisted a lantern chimney from its base, cleaning the sand and grime from the convex glass surface.

"Listen up," said Jean as Ross handed him the makeshift magnifier, "once this puppy goes up, we're gonna have to be fast. The canvas is loose enough to slip underneath, and once we do, we head East. Lieutenants Falman and Ross, make for those pylons. If you think you can relieve some of these nutbags of their weapons, do it, but don't endanger yourselves unnecessarily. We already have one invalid to worry about. Speaking of... Breda, you and I'll survey Fuery's situation and if possible, grab all his stuff... intravenous feeds and the like."

"You got it, Hav."
"We're ready when you are, Lieutenant," affirmed Falman. Ross nodded beside him.

"Alright... here goes nothing..."

Havoc held the polished lantern chimney in a beam of sunlight, adjusting the angle until a small, bright dot appeared on a patch of doused canvas. With the others watching anxiously over his shoulder, Jean held the chimney steady. Suddenly, a corner of the tent began to smoulder. After some gentle coaxing from Jean's breath, a full flame wound itself around the unbleached cloth like a hungry serpent. When the fire rose to head-height and people outside began to shout and scream, Jean gave Breda a shove.

"All right, go!"

The four of them rolled out from under the smouldering canvas. As Havoc lurched back to his feet, he could have sworn the ground trembled beneath his boots. He grit his teeth. If his legs were acting up again, he was going to be really pissed. Still, their little bonfire seemed to be doing the trick: all around them, the archeologists were shouting, running and stumbling as they tried to escape the conflagration.

Suddenly, Breda put a hand on his arm and squeezed, hard. "Hav," he began; his best friend's tone of voice made Jean freeze, "why do I smell rotten eggs? And why is the ground shaking...?"

"Wait," Havoc's eyes went wide, "that's not just me?"

Ross's round face went as white as a sheet. She clutched Falman to her. "Run," she breathed.

Heymans turned to her. "Marie..."

"If you don't want to be cooked then run!" she cried over her shoulder, near-dragging Vato behind her. "It's not the fire, Heymans! It's Feldspar!"

"Oh shit."

Havoc was thankful Breda still had his wits about him, because he didn't have a damn clue what was going on. His legs still felt wobbly and numb, but when he looked around, trying to get his bearings, he could see cracks appearing in the Xerxian ruins, the sand shifting as it slid down the shaking dunes. An earthquake? he wondered. In Ishval?

Just as Maria had done to Vato, Breda pushed Havoc into a tenuous jog. They kept their heads down as they navigated the tightly-knit encampment, but none of the archeologists seemed to be paying them any mind, fixated instead on something near the Eastern end of the basin. Jean, for a few bright moments, congratulated himself on his fire-starting ingenuity.

Suddenly, the smell of sulphur hit them with renewed force; Havoc gagged. It was like running face-first into physical wall. Next to him, Breda looked no less disgusted but far more fearful. At once, what had been wafers of ash from Havoc's little pyre became pellets of pumice and superheated rock, the air filling with a choking black smoke. Havoc's face warmed alarmingly, like he'd poured kerosene over a fire pit, or suffered a whole weekend's worth of sunburn in a few seconds.

"What the f—"

"Move, you moron!" grit Breda. "I think our luck's about to turn."

"Enlighten me!" snapped Havoc, wobbling as he dodged a piece of debris he could have
sworn was a chunk of magma. "Because it looks to me like we're about to get char broiled!"

"It's Major Miké," explained Breda breathlessly. "It's her alchemy. If I've guessed the location right, she must creating a physical barrier between the pylons and the rest of the camp, like a mote."

"Using what, a fucking volcano?!"

"Yes."

"Freaks." He shook ash out of his hair. "The lot of them."

"I ain't arguing with you, Hav. Come on: we gotta get Fuery out before these people get over their surprise..."

"Yeah, if I don't get over mine first."

Ignoring him, Breda took an abrupt right turn. He was following the smell of sulphur, Havoc realised. At the sudden change in direction, Jean hooked his hand on one of the pillars to swing himself into step behind the redhead... before an involuntary muscle contraction in his quadricep made his leg buckle. He face-planted, eating sand.

"Hav!" Breda skidded to a halt, turning back towards his friend.

Jean swore vehemently, spitting grit out of his mouth. "Why now of all times, you bastards!" he growled, rubbing feeling back into his thighs.

He tried to prop himself up on his elbows, managing to rise to his knees, before he felt a sharp pain in his lower back, like a nail gun had been fired into the soft nerves of his vertebrae. His spine spasmed and Havoc fell onto his chest. His heart thundered. A low ringing in his ears drowned out the sound of Feldspar's eruptions.

Jean felt blood well in his throat from chomping down on his tongue in an effort to stifle his panic. Suddenly, as Breda knelt down beside him, his body was wracked with raw sores and he shook like a leaf. He whimpered in terror.

"Havoc, you gotta get up, man," urged Breda. "The smoke is starting to clear, they'll be on us, soon."

"I..." Havoc's mind felt as though it'd been pickled in brine. He struggled to form the words, managing at first only a strained little whimper. "My legs... Heymans..."

"No!" raged Breda, his temper flaring as he snatched Jean's collar. "This shit ain't happening again, Hav. Come on! Get up!" The Lieutenant's large hands began to tremble. His grip weakened as he whispered hoarsely, "Please... get up."

Jean tried to roll over, to look up at the smoke rising from Major Miké's attack, pitch black against the sickly yellow of the sky. Though he could still hear and feel each of his breaths, rasping like he was inhaling through fiberglass, he couldn't feel anything below his waist.

"Trying," hissed Jean. He attempted to curl his legs up under his body, and let out a strangled scream.

"Jean..." Breda recoiled, stricken by the sudden violence of the sound.
Havoc couldn't answer him. His eyes Screwed shut, his chest heaving. His hand groped until it
found Heymans’s shoulder, fingers digging into the joint and squeezing tight enough to cause pain,
but Breda didn’t make a sound.

"I'm here," stammered Heymans, sounding more frightened than Havoc had ever heard him before.
The redhead planted a hand on Jean’s cheek, stroking it as comfortingly as he knew how. "It's
okay, Hav. I'm right here."

"My legs..." Havoc choked out, rolling his hips a little. He flinched, gasped, and then gave a tiny,
rueful nod. “Damn... they’re gone. They're gone again.”

His eyes rolled away from his friend, taking in the dark, cavernous void of volcanic ash and pumice
above his head. "I... I'm all right," Jean managed. “G-get to Marie and Vato… you gotta f-find Riza
and Fuery. Leave me here...”

“Nuh huh, not happening. You should know better by now, Havo.”

Jean made a tiny noise of gratitude that sounded disconcertingly like a sob, even to his own ears.
"Thanks," he breathed. “You idiot.”

Breda hesitated for only a moment before making up his mind. He got down on the ground next to
his friend, pressing his body against Jean’s. Gently, he lifted the man’s head and tucked his arm
under it, pillowing the blonde hair. He put his other arm over his friend, taking his hand and
squeezing it reassuringly.

"It's going to be okay," said Heymans firmly. Then, he hefted Jean in a fireman's lift over his
shoulder, grunting under the weight.

“Ow…” muttered Havoc.

“Stop whinging.” Breda took off at a brisk jog, puffing deep breaths. "Jeez, Hav, you need to lay
off Sheska's baked goods."

“You... you’re a fucking idiot.”

“I wouldn’t dream of dethroning the reigning champ.”

“Fuck you.”

“You kiss Catalina with that mouth?”

“I’m gonna kill you.”

“Like to see you try.”

They passed over a rut in the ground and Jean shuddered, pain shooting up from the base of his
spine. As Havoc's body spasmed Breda Clutched him tighter. Despite their jostling jog across the
ruins, Heymans’s hands were impossibly gentle.

Jean pulled in a tortured sound. “I... I'm scared," he whispered in a tiny, vulnerable voice. "Please...
don't leave me here alone... Heymans...”

Breda promised quietly, "Never...

"I'm not going anywhere."
She stared out the window at the backyard, her eyes gravitating towards the swing with the splintered wooden seat, its faded red paint peeling off in curls. It hung heavily from the branches, its rope green with moisture and musty. The swing swayed gently in the breeze, creaking. Grass grew unchecked beneath it, waiting to catch any careless child who decided to fling himself from the swing at the apex of its arc.

The sad little plaything waited patiently, unassuming, quiet, but there were no children in the Rockbell household any more. She wondered if that would ever change; the thought caught her by surprise, so much so she almost didn't notice when the telephone on her sideboard began to ring. Still thinking about children and swing sets, she picked up the receiver.

"This is the Rockbell Automail—"

"Winry."

Her rehearsed introduction fell short. That sounded like...

"Mei?" asked Winry, cautiously optimistic. "I haven't heard from you in a while..."

It came as a pleasant surprise: Mei had opened a healing clinic and alkehestry school in the Xingese capital the year before, and since then, her responsibilities had her swamped. Though she always reserved a kind word for Edward and Winry whenever Al phoned home, Mei was usually too busy to ring on her own time.

"I need to speak to Edward," the girl said in her high, piping lilt. Winry thought Mei sounded even more flighty than usually, her voice a wavering chirp, like a bird's.

Winry wound the phone cord around her finger. Choosing her words carefully, mindful of the secrecy of Edward's assignment, she said, "He's... he's away on business, Mei, but I'm sure—"

"It's Alphonse."

Winry couldn't stop the slow, creeping dread that seemed to calcify every bone in her body. "Al?" she parroted weakly. "What about Al? What's wrong? Mei—"

"He's..." Winry heard the girl sniffle. She sounded on the verge of terrified sobs. "He's... in a coma."

The bottom dropped out of Winry's stomach. She had to steady herself on the doorframe, and across the room Granny looked on in alarm, slowly setting down her current hydraulics project. "What do you mean," breathed Winry. She felt her stomach beginning to cramp. "How can he be in a coma... is he sick? Did he get hurt?"

"He said he'd been feeling dizzy for the last few days," whimpered Mei. "Nausea and vertigo, like he was on the cusp of falling. I thought he was working himself too hard, but he insisted he was fine... just kept brushing it off, smiling, like he always does! But then, just yesterday, he collapsed in the middle of a lecture, and he isn't waking up... oh, Winry, I've tried everything!"

"You mean your alkehestry isn't working?"

"I'm useless!" she cried despairingly. "The flow of energy around and through his body is just... gone."
Winry felt lightheaded. She wanted to be sick. "He's not... don't tell me he's..."

"He's still breathing, and I've tried everything to bring him back, but it's like... it's like there isn't anything to wake up!"

Winry felt thrill of panic race up her spine. "Don't say that, Mei. Please don't say that."

"It's not just that, Winry. Something isn't right. The chi of the land feels terribly turbulent, somehow, the energy flowing in rapids, like it's being sucked away and spat back out again. It's just... it's just like five years ago... when I stood in Father's chamber. Only this time... there's no one controlling it."

"Mei, what are you saying?"

"I think something awful is about to happen, Winry," whimpered Mei. "And Alphonse... he..." She burst into tears on the other end of the line. The sound made Winry's heart clench.

"Mei," Winry felt Granny's hand on her shoulder and she clutched it gratefully, "Mei, listen. I'm going to try to ring Edward, okay? We'll save him, Mei. We won't let anything happen to Al..."

"Winry..." she whispered, "but what if...

Winry held her breath, not daring to make a sound. Each second seemed to last an eternity. She couldn't seem to formulate a coherent thought.

"What if, whatever's happening... what if it's affecting Edward, too?"

Chapter End Notes

I haven't cried yet writing any of my stories. I cried writing this chapter.
Act VI Scene III: Break of Day

Chapter Notes

One more week of exams, folks

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What is Deserved

Earlier

She found them loitering outside the medical pavilion, one standing and the other sitting. The first, a tall, stringy man, as lean as a greyhound — the officer Edward had identified as one Major Miles — regarded her coldly as she approached. Like Lieutenant Breda, Miles made little effort to mask his disdain.

Sofia Bel Miké indulged a heavy sigh. She wondered if there was anyone left in the Amestrian military her wee brother hadn't managed to piss off. Knowing him, it was doubtful. He had a certain penchant for getting under people's skin, less like a splinter and more like a parasitic wasp, taking over its host, killing it from the inside.

That Major Miles appeared, at least superficially, Ishvalan only complicated matters. Though she had withheld her anxieties from Edward to avoid overburdening the boy, the prospect of traveling through Ishval had filled Sofia with a deep, nauseating dread. She had, in some ways, become her brother's ghost, a presence left to haunt the desert like an impression never fully scoured away.

"I don't think you should be here, Major," said Miles in a low dulcet. The bitterness seemed alkaline, his face twisting with the taste of it.

Sofia chose her words carefully, fixing Miles with a level stare: "I wanted to offer an apology."

"It's not you who ought to be apologising. He attacked you."

"That's well as may be, Major, but if our two parties are to be working together, we can't afford to skirt around each other like a pair of shy teenagers."

"This envoy was supposed to consist of General Mustang and his retinue," said Miles, crossing his forearms. "You and Edward Elric are surplus to requirement."

"I understand the current situation is far from ideal, Major. While my purpose in being here is distinct from General Mustang's, the fact remains that he has lost an essential part of his personal retinue. As an Amestrian officer, I am duty-bound to lend my assistance."

“Then am I to understand you’re here in the interest of ironing out your relationship with the Ishvalan leadership? Forgive me, Major, if that strikes me as being somewhat presumptuous.”

She frowned. “Not all leaders, Major. I wouldn’t dream of insulting the Ishvalan people with such impudence. My business is with the Muhaddith alone. There is something we need to discuss.”
Miles considered her, his eyes narrowing. Sofia noted that, despite his hard glare, the Major seemed rather frail and whey-faced, as though he’d just gotten over the flu. "And is Edward aware of your intentions?"

"Young Master Elric has his concerns here in Ishval, and I have mine. I don't have to explain myself to a civilian."

The Ishvalan soldier made a small noise in the back of his throat. He noted ruefully, “He doesn't know you're here, does he?”

"In truth, Major, I told him I went to find the commissary."

Miles threw a glance over his shoulder, looking towards the man sitting in the sand. If he overheard their exchange, he gave no indication of the fact. As he sat — torso bent almost horizontal, elbows balanced on his knees, and thumbs holding up his head — he seemed neither aware nor caring of the passing of the rest of the world.

“Should I be concerned?” asked the Major quietly, still regarding his taciturn companion.

“Well, no.” Sofia smiled, though there was little cheer in the gesture. It was a long, thin curve of her mouth that didn't quite reach her eyes. “I’m a Kimblee, after all.”

“If I’m supposed to find that reassuring, Feldspar, you've sorely missed the mark.”

“Not reassuring, no. Put simply, Major, I do not mean for you to waste your anxieties on the likes of me.”

Miles gave her a measured look. He had bright, critical eyes, ruthlessly intelligent, as though he was turning and sorting every possible permutation of her behaviour. Formulating models based on her patterns of manner and gesture to yield an outcome as mathematically sound as the fundamentals of logic. Major Miké had heard through the military grapevine that in addition to his stint in Ishval, Miles served as the adjutant to one of the most ruthless commanders in the Amestrian armed forces. Sofia could understand why.

Finally, he inclined his head to her. “I’ll leave you two alone,” he murmured solemnly. He stalked off, a slight hobble in his step, leaning heavily on some invisible stanchion in the air. As she watched him depart, Sofia felt a stab of sympathy for the tired, troubled man.

Mindful no one else was watching them, and thankful for the deep shadows cast by the pavilion, Sofia approached the seated figure. He looked up as she stopped in front of him, his face tented by his cowl. Unlike Miles, he didn’t regard her with unveiled contempt. Rather, he wore the same blood-freezing glare he always did, like she was no more nor no less loathsome than every other person he had encountered. Sofia found the consistency mildly refreshing.

“If you’ve come for an apology,” he growled, “you have it.”

The Feldspar Alchemist pushed the air out through her nose. Rather than standing above the Muhaddith, Sofia sat in the sand in front of him, cross-legged. The rigid Ishvalan regarded her warily but made no motion to move.

"In truth, sayyidi, I'm not looking for beg-pardons or excuses," she said. Sofia knew the brutal, brooding Ishvalan wasn't much for mauldering conversation; suspecting she would not be interrupted, she pressed on: "While your perception may have been skewed, you acted with every intention of ending my life. To renounce that intention now would seem deceitful of you, and I do not think you are a deceitful man. Therefore, I won't ask you to lie on my behalf."
Two red irises burned as though to ignite the air between them. His gaze did not waver as he bore into her with crushing intensity. Sofia met his eye sedately. She thought he had the type of face that would never age, the glare chiseled into his features like the scowl of a pharaonic effigy. It was a harsh, weathered countenance, with high cheekbones and bronzed skin, an ugly white scar crucified across his brows. His eyes were dark, the colour of garnet or some equally rusty andradite and pyrope gemstone. The Muhaddith reminded Sofia of a geologic cross-section, a small space of strata that somehow managed to encompass lifetimes.

"Then why are you here?" he asked roughly.

"Why..." She rested her hands on her knees, palms up. "Because our destinies are sad and strange, I suppose." Shrugging noncommittally, Sofia admitted, "I don't know why, nor could I describe the mechanism that makes it so, but I suspect our meeting was bound to happen. We seem requited, you and I. It's like something out of mythology, as though our pasts are not our own stories to tell. We lie helpless before the patterns inherited and patterns re-enacted by our own behaviour. We belong to the people who hurt us and who we hurt in return." She took a pinch of sand between her fingertips, let the grains fall slowly. "Those who are able to go about their lives unfettered by such concerns cannot possibly understand. Our fate is to chase through all the long, interminable years the shadows of our losses, our pain. The burden, I think you'll agree, becomes nigh-on intolerable."

Sofia scooted forward, until their knees were almost touching. Her violet eyes met his red ones.

"I told young Edward Elric, a little while ago, that alchemists are driven through some messianic imperative to strive for ultimate understanding. Perhaps, for us, that understanding equates to a certain species of closure. That constant chase," she ran her finger in a circle through the air, "your sin after my sin, my sin after yours, violence breeding violence and vengeance breeding vengeance, becomes the process by which fate governs every aspect of our lives. Everything dies, everything resurrects, and this ring of eternity remains faithful to itself. The path we tread is not a straight line, sayyidi, but a circle. We retrace the our patterns of recurrence like stepping in each others footprints through the snow. And perhaps that is the reason why we were brought together."

He didn't so much as twitch as Sofia pitched her head forward, her brow down, until two strands of black hair fell over her eyes.

"I cannot begrudge you the inward urgency that took hold of you today, sayyidi. If our destinies are indeed circles, bending back on themselves endlessly, then there is nothing for it but to try and see our chases through to the end, as best we can, for until we do so, those like you or I will never allow ourselves rest. The man who was my brother took something indelibly precious from the both of us. But, as creatures who understand deconstruction and reconstruction, if the yearning for knowledge quenches our thirst, then the reciprocity of equivalent exchange satiates our hunger. Solf took your brother... your parents, your family. Your people. Your home... and your happiness. So..."

He stiffened when she lifted his wrist, parsed his fingers apart, and rested his palm on her forehead. She felt his arm tense, the gorgeous arrays on his skin tautening.

"If you feel this is something you must do to make amends," murmured Sofia, "then know I am at peace. I wasn't prepared before, but I think am now."

The Muhaddith's palm was warm from resting in the sand. She tasted static on her tongue from the latent transmutational energy.

He took a shuddering breath. "Do you intend to turn me into your killer?"
Sofia smiled thinly again. "I assure you I haven't a single suicidal bone in my body, sayyidi. My wife is waiting for me back home in Table City. I promised to help Edward Elric close the rogue Gate of Truth, and end the suffering of Deirdre Bradley's son. I have no wish to die." She exhaled slowly. "But I forfeited my right to wishes and requests when my kin ended the lives of thousands of Ishvalans. Do what you must."

Neither one of them moved for a long while.

Sofia felt a heavy calm diffuse through her. There was, she decided, a strange grace in her companion's stillness. The sharp contrast of shadow and skin made him look so very grave, the sudden lack of wind allowing every white hair hang without movement. The Muhaddith didn't even blink, keeping his eyes fixed on Sofia's black crown as though her mind was whispering secrets to him she herself could not interpret.

The desert air felt surprisingly cool on her brow as the Muhaddith removed his hand. Sofia eyed him curiously.

"The destruction of my people..." he said quietly, forcibly, "was not your doing. And I will not dishonour my brother's memory any further by killing in his name."

"Sayyidi—"

He glared at her. "For as long I can remember, I have been steered by hatred. But for all the lives I took, I never managed to fill the hole in my heart. It is as the alchemists say... there is no price on a human soul." He turned his head to the desert. "And I have grown tired of trying to exact one."

Sofia knitted her hands together, hugging one knee to her chest. She murmured, "I see..." and appraised him for a moment. She knew there were some broken hearts, if they managed to heal at all, that mended in crooked and misshapen ways, as though cobbled inelegantly together by someone with only a cursory understanding of the human soul.

The loss of her mother had been immutable and inexpressible — a wound, Sofia knew, that would never completely heal. The Muhaddith's heart had been likewise broken. Revenge had, for so long, been his only mainstay of consolation, the means by which he tried to piece the remnants of his life back together. In a way, Sofia saw more tragedy in their shared grief than their shared loss.

The Major decided, "I don't think hatred becomes you."

"You would be the first to say so."

"I can think of at least one other," said Sofia quietly, looking in the direction Miles had gone. "Even during your attacks against the state alchemists five years ago, sayyidi, I did not hold you in ill regard."

Though his expression hardly changed, the low lilt of his voice betrayed doubt. "Oh?"

"I thought only one thing." She flicked a grain of sand out from under one fingernail. "I thought, 'Good riddance.'"

"Unless I am mistaken, you are a state alchemist."

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Yes, I am. Just as Major Miles is an Amestrian soldier."

The Muhaddith considered for a moment, then nodded in understanding.
She confessed, "While the guilt of my station still rears it ugly head from time to time, its visits have become less frequent and softer in duration. I remind myself that while I cannot roll back the shadow of the past, I can dedicate my life to walking in the light."

"Do you imagine that light exists for even one such as me, Alchemist?"

"Yes," she affirmed. "Especially for one such as you."

"How can you be so sure..."

"I have to be."

He grunted. "You sound like Miles."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"I do not," the Muhaddith, for a split second, looked terribly sad, but the concession of emotion was so brief and fleeting Sofia wondered if she had imagined it, "I do not deserve his friendship."

She chuckled lowly. "Who is to say what we do and do not deserve. Perhaps I deserve to die to make restitution for the sins of my brother. Perhaps you deserve to be shunned for the rest of your days to atone for the lives you took. But, regardless of whatever damnation we feel our actions may merit, that fact remains that you still have Miles's friendship, and you have still spared my life. Perhaps... it's time you spared your own."

Sofia stood, brushing the sand from her trousers. Before she left the shade of the pavilion, she caught a silhouette moving behind the canvas of the tent:

"Is Command Sergeant Fuery in there, sayyidi?" She threw a thumb over her shoulder.

"The small one with glasses? Yes. The medics bandaged his injury from the train."

"He should be so lucky," said Sofia, warmly, "to have you as his guardian."

Edward flexed his right arm, working out a sudden cramp. As he regarded the limb, his expression turned gloomy. He'd kept meticulous note of the ever-increasing frequency of painful tics and muscle spasms, as though his nerves weren't firing properly, the axons and fibres atrophying before his eyes. Even the skin peeking out from under his sleeve had grown pasty grey.

He knew his time was limited: Ed had been expecting something to go wrong with his resurrected limb from the moment he discerned the truth regarding Selim Bradley. His foreknowledge harkened back to Izumi Sensei's biology lessons during their alchemy training. In some ways, it was as though the entire world straddled a concentration gradient, solutes of matter and energy moving from an area of higher concentration to an area of low concentration. In the physiological sense, the diffusion gradients were separated by a membrane. Ed suspected the rogue Gate fulfilled a similar function on a much larger scale, demarcating the Realm of Earth from the Realm of Truth.

And if his arm had already begun to waste away, thought Ed grimly, then what of the other remittances? Mustang's eyes? Havoc's legs?

Alphonse's body...

Ed felt his eyes sting and his nose pucker, and he scrubbed a hand across his face to keep the tears
The fear surged in every vein and capillary, but as Ed took a few deep, measured breaths, it never quite reached his facial muscles. Ed's expression remained calm, his eyes dry, his gaze steady. He let out a soft sigh and turned away from the temple, trying not to think about his brother.

He couldn't bear to consider Alphonse's predicament for any protracted length of time: it hurt too much. The terror was a weight pressing down on his ribs and a dull ache in his head. Al was so far away, and Ed was powerless to help him. The eldest Elric could imagine a cage trapping him on all sides, sealing off any viable exit.

He remembered something, then: during the previous night, as they hid from Stokes's men, Ed had dreamt of sitting in church as a solitary white figure — a creature who wore no face and yet every face, spoke with the voice of the void and the voice of all the world — painted over the stained glass windows until each pane and portrait was completely, utterly black. Ed had jerked awake, and faced with the starless, moonless desert night, his heart had almost exploded for fear of something awful having come true.

"Master Elric," called Major Miké, jarring Edward from darker thoughts. "I need you to do something very important for me."

Ed looked to her. "What is it?"

"The safety of our friends and comrades, no... the future of Amestris may depend on it.” Her stare fixed him to the spot. “Can I trust you with this responsibility?"

Ed glared up at the Major resolutely. "I'm ready."

"I need you to hold my hat."

"What."

Before Ed could splutter a response, Major Miké frisbeed her trilby to the smaller alchemist. Ed snatched it and scowled. Sofia cast him a charming smile. Edward did not return the courtesy.

"Now, if you're in any way fond of your eyebrows, I would also stand well clear… across the arcade, if I were you."

"What are you planning to do, exactly? In case it’s escaped your notice," he eyed the edge of the encampment, hoping none of the archeologists thought to look in their direction, "we're more than a little outnumbered."

Major Miké blinked innocently. “Well… I did promise you a volcano, didn’t I?”

Ed gawped at her. “You’re not serious.”

"Fluent in sarcasm," Ed muttered darkly, "and conversational in passive aggressiveness."

He pounded across the courtyard flagstones, his automail leg clanking against the slabs of white
marble. As Major Miké began to chalk arrays into the causeway, Ed hopped up on a stylobate base, squeezing between the crumbling pillars. From his vantage, he watched the Feldspar Alchemist's meticulous calculations, following every hexagram and equation with a keen eye.

In addition to the transmutation circles tattooed on her palms, Ed noted, Miké’s alchemy relied on a series of concentrated focal points. He counted six distinct seals dotting the arcade. He recognised the symbols for sulphur as well as mercury and salt. He reasoned Miké’s alchemy involved the Tria Prima as part of the process of dissolving and coagulating sedimentary material before recombining the stratigraphic rock layers through crystallisation. And if Miké worked with vulcanism, Ed mused, her alchemy must have been geared towards creating the interstitial material in aphanatic igneous rock. It was like she was recreating the heat and pressure of tectonic movement on a smaller, controlled scale.

"That ought to do it," announced Major Miké, pocketing her chalk, looking very pleased with herself.

"Major," called Ed, "if you're about to do what I think you're about to do...

"Don't you worry, Master Elric, I have no intention of flambéing your former commanding officer and his men… or anyone else, for that matter. This little show ought to give those rather aggressive archeologists something to think about, and carve out a little neutral zone for ourselves in the process."

"You're harnessing the diastrophic energy that’s released from the movement and collision of tectonic plates deep within Earth's crust, aren't you?" Ed gestured to the ruins. "If that's the case, how exactly do you intend to keep from turning the entire basin into a caldera?"

"Well," began the Major, her voice distant as she checked her calculations, "simply put, my transmutation circles are my control throttles. I like to think of myself as less of a generator and more of a conduit. Whereas most alchemists transform that tectonic energy into their own praxis of practice — fire, stone, ice, whatever the case may be — I merely channel it. My alchemy does not generate volcanic activity, Master Elric, because vulcanism is a permanent fixture of our world. It is as natural a process as the wind and the rain. All I do is decide where that process should and should not exist at any given time."

"Cutting out the middle man," said Edward, in admiration despite himself. "Raw, untapped tectonic energy. The most basic alchemy there is."

"Quite right. A lot less showy than all that hand clapping and fire snapping. Although, as you’ve no doubt already surmised, the system of arrangement is quite involved. I have to make sure my calculations are correct, otherwise I could inadvertently bury this place under several cubic miles of boiling tephra and pumice." She flashed him a toothy smile. "Something I'm rather keen to avoid, as I'm sure you'll understand."

"So why, exactly, do you need me to hold your hat?" he asked irritably, slapping the brim against his thigh.

"Because I don't want it to get singed. I like that hat."

"I don't."

"Edward, if you throw my hat into my arrays, I will be very upset."

He grumbled something about it making her look like a con artist, but Major Miké didn't hear him.
She rolled up her sleeves, brushed some dirt from her palms, and touched her hands to the largest of the alchemic arrays: an intricate Leviathan's cross circumscribed by three triangles and the Taurus sigil, the alchemic symbol of congelation.

The effect was almost instantaneous, the shockwave radiating outward and downward from where Sofia crouched. The ground seemed to heave, a grating rumble vibrating through the marrow of Edward's bones, churning his insides into a viscous soup. He clutched the stone base of the stylobate, picking his legs up off the ground and tucking them under him. Across the arcade, where Major Miké had placed her transmutation circles, the ground split like seams in a too-dry leather hide. Ed was no stranger to the smell of sulphur, but that didn't make the noxious miasma billowing up from the rends in the earth any less revolting. He pinched his nose and blinked tears from his watery eyes.

There was an ear-splitting blast from the pressure accretion before molten magma plumed from Miké's arrays like synchronised fountainheads. Smoke and pumice belched from the cracks, hanging low over the ruins like the underside of a coffin lid, making Edward uncharacteristically claustrophobic. He noted the pooling geysers sloughing towards the gutters bordering the pylons, filling the ancient Xerxian sluiceways with slow-moving, superheated magma. As Edward and Major Miké watched, the temple acquired something not unlike a moat of molten lava.

Sofia approached Edward's perch and plopped down next to him; she turned a few white pebbles between her fingers — pellets of feldspar, Ed realised. Her gaze drifted to the flow of magma, already starting to taper off as the vents scabbed over. Across the arcade, the geysers trickled to a stop. Even the sheet of smoke thinned as the desert wind whipped angrily across the basin. The gutters surrounding the temple simmered with superheated magma, the red and orange tributaries hardening to wafer-thin black crusts.

Major Miké noticed Edward’s attention and explained, "Lava cools very quickly. As a result, basaltic magma can form crusts that are thick enough to walk on in as little as ten minutes. However, the ground surrounding the temple will be tectonically imbalanced for quite some time — little pockets of geothermal instability might still remain just underfoot."

"It may as well be a minefield."

"A fitting analogy, actually. It probably wouldn't do to cross the arcade without my guidance."

"So... you really weren't trying to hurt anyone," murmured Ed, surveying their surroundings, "just dissuade our enemies a little." He snorted. "And if the shouting and the screaming I hear is any indication, it worked."

"I suspect rogue volcanoes did not make Professor Stokes's shortlist of contingencies."

"Professor Stokes..." repeated Edward darkly, anger pooling in the pit of his stomach, making his skin feel hot and itchy. His arm seized, and he made an effort to hide the grimace of pain from Sofia's notice. "She's the one at the heart of all this."

"It would seem so. I can only hope the situation has not worsened since yesterday."

"It wasn't exactly peachy then, either," Ed grumbled.

Fullmetal thought back to the previous day: after learning of the Gate’s presence from Major Miles, he and Sofia had departed Dairut for the Mishaari basin. Just as they were climbing over the crater ridge, they spotted a huge fireball erupting over the ruins — Ed had recognised the Flame Alchemist's work immediately. When the smoke and cinders finally cleared, Ed had been able to
spot a gravely wounded Command Sergeant Fuery trapped in a circle of Professor Stokes’s
archeologists, with the one of the technicians, the Ishvalan girl, holding a pistol to his head. So far
as situational cues went, it had been blatantly unambiguous.

Ed had wanted to burst through the Professor's ranks and knock a few heads together. But Major
Miké had urged him to hold his peace for a little while longer, for Fuery's safety if not for his own.
Edward had been forced to watch helplessly as Mustang's envoy was separated: the junior officers
locked away in one of the storage depots, and Fuery carried to the medical pavilion by none other
than General Bastard himself.

"Lieutenant Ross is my direct subordinate," said Major Miké calmly, wrenching Ed from his
recollections. "Even if quakes took the others by surprise, Maria would recognise my alchemy at
work. And being as the temple pylons are the most defensible position in the crater, if Lieutenant
Breda's strategic prowess is worth its salt, he should know to direct the envoy here."

"And what about Sergeant Fuery?" asked Ed apprehensively.

"Unless Mustang's men take it upon themselves to rescue him, I'm afraid there's not a whole lot we
can do."

"We can help him!" insisted Ed furiously. "I'm not about to just sit here and——"

"Master Elric, sometimes an ounce of discretion is worth a pound of careless bravery. Professor
Stokes's forces will get over their surprise quickly. If we leave the safety of this temple, we'll likely
be shot." She confided, "In truth, I'm far more concerned about General Mustang."

Ed gnawed at his bottom lip; he wondered if Sofia knew something of the Gate diffusion already...
"He has his flame alchemy," he said carefully. "He can look after himself."

"Edward, if Professor Stokes is the one who orchestrated this entire affair, then who do you
imagine was responsible for Captain Hawkeye's disappearance?"

The realisation slammed into Ed with enough force to leave him breathless. He had to quell a
shudder as his hackles twitched and jumped under his shirt. His right arm fell slack. Ed rubbed the
space below his elbow, trying to massage sensation back into his limp muscles. His tongue went as
dry as the desert as he ventured, "Do you think they'll——?"

"They held the Command Sergeant at gunpoint. I don't expect threatening a captain will prick their
consciences to any great extent, either."

Ed hung his head. Suddenly, without warning, he felt a harsh peal bubbling in his throat. His
laughter left his mouth as a high, cold sound, piercing the remnants of the smoky, noxious air.

Major Miké looked askance at him. "I don't think I've said anything amusing..."

"If they're gonna threaten Hawkeye, then I'm really not worried about Mustang," said Ed bitterly,
his golden eyes darkening. "Because if they hurt her, he's gonna kill them all."

Sofia sighed. "And that," she said gravely, her voice treacle-dark and thick with sadness, “is
exactly why I’m concerned."

Ed’s stomach turned in an unfriendly way. He felt as though his brain was full of static, either
firing off a million unhelpful thoughts at once or offering nothing at all.

"Major! Edward!"
Ed's head shot up, looking westward. He saw Lieutenants Ross and Falman racing towards them, their hair dusted in ash, the blue of their uniforms hidden under a thick layer of sand and dust and dry sweat. Before they reached the arcade, Major Miké leapt to her feet — with surprising agility for her age, Ed thought grudgingly — and held her hands out.

"Stop!" she cried, startling Edward with her piercing urgency. Ross's dark eyes widened in alarm and she skidded to a halt, pulling Falman back by his sleeve and nearly causing the man to fall over backwards.

"This way," called the Feldspar Alchemist, directing them around the moat, towards a narrow avenue of black rock. It was so small, Ed knew Stokes's archeologists would never manage to find it on their own. "The crust is thick enough to step on here, and you won't set off any of the geysers."

Ross nodded her understanding. With agonising gentleness, the two lieutenants tiptoed across the crusted magma. Ed thought he heard Falman whimper in fright, and Maria offer the twitchy man some nonsense words of encouragement.

When they reached the entrance to the temple, Major Miké frowned deeply.

"Where are the others?" she prodded.

"They... went... to get Fuery," puffed Falman, a self-annoyed expression on his face. His throat was hoarse from the smoke, his silver hair closer to black from the pumice and ash.

Maria Ross tried to say more, but the inside of her mouth lacked any moisture and all she managed was a dry croak. She took deep, shuddering breaths, trying to clear the smoke from her lungs.

"No..." murmured Edward, looking towards the encampment, "they didn't."

He spied four dusty figures lumbering towards the temple. Though they seemed to be making an effort to hide their heads from the notice of Stokes's little army, from Ed's vantage, their faces had taken on such an ashen hue that they appeared almost grey under the high, hot sun. Their eyes were locked on the pylons. Whereas Falman and Ross had crossed with ease, the Breda, Miles, and Mustang's progress was slow and unwieldy.

The stocky figure of Lieutenant Breda directed his superior officers over the narrow bridge, following the path Ross had taken a few moments before. After a moment, Ed noted General Mustang's white-knuckled grip on Major Miles's arm, and the sandy-blonde hair of Havoc, whom he hadn't noticed before, slung across Breda's back. The Lieutenant's face was ghost-white with pain.

Ed also realised, when he tried to wave to the newcomers, that he had lost all feeling in his right arm. It hung limply from his side, the moisture gone, the skin gnarled with webs of wrinkles, dry and dusty like the arm of a corpse. He couldn't feel anything below the shoulder.

"That's Miles and Mustang," said Major Miké, sounding troubled, "and beside them, that's Lieutenant Breda. But who is he carrying...?"

"Havoc...!" croaked Falman in disbelief. "What on earth happened... did he get shot...?"

"No."
Everyone looked at Edward expectantly, though Major Miké's stare was the strongest. When Ed lifted his head to meet her eyes, she didn't glance away casually. She watched him as though probing his face for the one vital detail could mean the end of their lives. Other than her whittling at her inner cheek, she was utterly still, her measured appraisals constantly sweeping over one another as through being washed in an invisible stream.

"Havoc wasn't shot," affirmed Edward grimly. "I think... I think he's lost the use of his legs again."

Falman went almost as white as Jean. He muttered, more to himself than to anyone else, shaking his head and sending ash flying everywhere, "That's not possible... Dr. Marcoh—"

"Dr. Marcoh's Stone isn't going to help right now, Lieutenant."

"Then..." Falman's throat hitched. Edward could have sworn the tall man looked on the verge of tears, his eyes misty and distant, "then the General..."

"Blind again. Yeah."

"How can that be?" cried Ross, her voice trembling. "Both of them were fine a few hours ago!"

"No, they weren't," murmured Falman gravely, his eyes pinching in consideration. The Second Lieutenant turned to Edward as though looking for the Fullmetal Alchemist's confirmation. "Ed, the General has been rubbing his eyes incessantly, and Havoc's legs have been causing him a tremendous amount of pain—"

"And my arm has been murdering me since Resembool," said Ed firmly. "Look, the thing that Professor Stokes is after — and the reason Major Miké and I are in Ishval — I think it's triggering a diffusion of reconstructive energy back across the Gate, sorta like plasmolysis in a plant cell. Everyone who had something returned to them courtesy of dealing with the Truth or using a Philosopher's Stone, is probably going to lose that something again."

"How long have you known this?" asked Major Miké, her voice a hoarse whisper.

Ed used his left hand to pick up his limp right arm. He swung it back and forth for their observation, and when he released it, it flopped back to his side. "I've had my suspicions since we spoke with Selim Bradley," he admitted.

"And you chose to say nothing!" snarled Feldspar viciously. Falman and Ross jumped. Even Edward recoiled. He had never heard Sofia sound so angry; it frightened him. "Not only hiding your own handicap, but that of General Mustang and Lieutenant Havoc, as well!"

"I didn't think the diffusion would be strong enough to affect them, too!" Ed snapped back, his hands balling into fists. "Besides, it was only a theory. But once I learned the Gate was located here, in Dairut, and once my arm started to get worse, I suspected our close proximity would only accelerate the effects."

"And what about Alphonse?" breathed Ross. "He... he had something returned to him, too."

Edward squeezed his eyes shut. "I don't know," he said hoarsely, his voice thick with pain. His words seemed to trickle down into his ears, drop by drop. "Unconscious... or... or in a persistent vegetative state. I don't know. For now, he has the benefit of being all the way in Xing, but give it another day or two..."

"It won't come to that, Fullmetal."
Everyone looked in the direction of General Mustang, who shrugged Major Miles from him, striding towards them with a steadfastness that suggested nothing of his newfound blindness. He followed the sounds left in their wake, zeroing in on Edward with two blank eyes as he concentrated on the hollow clank of the latter's automail leg.

"We're going to close that Gate," he growled.

"What would you suggest, sir?" asked Major Miké carefully, tempering her anger.

"Fullmetal..."

Ed caught Roy scowling at him — right at him. Being trapped under the snuffed-out light in the General's eyes was disconcerting. Ed wilted under the withering glare; it was irrational, perhaps paranoid of him, but for a moment Ed suspected Mustang's blindness, instead of rendering him impotent, only made him all the more dangerous.

"You're the one who seems to know all about this phenomenon," he went on gruffly, "and without the use of your arm, you're no good to us in combat."

"Gee, thanks," muttered Ed. Roy ignored him.

"You'll stay inside the temple, and you'll do your damnedest to think of a way to get that Gate closed. Falman," he turned in the general direction of the Lieutenant, though stared somewhere over his shoulder, "give Breda your gun, and get Havoc inside. You'll help Fullmetal in any way you can... lend him every scrap of information you've logged away regarding a rogue Gate or the Risen."

"Yes, sir."

"Breda, Ross, and Miké will form our defensive line against Stokes's people... Lieutenants, use those confiscated weapons, and Major, use your alchemy. Make sure none of those bastards get across that mote."

"Sir!" All three snapped to attention.

Instead of heading between the pylons, Edward eyed the General with unguarded suspicion. "You seem awfully keen on barking orders to us without saving any for yourself," he said dryly. "That usually means there's something else going on you're not telling us."

He scowled down at Ed. "If you must know, Fullmetal," he snapped irritably. "Major Miles and I are going after Captain Hawkeye."

"What? You're blind, you dumbass!"

"Hence why I'm taking Miles with me, Edward!"

"I don't remember agreeing to this," interjected the Major heatedly, taking a meaningful step towards the higher-ranking officer.

Roy rounded on Miles, glaring at him. Miles stared back at with a neutral but expectant expression. "I'm your commanding officer, Major," said the General, his voice low, dangerous. Ed swallowed.

The Ishvalan regarded the Flame Alchemist with something akin to regret, seeming to forget, for a moment, that Mustang was completely blind to the expression. "With respect, sir... General Olivier Mira Armstrong is my commanding officer. Not you."
"Is that insubordination, Major?" asked Roy, his jaw tightening in anger.

"That depends on if you intend to pursue this course of action, sir."

Everyone froze, their eyes flicking between the two officers like they were following the world's most dangerous tennis match.

"Refusing a direct order is sedition, Major."

"No, sir. It's common sense. I will not be party to escorting a blind man through a war zone. I'm sure Captain Hawkeye would agree with me."

Oh shit, thought Ed despairingly, shrinking into his shirt, bracing himself for the barbecue...

"I will retrieve her."

A man stepped from the shadows of the Xerxian temple. His red eyes were deep-set and looked out from a face burnt to the colour of a brick. His nose was straight and large, cheeks well-hollowed; his face would have been handsome but for the persistent glare fixing his features in place.

"Sayyidi?" queried Miles, shock making his face go slack. General Mustang's head jerked in the direction of the Muhaddith's voice. "What are you doing here...?"

"I brought the boy," said Scar simply.

"Fuery's inside?!" crowed Breda, his face, heavy with exhaustion from carrying Havoc and sick with fear from seeing his best friend crippled again, lifted slightly.

"Yes."

Though no one else seemed to notice, Ed thought he saw Scar exchange a look with Major Miké. The Ishvalan monk glanced over at the alchemist, who stared back and nodded slightly.

"Major Miles and I will rescue your Captain," said the Ishvalan stonily. "We are familiar with the region. We can move quickly, without attracting attention. And once she is free, you may defend yourselves without fear of repercussion."

Edward could hardly believe it. Scar — the man who abhorred the Amestrian military, who had nearly taken Ed's life and General Mustang's, who had been one of the Ishvalans hiding from Hawkeye's crosshairs during the War — was willing to risk his life to bring Riza home.

Ed thought back to the quick glance passing between the Muhaddith and Major Miké, a look of understanding from two people who by rights ought to have hated each other.

Ed wondered, then, if in that small glance, the state alchemist and the Ishvalan felt the pulse of each other's pain as well as if it were their own, if it bound them together, somehow. And though Ed knew Scar was not a man given to begging for forgiveness, the Fullmetal Alchemist also knew a good heart wasn't prone to settling until things were set right and true. Perhaps saving Riza wouldn't remake the past or even begin to undo the terrible things Scar had done, but the act might work to bridge a gap. Leave an offering. Give a gift.

As though it was, in some way, something deserved.

"I agree to those terms," said Miles; Roy was too stunned, perhaps too moved, to do anything
besides nod mutely. "However, we still don't know where the Captain is being held."

"I know where she is," said Scar simply.

Ed furrowed his eyebrows. "You do?"

Scar's red eyes betrayed nothing of his thoughts. "Stokes will be keeping her somewhere in Ishval. However, the Professor cannot risk Mustang's woman being noticed by the locals, so while her hiding place must within a defensible base, likely some portion of the local architecture, it will be without a resident population. There is only one district that meets those requirements. A place, my people believe, is maleun. Cursed."

Miles swayed. "You don't mean..."

"Captain Hawkeye," muttered Scar, "is being held in the Kanda region of Ishval."

"The place I once called home."

Chapter End Notes

Oh lord, that one was long
"Truth be told, I'm scared. Really, really scared.

"I'm scared of what's gonna come next. I'm scared of dying. I'm scared I'm running out of things to say in this Will. There's a part of me who believes that if I keep talking, I can somehow prolong it. That I can live my life a little longer. A persistence of my memory through the duration of this recording.

"I've always wondered whether people's memories are the fuel their bodies burn to stay alive, a sort of caloric intake by means of nostalgia. Did you know... the Xerxian word for "return" is nostos, while algos means "suffering." So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return. How poetic.

Maybe talking to you like this is my way of prolonging the inevitable. To keep my fire burning a little longer. And I'm beginning to realise, by doing this recitation of regret, that it doesn't really matter whether any of those memories have any actual importance or not. It doesn't matter so far as the endurance of my life is concerned. They're all just fuel. Breaking stories in the newspaper, philosophy books, playing cards, dirty pictures in a magazine, a bundle of thousand-cenz notes... death doesn't distinguish between them, and in a way, neither does life. When you feed 'em to the fire, they're all just kindling. Just firelighter. And that fire isn't thinking 'Oh, this is Socrates,' or 'Oh, this is a winning hand,' or 'This is a shit-ton of money,' or 'Nice tits,' while it burns. To the fire of life, memories are nothing but scraps of paper.

"But I'm running out of things to say. I'm scared that, once this recording ends, I'll be gone for good. Done and dusted. Really, truly... dead.

"The fear of death has never left me... never left anyone, I suppose. But no matter how many dead soldiers I see, no matter how many funerals I attend or bereaved families I write condolence letters to on the Boss's behalf, I can't seem to get used to the thought. I could record a hundred Last Will and Testaments and my own goddamn mortality would still scare the shit out of me. It gets to the point where I shake myself awake weeping with terror.

"Because I don't...

"I don't want to die."

Continued in Act VII: Being in Nothingness
He was not a kind man, her father.

He once told her, in an attempt to frighten her out of staying up late with the apprentice, that if she didn't get to sleep before midnight, the monsters of the night would come and abduct her. But there were never any ghouls and goblins, no boogeymen under her bed. All that came in the small, dark hours before the dawn were screams, rending shrieks from a voice so much like her own. On those nights, Riza would dream of waking up and seeing herself standing at the foot of her own bed — a pale, skinny child, face curtained by a messy bob of blonde hair, dressed in a dirty smock. A frail, feeble slip of a girl. And there was always a knife, resting on the duvet of the bed.

Every night, Riza had picked up her blade and stabbed the girl, right through her heart. And every night, Riza had woken up screaming into the darkness, clawing at her chest. The apprentice had heard her cries. Her father had not.

He was not a kind man.

Over the years, the phantom, the girl wearing her face, had assumed many forms on many nights. Her father's monster was a master of disguise.

In some distant part of her mind she cared not to acknowledge or resolve into understanding, Riza knew, at that moment, she was dreaming again.

She remembered dimly those long seconds before losing consciousness as her screams tore free and, like embers, set fire to whatever lay around her. The fragmented memory of her suffering, drunk on its sweat and sick, unstitched something bright from her thoughts and shredded whatever remained. At least, sunk in her nightmares, her anxious mind was freed from knowing its own decay, her broken bones and bruised flesh unencumbered by skeletal epiphanies of visual and aural coherence. Better, her dreaming self decided with its infallible dream logic, those landscapes where the only fear came from imagined monsters. Real people were far more terrifying.

But, Riza admitted, she hadn't anticipated the resurrection of her childhood phantom.

It wasn't the girl wearing Riza's face, jerking her awake with its shrieking. It had taken on the form of a tall, anaemic figure, and as it crept after her, time seemed to slow, each successive moment matching the pace of its measured, sedate footfalls. It stopped at her side, and its hand reached for her arm. Riza did everything to move, writhing like something soft and pulpous inside her carapace, but her body remained fixed, held fast by some invisible force. The figure's fingers ghosted over her shoulder, the thick, white scabbing of her throat, while Riza stood still, paralysed.

"There may have been those who wished to enter this world of ours," it murmured; each word rippled in her mind, the waves radiating outward in strange, dampened echoes, "having glimpsed it in the infinite distance, a territory of inexpressible possibility, a place remembered from no dream at all. In some ways, it has proven to be possible to die in this place, though no book has been kept of the names of the perished. Some survive here, but do not return. But for those who remain, something else gradually happens: the membrane erodes, and the survivors fall through the cracks in the world. Just as we did."
Leave me alone, she tried to tell the voice, straining her vocal cords. She just wanted to sleep. She just wanted to escape the pain...

"Your talk is how you show your love, the evidence of your listening lies in what you say, your emotion in the silences. I could listen to you forever, talking about something, talking about nothing, be boring, tell a tall tale — it doesn't matter to me."

Riza gazed at the pale figure, its diaphanous, blurred edges hardening to a form half-familiar. His expression was one of quiet amusement; he seemed almost charmed by her bemused, silent questing, his mouth curving into a lazy smirk as she cast around for the right words.

I don't... I don't have anything to say to you.

"No?" The man's face twisted into a moue of mock hurt. "Such a shame, really... I always so enjoy our conversations."

Riza tried to cover her face but found to her unhurried amazement that her body was gone, that she had no eyes to cover, nor hands to cover them with. She just existed. A being in nothingness.

What is this...? she asked. Where am I?

"You don't even remember? You wound me, Hawkeye. You really do."

"Yes." His eyes were as blue as the nightmare depths of the ocean, the colour of creatures who've spent their lives in perpetual shadow. "Some things are not so easily discarded, are they?"

He seemed to slither and ooze from her peripheries, existing in the margins of her vision but completely invisible if she tried to look at him dead-on: skulking, slinking, leering. He had unnaturally long, thin fingers, each like the tendril of a parasitic plant, reaching, searching.

But he moved as though dancing, and in the care of his steps, there was reminiscence. And there was grace. He wasn't tapping around her so much as meditating, turning in fluid motions as though the shadows filling the spaces beside him were beloved partners. She wondered, then, if there existed a cracked record player where his heart should have been, the tracks stuck on repeat, playing the sounds of Debussy and destruction out into the nothingness, into everything.

Why are you here...

"Who's to say I ever left?"

What are you? A ghost... or a memory?

"I've never been one to believe the two are mutually exclusive. A trace of me remains still, Riza Hawkeye, tattooed on the inside of your skull."

No... you're dead. You're gone.

"I think you miss me."

I assure you, I don't.

"No? Then perhaps you're just lonely."
I value my solitude.

"Then why dream of me?"

I'm injured. I'm in pain. And my memories of you and of pain are often intertwined.

"You're afraid."

Yes. I'm afraid...

"Tell me why."

I don't want to die.

"But... you fear you might have to. Isn't that right?"

The Risen will use me to get to my commanding officer. It's just like Bradley… just like the Promised Day. I will not allow that to happen again. Even so...

"Ah... then it's not the pain you fear, is it? You regard death as something of an empty train station... but with no people, no trains, no lost luggage or discarded ticket stubs, and nowhere to go. It's hearing and seeing with none of it mattering. It's the world carrying on with its business as usual, but for you it can never be the same again. You don't fear dying. You fear abandoning him at the station platform."

I don't—

"You forget: I know you."

No. You don't. I just told you I value my loneliness.

"Don't lie to me. Even now, your attempts at misdirection are perspicuously transparent. I find the hypocriticalness of it nauseating. If you will not be honest with me, at least be honest with yourself. Then again..." he made a small noise of consideration, the dry click of teeth, "I suppose we are, in this moment, one and the same thing."

Get out. She clutched desperately for some defined edge, some precipice, only for her grip to grow sweaty and slippery. Get out of my head. GET OUT.

"Or perhaps it's simply being here... in this place." A pause. "You do know where you are, I trust?"

I'm dreaming. None of this is real.

"Debatable. But, not to belabour a point, let's, for the sake of argument, consider your waking self. You're in Ishval. Correct?"

Yes.

"Where in Ishval?"

The Risen…

"Their base of operations, then."

I don't know.
"Yes, you do. You're talking to me, aren't you?"

It's not as though I have much of a choice.

"Stop," it snarled, the word almost a growl. "You may believe that you are responsible only for what you do, but not for what you imagine. The truth is that you are responsible for what your mind conjures, because it is only at this level that you can exercise choice. What you do comes from what you think. You brought me here for a reason, Riza. What is it?"

I don't know.

"You do."

I don't...!

"I warned you," he said, "I warned you once to never forget. I told you to look death in the face."

And I have! she raged. Time and time again! For him, I would march on the gates of Hell!

"I told you and your Flame Alchemist what you needed to hear that day. Here, in this very place. But... I confess my advice was incomplete. I neglected to tell you that there will never be a reward for the perspicuity of your memory. Nobody plays this life with marked cards; do not expect your efforts to be appreciated, your loyalty to be avenged or your love to be requited. Stop tuning your emotional radio to the same program over and over again, the one that shows how much you suffered from a certain loss, from a certain promise made in this desert land: that memory is only poisoning you. Break free of it."

I...

The figure waited. Riza took a deep breath.

"I know where I am."

She felt the figure step up to her. "Then I think it's time to wake up, don't you?"

Inches away from her face, he questioned her with his indigo eyes, and when she didn't answer, he kissed her gently. The pressure increased, the contact growing harder and more insistent, a violent clash of tongue and teeth until her lips began to bleed, until at last she closed her eyes — tight — and began to gasp.

Her consciousness swept through the fog, dragging some distant part of her closer...

Riza woke up feeling like every bone in her body had been welded together with a blowtorch.

Her skin felt tight. Her muscles ached. She tried to draw a deep breath and found herself unable to find the ample oxygen, sucking shallower and shallower lungfuls of Ishval's hot, stale air. She couldn't feel anything below the hips, and for one horrifying moment, as she remembered Jean Havoc's paralysis five years previously, panic clawed at her chest. Riza felt a mutant, discordant wail rising in her throat, dripping from the corners of her mouth as high whimpers.

"Calm down, girlie," ordered a deep, resonant voice. She felt a hand under her shoulders, easing her into a precarious sitting position. "Just the pain killers. Got you on enough anaesthetics to fell an elephant."

There was a warm, aching grate of muscle in her abdomen as she struggled to sit up, her ribs
smarting. As the bones settled, the breath seemed to flee her body, leaving her gasping for air like a fish. Bright light stung the rods and cones of her eyes every time she blinked.

“Priam…” Her own voice horrified her — a jagged, rasping whisper like she was speaking through shards of glass. In her present frame of mind, she couldn’t tell whether the ravaged sound came from dehydration or from screaming. A fair bit of both, she supposed: Pythos had not been kind to her. She didn't want to imagine what she looked liked...

"How long…" she swallowed, trying to wet her mouth, "how bad...?"

“You been out for nearly twelve 'ours. It’s the middle of the night.” Priam's expression didn't change as he intoned: "Three broken ribs, a bruised patella, and a femoral crush fracture in your right leg."

Riza closed her eyes to dampen the sudden sting. "Oh." She tried to shift her position, but the crunch of her ribs nearly made her choke, and she fell back against the metal bed-frame. "Oh..."

As a soldier, she had been trained in techniques intended to withstand interrogation and torture — of both the psychological and physiological varieties — and while a femoral crush fracture and broken ribs fell well within the extent of expected injuries, her past instruction did nothing to alleviate the present pain.

Any hope she had of escaping into the desert vanished in an inglorious puff of smoke. Risa realised, despairingly, that there was no way she could get to Roy on her own.

"Useless," she murmured.

“You really shouldn’t be talkin',” said the big man as he tended to her leg. Though the grime on his glasses shielded his thoughts from Riza’s scrutiny, his eyebrows had converged in a thick, tense scowl, every crack and crevice in his ruddy cheeks carved to a hard line.

He braced his face to stiffness as he wound a clean bandage around her splinted leg — the shaft of her crushed femur just visible under the skin, the flesh bruised livid purple from the hematomas. Hawkeye felt nauseous at the sight of it.

"Normally,” Priam muttered, "a surgeon outta insert a rod or large nail into the centre of the bone... 'elps support the femur until it 'eals. Can't do that 'ere. I'm patchin' you up on Cassandra's say-so, but you need a proper doc."

"I'm lucky..." she hissed, sweat breaking out on her forehead from the effort, "lucky that stupid bastard didn't... knick my femoral artery."

"'ush you. I said no talkin'."

"How can you be okay with this?" she asked coldly, though her exhausted breathlessness mitigated any effect her anger may have had.

Priam grunted. "Don't matter whether I'm okay with it or not. I just do what I'm told."

"Then I have... a favour to ask, if you're... so good at following orders."

"You promise to shuddup if I listen?"

"Perhaps."
"Then what is it?"

Riza steeled herself, willing her words not to waver: “Bring Atreus down here… leave me, and shut the door behind you.”

Priam paused, glaring at the shiny purple skin of her leg. “Why in the ‘ell should I do that?”

Riza swallowed again. “Something tells me… though you lack the inclination to speak out against it, you don’t have the stomach for violence yourself. Otherwise, I’d be asking you to do it.”

“Atreus’ll ‘urt you,” he reminded her, rather unnecessarily, Riza thought.

“Since General Mustang has proven himself incapable,” she croaked, “of prioritising Amestris’s safety over the wellbeing of his soldiers, I have a responsibility to render the decision null. He will no longer have a choice in the matter. So long as I’m alive, the General's enemies have a weapon to use against him.”

Hawkeye waited to see what would emerge from the messy excavation of Priam's thoughts. He continued to set her leg, and Riza was suddenly very thankful for the pain killers. “So you mean to off yourself so you can’t be used as a ‘ostage,” he grumbled eventually. He tied the end of the bandage. “That about the long and short o’it?”

“Yes.”

“It ain’t ‘happenin’.”

“Please, Priam.”

“No.”

"Why not? I thought you said it didn't matter to you."

"I won't 'ave ya turnin' that boy into a murderer."

She blinked her surprise. "That boy... you mean Atreus." Riza remembered suddenly: "General Hakuro's son."

As Priam swept over her, his thoughts remained inscrutable, somewhere lead-lined and dark, far away from her prying eyes.

"Jin Hakuro," said Hawkeye quietly, parsing through the piecemeal fragments of her memory, "the General's eldest child... h-he died seven months ago when one of his university's laboratory buildings caught fire. The General was devastated. The accident was the talk of Central Command. But... a body was never recovered..."

Priam’s eyelids drooped and there was a slight lolling to his head, his muscles going slack from fatigue. His limbs seemed too heavy for him, like he was personally struggling against far more gravity than the rest of the world.

"I thought you promised to keep quiet."

"Priam," murmured Hawkeye pleadingly, urgently, "General Hakuro is one of my colleagues. If his son is alive—"

"Jin ain't alive," said Priam bitterly, "Not anymore."
"Atreus's mind may be gone, but—"

Priam rounded on her, his black beard bristling. "You don't know nothin'!" he growled; Riza's mouth clamped shut. "Jin is gone. Atreus, when he ain't skinnin' animals, 'e just sits on a chair, rockin', rockin', always in motion, and every few seconds 'is hand flickers to 'is face to swat some invisible insects. Each day’s the same. When 'e speaks it makes no sense, like a telephone call only 'eard on one side and the caller leatin' from one unconnected subject to another. No word fillin' the gaps of whatever came before."

"What happened to him?" asked Riza gently.

Priam said nothing, glaring at her from behind the shield of his glasses.

“I can guess.” Hawkeye went on, quiet in her stubbornness: “The name Cassandra said, Dr. Lendel Bates… he was also one of the ones killed in the laboratory fire seven months ago. Except… there wasn’t a fire, was there, Priam? Dr. Bates and Jin Hakuro were each a part of Professor Stokes’s preliminary expedition to the Mishaari basin. Pythos mentioned Jin being the first to stumble upon this rogue Gate, the same Gate Professor Stokes means to use to turn General Mustang into the Speaker of the Dead. However, something went wrong. There was an accident. Jin wandered too close, and he saw the Truth. Then… he lost his mind.

“And rather than having to deal with informing a high-ranking official of the mental atrophy of his eldest child, which would risk the wrong sort of scrutiny on the part of the Amestrian military, Stokes had her agents cover it up with an alleged fire. Lendel Bates and Jin Hakuro perished. Pythos and Atreus were born.”

Priam scowled at her. “You got all that from the phone call?”

Riza allowed herself a tiny smile; even that small motion smarted. “Pythos made the mistake of believing I’d be distracted by his torture. He is at his most negligent when he believes he is in control. His delusions of power have a tendency to render him complacent.”

And if Roy hadn’t succumbed to Cassandra’s coercion, Hawkeye thought grimly, the Captain likely could have gleaned even more information…

“Jin was a good kid,” said Priam mutely, his gaze distant. “Nice kid. ‘Ardworking. Smart as ‘ell. What ’appened to ‘im, it changed ‘im. Made ‘im… wrong, in the ‘ead. Strikes me Cassandra and Pythos weren’t overly inconvenienced by the whole affair.”

“They abuse his psychosis,” agreed Riza solemnly. She thought of the boy’s delicate blonde curls falling over his brow, skin so pale it rendered him stark against the dreary desert; an angelic face, even if his eyes bore a hard expression, a warning of the devil stirring underneath. "Priam... you care about the boy. If you won't defend me, then defend Atreus. You have to end this."

"I ain't gonna do that, 'awk."

"Priam," she insisted, dredging up the reserves of her strength, "you were one of the candidates for the Führership, weren't you? Every decision made for you... every direction of your life mapped to the finest of trajectories. You have never lived for yourself: not in your youth, not under the control of Amestris's enemies during the Promised Day, and certainly not under Cassandra's thumb. You have grown so accustomed to the comforts of your passive existence that you've forgotten what it's like to make choices for yourself!"

_The truth is that you are responsible for what your mind conjures, because it is only at this level_
"What would you know about livin' for yourself?" sneered Priam, rankling at her probing. "You... a military dog, who won't so much as take a piss without an induction order. We’re both spinnin’ tops, Captain, and whirligigs ain't got futures... just more revolutions."

Riza let out a sound too dry and thin to be a laugh. "You think I don't know that?" she cried. "I once served under Führer-King Bradley himself. Every aspect of his life was a fabrication. While I joined the military of my own free will, to protect the man who would become my commanding officer, Bradley was never allowed even the illusion of free choice. He resented me for it, because unlike me, he didn't earn his rank or status or even his power. Bradley was a puppet! But he told me once..." Riza clenched her left hand, tearing at the fibres of the thin blanket, "he told me that he took immense pride in the only truly independent choice he ever made, the choice of making Mrs. Bradley his wife. And it made me realise something...

"I joined the military of my own volition. I have my own goals, my own motives, my own reasons to keep moving forward. But still... but still," she glared at Priam, doing nothing to hide the unexpected surge of anguish, "Bradley had the one thing I, as an officer, never could. I couldn't pity him because I coveted the one freedom he had that I didn't!"

She refused to look away from the other man, even as her lips began to tremble and her shoulders heaved with emotion. Her lashes brimmed heavy with tears; she blinked in a desperate battle against her grief. There was something about pain, about complete physical exhaustion that loosened her lips; nothing else could have coaxed such a confession out of her. Not even Roy Mustang in all of his needling.

A lone tear traced down her cheek at the very thought, and just like that, the floodgates opened.

She wept, tears streaming from her amber eyes, loud, heaving sobs tearing from her throat, and still she did not look away. Priam stared at her, unblinking.

"Because no matter how pathetic or sad Bradley's life was," she sobbed, "he still had the right to be with the person he loved...”

She flung an arm across her face, muffling her tears. Priam, still, said nothing.

"That you would abandon someone you love, someone you swore to protect... because you've deluded yourself into thinking you don't care... you’re lying to the world, Priam. You’re lying to yourself!"

Priam removed his glasses, wiping the thick lenses on the collar of his shirt. His eyes, when he looked across at Riza, were bright green.

They were Bradley's eyes, strands of gold still pierced through the green like spokes around a wheel.

"What would you 'ave me do?" he asked quietly, regarding her with a narrow glare, reduced to squinting without his spectacles.

Hawkeye ignored the pain in her chest as she shifted forward, lowering her voice, though her words still sounded damp from her tears; "Jin needs psychiatric help," Riza said firmly. She urged him: "Get him out of this desert and back to his family."

"I don't—"
"You still have that truck," Riza insisted. "While Pythos is distracted, you can escape with Jin to East City. You can contact General Hakuro at Central Command from Eastern Headquarters. Save him, Priam, even if you won't save me."

"While Pythos is distracted," he parroted, doubt clouding the words. "You plan to tell me how you're gonna manage that?"

"I'll ask to speak to him alone. He... he will agree."

Priam's viridescent eyes blazed. "You tryin' to get yourself even more 'urt?"

Riza didn't say anything, and the larger man stared at her for what felt like a long time. Green met amber; a silent understanding passed between them with such potent cognisance Hawkeye almost expected to blink and find herself staring at Roy, his dark eyes half-lidded and grave. For someone who had very little to say, Priam was easy to talk to: his straightforward manner of speaking, combined with his scrutinising gaze, made hidden thoughts fall from her lips; without Roy, it was not something Riza was familiar or comfortable with. Though, in that moment, the large man's understanding made her thankful.

Finally, Priam raised an eyebrow and crossed his bulging forearms.

"You are, ain't you?" he murmured. "Tryin' to get yourself even more 'urt..."

"Yes." She mitigated the harsh monosyllable with a small, sad smile. "Priam," said Riza gently; she cast a glance down at her leg, "I can't escape on my own with these injuries. But I won't remain here for Bates to use me to control the General."

He shook his head, wiry black hair flying everywhere. "So you're just gonna give up?"

"This isn't giving up. This is as brave as I know how to be. A man once said to me, a long time ago, that while death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a person, it is wrong to fear it as though it is the greatest of evils. Perhaps, now that that Gate is open, it's high time I listened to the wisdom the dead have to offer us." She sighed. "Nobody plays this life with marked cards... know when to remember... and when to let go."

"But what about 'im?" asked Priam shrewdly. He didn't have to specify who.

Riza felt a taut pain in her chest that did not come from the broken ribs. "It will break his heart, I think. And there is nothing I can do to stop that."

"With you dead n'gone, what's your commander gonna do to the rest of the world?"

Her head fell back. "He will scream," she said softly. "He will rage. He will burn and in doing so he'll try to burn everyone else right along with him. But..." Riza closed her eyes, and for a moment, she imagined she saw their faces, smiling down at her, as though they had left impressions on the insides of her eyelids: mousy, kind Kain Fuery; brilliant Vato Falman; loyal and laughing Jean Havoc; unwontedly wise Heymans Breda. Nodding to her in affirmation.

"They'll save him," she breathed. "He has never been alone. And he never will be."

"You seem so certain."

"I have to be."

"Why?" asked Priam pointedly. "General Mustang is one man. Perhaps, with the 'elp of the Risen,
'e coulda become more, but until then, 'e is as mortal as the rest o'us."

"Because, Priam, we love that man for what he is, just as much as we love him for what he has the potential to become." And I love him for what he has always been, thought Riza, surprising herself with the silent admission, though she supposed it was nothing new. Not really. Long-dormant, perhaps.

From the moment he stepped across my father's threshold twenty years ago.

"How touching."

Pythos — Dr. Bates — sauntered down the cellar steps, the slight figure of Atreus slinking after him. Riza's hands fisted in the sheets. Though Priam continued to scowl, Hawkeye noted a few more lines in his shirt as his shoulders tensed. Anyone else would have missed it, but Riza was far too well acquainted with watching someone's back to let the physical anxiety slip by unnoticed.

From the neck down, Pythos cut an unassuming figure, dressed in a rumbled collared shirt, a jaunty bowtie, and sports jacket, still wearing, Riza noticed, those awful brogue shoes. The facade of demure university professor ended at his eyes, which seemed in the shadowy half-light of the basement to glisten yellow, without white or pupil, as polished as amber glass and far colder. His narrow teeth were a similar colour, scraping his gums as he spoke as though trying to bite through his words:

"You may be more right then you know, Miss Hawkeye," he said, referring to her subordinates' loyalty to their superior. "I just received a rather distressing call from Cassandra out in Mishaari."

Riza's chest tightened, the reflex making her ribs ache, before she heard Atreus muttering to himself, "He's gone he's gone he's gone he's gone..." over and over, as regular as a metronome. The boy rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet.

"What does he mean," queried Riza shakily, ignoring the fact that Pythos was probably dying for her to ask that very question, "'he's gone?'"

"Roy Mustang has done a runner," said Professor Bates airily. He didn't sound nearly as put-out as Riza thought the situation warranted, which did nothing to divert the undercurrent of danger. In fact, it did quite the opposite. "Apparently, one of the alchemists who joined the envoy on the train is something of an expert in vulcanism. She created a distraction which enabled the erstwhile General and his men to escape our custody."

Vulcanism... Hawkeye's dream reared unbidden from the hinterland of her thoughts and her stomach lurched. She almost imagined him standing just shy of Pythos's shoulder, cackling at the sheer poetry of her predicament.

"Major Miké from Central is with them?" murmured Riza. And helping them.

"They've holed themselves up in one of the ruins," Pythos went on, his voice still scant of any discernible concern, "and several of the soldiers have acquired weapons."

Riza smiled grimly. "Somehow I suspect you don't sound so pleased on my behalf, Doctor?"

Pythos sighed one of his deep sighs. "Don't get me wrong, my dear, I am pleased. The Mishaari Temple is precisely where we meant to lure Roy Mustang in the first place. The ruin contains the very Gate we intend to harness for our purposes. In a way, the General has done half of the logistical work for us. We intend to starve your men out. We have waited years for this moment; we can wait afford to wait a little longer..."
"Then, of course, there's the matter of you..." Pythos sidled around the perimeter of the room; Riza was suddenly very thankful for Priam's staunch presence at her bedside. Even the addition of gibbering Jin Hakuro was preferable to the singularity of Bates's lascivious company.

"You were our insurance," he elaborated quietly. "Our means of controlling General Mustang. With your commanding officer out of our reach for the time being, you've ceased to hold any more strategic value, Miss Hawkeye."

"Captain," she snarled, spittle flying from her lips.

"Well, Captain, with the General being more than a mere phone call away, we — that is to say, I — could do something unspeakable to you before shooting you between the eyes and your commanding officer would be none-the-wiser."

"Don't expend your creative energies on my account, Doctor," Riza snapped, "if you're going to kill me, then kill me. Don't waste my time."

"But if your insightful conversation with Priam was any indication," Bates went on unhindered, yellow eyes glittering, "dying is precisely what you want. No... how I'll amuse myself until Cassandra breaches the Temple depends."

"On what?"

"On you." Pythos moved closer, until he was just inches from her bedside. Riza tensed and her leg seized with pain, making her grit her teeth against a gasp. A few freckles disappeared into the dusting of scruff on the man's jaw as he leaned over her. "I'll be gentle," he added. Hawkeye's breath caught in her throat as he looked at her from beneath his long lashes.

Riza narrowed her eyes at him. "You're evil."

In response, Pythos smiled, and raised his finger to gently tap the tip of her broken nose. "And you're mine," he said, then retreated to the wall where Atreus crouched.

"What do you intend to do with 'er?" rumbled Priam, surprising Riza.

"In truth, Priam, I haven't yet decided. Although," Pythos pondered, fiddling with a button on his jacket, "it seems, my friend, if I read your intentions correctly, you are no longer interested in the truth the Risen have shown you, the purpose they have given you."

"I don't care about 'er or 'er soldiers," growled Priam, jerking a thumb towards Riza. "But... Jin needs to see a doctor. That there is a truth that knows no allegiance."

Pythos leant against the wall, his head falling back, one hand playing absently with Atreus's blonde curls, "I am reminded of an old Xerxian legend. The one where the stupid girl opens the box that God gave her, and all the evils of the world fly out, except Hope," he burlesqued the word with a drawl, "which stays at the bottom. I trust you both know the story?"

Priam and Riza said nothing, though the adrenaline had begun to course through the Captain's body with frightening efficacy, making her pulse thrum...

Pythos sighed. "I always wondered what Hope was doing in there in the first place, in with all the bad things. Then, just recently, in fact, the answer came to me, and now wonder only how I could've been so blind to the truth. You see, Hope is in the box because it, too, is evil... probably the worst of all evils. So heavy with malice and pain that it couldn't be bothered to drag itself out of the box."
"I know that story, Mr. Pythos!" cried Atreus, tugging at the older man's coattails. "A tiny bug burrowed in the brains of all mankind. And he gave them all a big buggy smile in thanks for his freedom and flew away. That tiny bug was named Hope. And Hope made all the difference in the world!"

"Yes," said Pythos softly, stroking Jin's hair.

"He did."

Then the pistol was in Dr. Bates's hand and a bullet spat through the air, a streak of red in the darkness. It hit the Priam in the chest, propelling him backward in an awkward cartwheel. The man dropped heavily. For a few seconds he looked up at the ceiling as though trying to stare through it, to admire the night sky one last time. Then his eyes glazed over, and he saw nothing at all.

The scream that rent the air was as loud as an air-raid siren, almost primal in it raw intensity. It didn't sound like Jin was pausing long enough to breathe. The boy went beet red in the face, his cobalt blue eyes pouring tears, banging his fists into the ground until his knuckles began to bleed. Pythos had a resigned look about him that made Riza want to scream right along with General Hakuro's child. Without a word, the older man pistol-whipped Atreus in the temple, sending the slight figure sprawling. The boy's head smacked against the floor with a dull thud and he didn't move again.

"He just..." Riza mouthed silently; she didn't realise she was crying until she tasted salt on her lips. She trembled violently. "He just wanted to help the child..."

Pythos spun the pistol around one finger, hissing slightly as the hot barrel brushed his skin. "My dear... I did help him. I kept Hope at the bottom of the box."

"You're inhuman," she seethed through clenched teeth, her eyes streaming.

"Everyone gets dehumanised, Miss Hawkeye... everyone." He began to roll up his sleeves. "But here's the rub, my dear: that act of dehumanisation induces psychopathy. It's like a positive feedback loop, a phenomenon amplified by its own effects. We aren't born to be that way, I don't think. The Creators gave us a soul given to holding on to such things as truth and honour. We are supposed to stay noble, be kind, think critically and, of course, be brave. The only other option is to be complicit in the same psychopathy we rail against; if you do that, my love, not even I can save you. Being the angel of your better nature is your only true defence. There is no manual for this stuff, I suppose, because psychopaths subvert written rules, yet the power of love is creative and flexible. And that, Riza Hawkeye, that's how we win." He threw her a strangely euphoric look that ended with a wink as he stalked towards her, his discoloured teeth grinding against his cheek.

Pythos rubbed the boney stalk of Riza's spine through her shirt, down to where the flesh thickened and became soft. She whipped her head around and tried to bite his hand.

Riza tried to shift away from him, tried to drag her splinted leg across the cot after her but Bates caught her shoulder, holding her in place. His grip wasn't particularly tight, but the downward press of his fingers into her clavicle made her abdomen grind together, eliciting sharp, staccato bursts of pain from her ribs until she couldn't breathe properly.

Pythos rubbed the boney stalk of Riza's spine through her shirt, down to where the flesh thickened and became soft. She whipped her head around and tried to bite his hand.

He pressed the heel of his palm into her cheek, forcing her head to the side and exposing her throat. He moved in so close she could feel his lean, long body pressed against her side. His mouth caressed her neck, slow and gentle.
Riza shivered. Her feelings felt muted in her; in a sequence of uncharacteristically poor planning, her mind dulled by the pain of her broken, things had somehow come to this without her really considering. She tried to think of something to say, but couldn't.

She closed her eyes. Get out, she begged. Get out.

Something knocked against the hematoma in her right leg — a knee, a hand, she didn't know — and white light exploded behind her eyes. The pain was like molten ore in her nerve endings, her mind swimming in a fog-filled nothing. If she concentrated, for a moment she was able to resolve the swirling mist into substantive shapes before they slipped away. She thought she saw a hand, a smile, a stare, the curve of a hip or a shoulder or a pistol swimming in front of her eyes before dissolving back into the ash-grey veils.

She thought she heard voices, heard screaming, but the sounds seemed to be coming from far, far away. Her head fell against her shoulder, her gaze drifting to the floor, to Priam's gold-green eyes, staring at everything and seeing nothing, partially obscured behind a pair of cracked spectacles.

Riza felt a force of impact through her sternum, a grunt grating in her ear. As a weight slipped from her body, she thought she saw a pale, ringleted oval swimming in front of her face, a pair of over-bright blue eyes and blonde hair, before a voice whispered:

"The last thing to come out of the box was Hope," said the voice, "and Hope flew away..."
Act VII Scene II: Being in Nothingness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

War of Attrition

Stalemate.

Otherwise known as a deadlock, thought Breda gloomily, his mouth set in a grim line.

A position in which no action can be taken or progress made.

In chess, a situation where the player, though not yet placed in check, has no legal move. The rules provide that when stalemate occurs, the game ends as a draw.

Heymans Breda didn't play for draws. He never had — no one had ever left a stalemated game feeling in any way pleased with himself or satisfied with his performance. Draws were, in Breda's modest opinion, a waste of time. All the same, it seemed as though Stokes and her lot had resolved themselves to denying him any say in the matter. Chess and shōgi, at least, were manageable, manipulatable. Trying to wrest some semblance of control from the likes of Stokes, on the other hand, was like trying to herd cats.

Still, the chess-like strategic planning and move-by-move evaluation of threats and defences held no small bearing on their current predicament. Despite their overwhelming numbers, the Professor and her people hadn't decided to storm the temple grounds. The archeologists hadn't broken the stalemate with either gunfire or a request for negotiation. They seemed perfectly content to bide their time in their cozy little tents as the Amestrian forces stood around like so many spare lemons.

As he killed time, ruminating, Breda's mind drifted to another military tactic: attrition warfare.

Stokes had the material resources of the entire Mishaari excavation site at her disposal. Mustang and the rest of them didn't have so much as a ration bar. Heymans didn't need to be a strategic genius to recognise an attenuation gambit when he saw it — a belligerent attempt to win a war by wearing down the enemy to the point of collapse. All Stokes had to do was twiddle her thumbs for a few days and necessity would force their surrender. Even if their two state alchemists transmuted water in some shape or form or they resorted to boiling their leather boots, Breda knew Kain Fuery's precarious medical situation wouldn't hold under full sanctions.

They had, decided Heymans grumpily, been in more favourable situations.

Since he didn't anticipate Stokes shifting her arse anytime soon, Breda surveyed his surroundings for the umpteenth time. Lieutenant Ross flanked Mustang's left side and he flanked Major Mikē's right. The four of them stood straddled to a point, the two alchemists positioned the closest to the Mishaari encampment. Aside from the occasional flutter of canvas from the wind, movement was scarce. Night had fallen fast. The shadows cast by the crater ridge eclipsed the basin darkness. A few pinpricks of light from billie fires and lanterns dotted Stokes's encampment. Feldspar's moats simmered molten red in the gloom, illuminating the arcade and the temple, but precious little else.

Breda scrubbed a hand over his face, and in doing so, found himself looking towards the sky. The high, yellow clouds had cleared late in the evening, and pressed against the blackness of the night,
the stars burned with a brilliant sapphire pallor. He stood and watched for a while, the matte black constellated with millions of motes of white and blue, a never ending void of light that projected no means of guidance in his eyes. A part of Heymans envied people who could read the stars, make sense of the complicated configurations. Below a girdle of purple dust, the blacked-out hillside, its sandy roughness, had been reduced to a clean, flat shape, dissolving into the shadows of the desert night. It was, he thought, a bit like looking at a snowy postcard: the world seemed cleaner, somehow. Still and uncomplicated and spartan.

“Hey… look there.”

Suddenly, Marie was at his side, pointing towards the northern sky. He glanced sidelong at Roy and the Major, but neither one of them seemed to notice Ross's break in formation, or if they did, didn’t care enough to voice a reprimand. Heymans certainly wasn’t complaining.

“It's Polaris.”

Heymans looked up dutifully. “Oh yeah...” he hummed to himself. "I actually know that one."

"It's weird... seeing the northern constellations all the way out here in the desert."

He shrugged. “I suppose it's something to do with being a guide star n’all. It's gotta be consistent.”

“Consistent... I guess you're right. Polaris will be waiting for us there when we're old and have experienced a lifetime of joys and regrets.” There was a wistful note in Ross's words. “That fact alone makes me feel like one very insignificant creature.”

Marie continued to stare at the sky, lost in her appraisal of it. Breda continued to stare at her.

"The trouble with the night sky," she murmured, looking, Heymans thought, terribly sad, "is there's so much of it. An ocean of blackness without any shore. And here we are, all alone in the million billion miles of midnight... one solitary moving speck. A fragile world filled with sleeping people and their dreams."

"Gives me vertigo," said Breda thickly, overcome suddenly with an emotion he couldn't quite name. He knew he ought to enjoy his brief respite — from the conflict with Stokes, from the rogue Gate hovering at his back. Even from the simple fact of having lived in a city his entire life, and never being blessed with the opportunity to lose himself in the firmament of a clear night sky.

But, in that moment, Heymans found he was perfectly content watching the woman next to him.

Her emotions, as always, were not easily hidden on her face. Despite the wonder she took in gazing at the stars, her anxiety was evident in the crease of her brow and the down-curve of her mouth. He supposed Maria Ross's wide eyes and undefended thoughts had a common provenance in a quiet, resilient grace. Suddenly, despite their predicament, despite the weight of the stolen gun in his hand and the Hawkeye-shaped hole in his heart, Breda was struck by how beautiful it all was, him and Marie, fixed in that layered landscape, standing together amidst a darkness broken only by the pale refraction of the stars.

He knew it was the tactician in him talking, but he'd always thought of affection as something of an agreement, a treaty between two nations that a person could either sign or not as they pleased. Hopeless romance of the Jean Havoc variety always struck him as being terribly careless and disorientating, like walking up a staircase in the dark only to find an empty space where you expected a last step, leaving only the time it took to hit the floor to chastise yourself. It made him strangely anxious, that prospect of free-fall.
Jean couldn't understand — he *revelled* in it, despite its leaving him forlorn and dejected. Vato would probably understand, being a stringent pragmatist himself, but Breda knew the Second Lieutenant had all the emotional intuition of a telephone pole. He didn't think Kain, bless him, knew enough of the world and its cruelties to form an opinion on the matter, and Heymans knew better than to broach the topic with Mustang or Hawkeye.

Looking back on it, he realised nothing monumental had happened. The earth hadn't trembled like one of Major Miké's eruptions. Lightning didn't strike. There had been no cosmic portends. It had been quiet. It had been subtle. Maybe it had happened in the Great Desert. Maybe it had happened at the radio station during the Promised Day. Whatever the case, it *had* happened, and it had been unbridled and undeniable.

I'm in love with this girl, Heymans said to himself, not quite believing it, because he knew it was a life-changing thing and life-changing things ought to remain fixed in his thoughts, should have a moment of their own in time, some molecular structure to make them real.

I'm in love with this girl.

The words reverberated inside his head. And it was the truth, he realised.

How stupid of me, thought Heymans sadly. How careless.

"Marie..." he mumbled.

"Hmm?"

"Stars look nice tonight."

"Yeah..." she smiled at him. "Yeah, they do."

He bit the inside of his cheek, ran his thumb agitatedly over the catch of the gun safety. "Look..." he tried to dredge up every scrap of his articulative ability but damn it all if his tongue didn't feel like it'd been stung by a scorpion.

"What is it? See something?"

"Nah." He shrugged. Then, before he could stop himself: "Just been meaning to ask you something about ancient art."

Ross's eyebrows pinched together. "Bit of an odd time, isn't it?"

He snorted, jerking his hand over his shoulder. "We're guarding an ancient Xerxian temple."

She chuckled. "Touché. Okay then, what is it you wanted to ask?"

"I 'member you saying, before, about ancient architecture and that sort of thing being a bit of a hobby of yours."

"I'm surprised you remember that, to be honest."

"It was only this afternoon."

"Yes, but it was a *busy* afternoon."

"In any case..." he pressed on before he lost his nerve, "there's an exhibition on maiolica and Auerogonian Renaissance ceramics at the University of Central's Museum of Anthropology. I hear
they got the only white ground lekythos in all of Amestris. Maybe, if we get outta here, and Stokes
don't manage to turn the Boss into some cult's god, and we get Hawkeye back, and we don't all die
horrible deaths... we could visit."

Marie gave him a measured look. Breda became peculiarly conscious of her standing next to him.
"Heymans..." she began gently.

"What are you two nattering on about?"

_Damnit._

Breda fought the urge to round on Major Miké in a rage. "Nothing, sir," he managed through
gritted teeth. So kindly go the fuck away, please and thank you, he thought furiously.

Heymans didn't know what the crane-like alchemist took out of 'nothing,' but her eyebrows arched
until the Lieutenant thought they'd vanish under her hairline. If Marie's gaze was pensive, the
Major's was downright probing. Her habit of staring without blinking made Breda feel as though
she was looking right through him, from eyes to skin to skull and every thought lodged in-between.

"Well," said Miké drily, electing — wisely, Breda thought — not to press the matter further,
"General Mustang was wondering what you two were doing breaking formation. We're not out of
the proverbial woods yet, Lieutenants Two."

Maria sighed, shifting her weight to one leg. "With respect, sir, we've been standing out here for
hours and nothing has happened."

Breda looked past the Major's shoulder, towards the solitary figure on the other side of the arcade.
"Did the Boss ask you to check on us or somethin', sir?" he asked astutely.

Feldspar spared a glance towards Flame. In the near-darkness of the night, with only the stars
offering some small light, her eyes seemed more like empty sockets, holes without a bottom.
Heymans suppressed a shudder at the mental image.

Miké lowered her voice, until the Lieutenants had to strain to hear her: "In truth, Ross... Breda... he
didn't ask me to check on anything. He hasn't said a word since the _Muhaddith_ and Major Miles
left Mishaari. It's getting to be a wee bit disconcerting." She grumbled, "The man's intimidating
enough as it is..."

"He's tired, Major," said Breda, trying to tell himself that if he said the words convincingly, he
might even believe them. "And he's lost his sight again... at least for the time being. It's kinda a lot
to process."

Major Miké weighed on him, until Heymans was almost certain he felt a press on his shoulders. He
couldn't stop a dry swallow, although standing out in the sun all day without food or water made
the motion go down like cinnamon.

"Are you quite sure that's the only reason, Lieutenant?" queried Feldspar softly. Ross's dark eyes
darted between them like she was watching a table tennis match.

Damn the Major, thought Breda, again. While he'd grudgingly acknowledged his mistake in
suspecting Sofia Bel Miké of being behind the attack on the train, he couldn't completely dispel his
unease whenever she exercised that uncanny insight of hers. Breda prided himself on playing
things close to the vest, but for all the mystery he presented to Major Miké, he may as well have
been advertising his apprehensions in red felt tip across his forehead.
"He's worried about Captain Hawkeye," Heymans found himself admitting, not quite realising he'd said the words aloud until Miké gave a curt little nod.

"I thought he might be," she said. She made sure they were well out of earshot before murmuring, bending her head low for Marie's benefit, "The General, of course, has been understandably tight-lipped about the subject, but from what little Major Miles elected to divulge before his departure, the Captain, it seems, has landed herself in fairly dire straits."

There was a long, heavy silence. Each hushed breath seemed to fall like dirty pebbles into the sand, still hot from the day's sun. Breda looked around at the faces of both his friend and his superior, how the tightness of their jaws and shoulders were reflected in one another. His own belly had become tight and his usually schooled, undemonstrative expression was reluctant to decorate his face. The thought of those... *animals* laying so much as an errant finger on Riza made his blood boil. And if Breda and the rest of them were angry, Heymans couldn't begin to imagine how the Boss was feeling.

Well, Breda admitted to himself, he could imagine very well. But the prospects that presented themselves frightened him so much he immediately tried to put them out of his mind.

"Hawkeye can handle herself," said Breda gruffly, not quite invested in his own conviction. He pressed on regardless: "But she's... I mean, her and the General..." Heymans hesitated to say more, mindful of the metaphorical thin ice under his boots.

"I think I understand," said Miké gently. "Captain Hawkeye is a fine officer and, in truth, something of an exemplary human being. I know you all must feel her loss acutely. It's quite like losing an extremity. Even after a while, I imagine one still feels the pain of the phantom limb."

Breda shook his head viciously. "She's not gone for good," he growled. "She's *not*." His shoulders slumped. "She can't be..."

"I trust the *Muhaddith* and Major Miles to bring her back," the Feldspar Alchemist assured him. "In the meantime, it's our responsibility to ensure the Captain has a Flame Alchemist to return to, no?"

"What else can we do?" asked Ross tiredly. "We're a bit stuck at the moment, sir. No one's shooting at us, that's true, but it's only a matter of time before they manage to starve us out. And if Fuery's condition worsens in any way... they won't even have to wait *that* long."

"Can't the Boss use that clap alchemy of his to clear us a path outta here?" Breda considered for a moment and amended hurriedly, "Provided someone served as his eyes."

"Young Master Elric has already suggested that," said Major Miké. "Unfortunately, my tectonic alchemy has rendered the surrounding area quite unstable. Putting the earth under too much pressure at this stage might trigger a chain reaction which could very well solve our Professor Stokes problem. Of course, the rest of us wouldn't be alive long enough to be glad of the fact."

"Point taken," grumbled Breda. He heaved a deep sigh, refusing to meet his superior's eye. "Sir, with your permission, I'll take your position at point for a while. It'd probably make more sense for you to monitor the periphery, where you can keep an eye on your little moat."

The Major hummed to herself. "If you're quite sure, Lieutenant..."

"Yeah. See if I can't figure something out with the General."

Before Ross or Miké could raise any objections or, more likely, try to talk him out of it, Breda stalked off, making a beeline for the lone figure at the westernmost edge of the courtyard.
Mustang was silhouetted black against the backdrop of stars, and without his trademark ignition cloth gloves or even his uniform pressed to immaculate perfection, he looked small and vulnerable. He was adrift again, Breda realised, too distant for any of them to reach. The bond he had shared with his adjutant had been a bridge out of his fortressed mind — it had, in some ways, allowed him to set foot outside the protective compound of his own thoughts. Now Riza was gone and the bridge had been burned. Now, no matter how many people surrounded him, Roy Mustang was a man alone. Breda may as well try to fling a clothesline across the gap for all the difference it would make.

Though he didn't turn to watch the Lieutenant's approach, Roy's head shifted ever so slightly, tracking the soft press of Breda's boots in the sand. As he drew level to the Flame Alchemist, Heymans could see the little grains of starlight glancing off his grey, opaque irises, as though there was an entire universe trapped inside his head. Boundless space bound within those two snuffed-out eyes.

"How long, exactly, do you intend for us to stand around out here, sir?" asked Breda gruffly, not wasting his time or Mustang's with niceties.

Roy looked everywhere but at Heymans's face. If the Lieutenant didn't know any better, he would have thought Mustang was avoiding something, like if he looked at his underling head-on, something would snap and he'd either slap him or break down in tears. Breda wasn't exactly sure which he would prefer.

"We can watch for Scar and Miles's return," said Mustang instead, his voice rough and abrasive from disuse. "And we can serve as the last line of defence for Fullmetal. We'll stay out here as long as we have to."

"You know she's not tryin' to drive us outta here, Roy," said Breda with strained patience, nodding in Stokes's direction. "We can't just sit around and wait for Kain to mend himself, or for the Chief to muddle through all our problems with his alchemy flimflam, or for Armstrong's second to bring Hawkeye back. None of those things are guaranteed. If we place all our bets on possibilities and uncertainties, we run the risk of vegetating here until we starve or Fuery looses the leg."

Roy's blindness did nothing to mitigate the potency of his glare. He fixated on his subordinate. "Uncertainties, Heymans?"

Breda's heart hammered in his ears. He'd hedged himself into a corner; though Breda would rather it be him than anyone else, it did nothing to make the forthcoming task any easier...

"Sir," he began, carefully, "look... we gotta consider the possibility that Captain Hawkeye isn't coming back."

Heymans heard rather than saw the man's knuckles crunch. The Lieutenant braced himself for the blow, hoping, bizarrely, that Marie wasn't watching him, wouldn't see him get his ass beat by a blind man several stone lighter than him. The only other time Mustang had ever landed a hit on him — something having to do with Maes's stag night that Breda still couldn't pick out from the drunken film reel of debauchery — the bastard'd struck Heymans so hard his gums bled.

But the punch never came.

"I know."

Breda hazarded a glance at Mustang. When Roy sighed he jutted his bottom lip out, redirecting his breath to his flyaway bangs. For that brief moment, his black hair fanned upwards before resettling
just over his eyes. The sound was resigned and weary. It signalled the end of the man's deliberate effort and the beginning of some passive deterioration, its movement dissipating into the vastness of the desert.

Breda decided he would have preferred the punch.

"I know," said Roy again, shakily, not so much as a particle of his glory-hounding bravado left in the words. "She..." he had to steady himself, "she ceased to be of any use to them when Major Miké launched her counteroffensive. With no value as a hostage..." Mustang's adam's apple bobbed up and down.

Breda's throat felt raw and tight. "Roy..."

"I don't know what to do," he breathed desperately. He dropped his head into his hands. "I don't think I can do this without her. I can't afford to lose her, Heymans, I can't. It will... it will..."

"It will hurt like fucking hell," said Breda firmly, a taste like vinegar in his mouth. "I know, sir... I know. Kain and Vato and Jean and I, even Ed... we all love that woman. You don't get past something like that... but you get through it. Shit doesn't stop happening just because it stopped happening for us. Life goes on. The world keeps turning, the seconds keep ticking."

"But what if I don't want them to..." the man whispered hoarsely. The hand fell away, and tired eyes drifted towards him. Not for the first time, Breda was genuinely worried. He had never seen Mustang look quite so lost.

The Lieutenant felt strangely numb, like he was sitting in the audience of some theatre of cruelty, watching people get butchered onstage. He stared at Mustang, and didn’t find the Flame Alchemist's eyebrows knitted in an anguished glare, or his mouth set in a rigid snarl, like he’d expected. Instead, the General's face was blank, his blind eyes wide with an almost apocalyptic fear. Heymans's eyes levelled on Mustang’s and the latter's gaze attempted to smooth out into some semblance of composure, but the effort came too slowly.

"That's enough of that kinda talk, sir," said Breda, in a tone that brooked no argument.

Mustang, as per goddamn usual, didn't get the hint. "Heymans—"

"Listen to me, Roy... we're soldiers." He swallowed thickly. "We've all had that moment where we've been forced to come to terms with the fact that life takes far more than it gives back. It's a thing made of holes. Absences. Losses. Things that were once here and ain't any more. And along with that realisation comes some understanding that we gotta grow around and between the gaps. We have to..." Heymans pinioned Roy with his eyes, "otherwise we're as good as dead, ourselves."

But Breda knew, in some distant part of him, he knew that sometimes, there was no getting over it. There were people who lived with the emptiness inside of them until it imploded, like a singularity, until the grief expanded and hollowed out the rest of them so thoroughly they became something like a ghost in their own lives. A human-shaped absence in the world.

Heymans knew... and he understood what Riza Hawkeye's loss would do to Roy Mustang. And it sliced Breda's insides to ribbons to think there was nothing he could do to stop it. That, just as their love strengthened them, it would just as quickly destroy them.

"No matter what happens, Roy," said Breda quietly, "no matter what has happened... Miles will bring her home."

"Miles..." Mustang laughed raggedly. "Am I so useless that I have to rely on Olivier's dogs for
Breda clucked his tongue against his teeth. "She will never let you hear the end of it, sir. 'Sides, you're not useless. Ain't raining out here."

Mustang inclined his head, gazing into a nighttime sky he couldn't see. Breda thought his long neck, a shocking white in the starlight, looked altogether too vulnerable; it seemed to encourage catastrophe to take the General from them just as it'd taken Hawkeye.

Breda caught a glimmer of white just to the right of Mustang's shoulder, a shining mote hanging low on the horizon, almost brushing the ridge of the Mishaari Basin. A comet, perhaps, or sand stirring in the starlight.

The Lieutenant frowned... realising, abruptly, the light was coming from the ridge of the basin, glinting like the reflection of sun on a polished rifle bolt...

Breda's heart shot into his throat. "Roy, get down!"

Without waiting for his superior to rouse himself into action, Heymans grabbed the back of Mustang's neck and drove him into the ground, the man spluttering and gasping as his mouth filled with sand. Breda leapt on top of him as a punctuated stream of bullets snicked through the air over his head.

"Sniper fire!" hissed Heymans, his knee in Roy's back, holding him down. "What the fuck—"

The gunfire stopped as quickly as it began, though he made no move to stop shielding the General. Then he heard someone cry out from the other side of the arcade. Breda's face went chalk white.

"Marie!" he bellowed. Please no, he thought furiously, his mind going blank, the air suddenly feeling far too cold, his skin erupting in gooseflesh. Please please please please please...

"The Major's been hit!" cried Lieutenant Ross, and though he hated himself for it, Breda felt a surge of relief.

"Lieutenant Breda, what's going on?" bellowed Roy from under his elbow, spitting sand. Of course, Heymans remembered abruptly: the Flame Alchemist couldn't see...

"Seems Stokes finally grew a pair," Breda relayed hurriedly, without a trace of irony in the words. "There's a sniper up on the southern ridge. Feldspar's taken a hit, but I don't know how bad she's hurt."

"I'm alright," croaked Major Miké hoarsely. Breda released the breath he'd been inadvertently holding in, then: "Ah... wait a moment. No, I'm not. No I'm not, General. One of those bullets went straight through my hand."

As Breda pulled Roy to his feet and shuffled him across the arcade, the former kept a firm arm across the latter's back, Mustang went rigid, his muscles seizing under Heymans's grip. "Her hand..."

"Either that gunmen has crap aim or aim that'd give Riza a run for her money," said Breda. To his relief, he saw Ross likewise guiding her superior towards the safety of the temple, shielding the Major's vitals with her shoulders and back.

Roy growled, "You were right the second time."
"How's that?"

When he glanced down at him, Breda thought the Flame Alchemist was trying to grin, but Roy's barred teeth looked feral, almost predatory, in the darkness. The gesture held about as much mirth as a shark before he takes a chunk out of your leg. "They were waiting for this," Mustang hissed. "During the day, we would have spotted a nest from our position, and given a little direction, I could have cremated the bastards. They waited until nightfall to make their move."

"And what move is that exactly, sir?" huffed Heymans, guiding Roy between the two massive pylons and into the narrow antechamber, their breaths echoing noisily against the ancient stone.

"Major Miké was the only one who presented any legitimate threat."

"And they just shot out her hands," finished Breda grimly. "Those transmutation circles tattooed on her palms, just like her brother's... her alchemy is useless."

"And we're completely defenceless."

"Awesome. Superb. We're really up shit creek now, aren't we, sir?"

"In so many words..."

They emerged into the elevated, enclosed sanctuary. Heymans remembered the general layout of Xerxian hypostyle halls from his few visits to archeological museums: vast covered rooms filled with columns. Whereas the outside of the temple was elaborately decorated with reliefs and free-standing sculptures, aside from the columns, the main chamber was surprisingly spartan. The walls were completely blank, the smooth monotony of the marble surface broken only by the occasional abrasion or crack from years of erosion. Scar had lashed together a makeshift care centre for Fuery in one corner — the kid, though unconscious, seemed to be resting comfortably for the time being, which made Breda breathe a little easier. Ed and Falman had erected a ring of lanterns around the periphery of the temple; even so, the far side of the chamber remained shrouded in darkness, as though the lamplight was too weak to reach it.

No... Breda realised, slowly releasing his grip on the General. The far side of the chamber wasn't just shadowed: there was no light getting through in any capacity. Under a crumbling archway — which, even by ancient archeological standards, looked barely passible as a purposive piece of architecture — was a narrow oval of absolute blackness, like a sheet absorbing all the radiation in the visible light spectrum. Breda felt his stomach lurch at the sight of it. It felt... wrong, somehow — a distortion that stridently differed from objective reality.

That's must be the cause of all this, affirmed Heymans to himself.

That's must be the Gate.

With his usual tact and finesse, Ed Elric bellowed: "What the hell is going on?" Noticing Marie and Feldspar, his expression fell. "Major, what happened—?"

Breda caught a glimpse of Mike's left hand. It had been a clean shot, at least, the bullet passing straight through her metacarpals and exiting through the palm. The injury didn't look too dissimilar to Roy's hands after Bradley kebabed them during the Promised Day. But, Breda noted, where before there had been an intricate alchemic array tattooed in red across Sofia's skin, there was only a ragged bullet hole and clotted blood.

"I let my guard down," hissed the alchemist, gritting her teeth as Maria began to clean the dirt and sand from the wound. "Professor Stokes doesn't mean to merely starve us into submission... she has
accelerated our attrition by eliminating any chance we may have had of forcing our way out of the basin. Which, unfortunately, included hole-punching one of my arrays."

"Essentially rendering our only healthy state alchemist ineffective," grunted Breda, scratching at the back of his scalp in agitation.

Ed's honey-coloured eyes looked closer to Riza's amber in the gloom. Breda was glad the Boss was blind to it. "You set off those eruptions using concentrated transmutation circles around the arcade," argued the Chief. "Couldn't you still use those?"

"Edward, the grids are focal points, but my hands are the throttles. I may be able to carve calderas into the earth but I can't make them erupt without the arrays on my palms to redirect the tectonic energy." Her shoulder slumped. "I'm sorry, gentlemen, Lieutenant Ross... I'm afraid I've become rather surplus to requirement."

"What about the moat, Major?" asked Roy urgently. "Do we still have our defences?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes, sir. However..." she hesitated for a moment, her voice growing low and gravely, sharpening the words on a grindstone, "I have no means of controlling the tectonic instabilities. Crossing the space between the peristyle court flanking the pylons and Stokes's encampment would be tantamount to navigating a minefield in a tank."

"Do ya mean to tell us..." Everyone looked over at a scruffy, sweaty, thoroughly unhappy Jean Havoc, his back propped up against the wall of the chamber, limp legs splayed out under him, a piece of straw hanging from his lip, "... that we're sitting in the middle of what's essentially a massive volcano?"

"You know, Lieutenant," said Major Miké wearily, "I was attempting to avoid using that particular wording."

"This day just keeps getting better and better," muttered Breda.

Edward trotted over to the Feldspar Alchemist. His right arm, Heymans noticed, still hung limply by his side, flopping against his hip like a slack length of rope.

"Are you all right, Major?" he asked carefully, eyeing the neat hole in her hand.

Sofia shook her head. "Nevermind about me, Edward," she insisted. "Have you worked out a way to close that Gate?"

Ed hazarded a glance towards the void pressed into the far wall, his attention confirming Breda's original suspicions. Vato hovered at a safe distance, his silver head bowed in thought as he passed back and forth around the peripheries.

"Space isn't the same near the Door," said Ed solemnly, looking to each of them in turn but lingering, Breda thought, on Roy, as though the Chief was sure the General could see him somehow, infer the gravity of the situation through the tone and inflection of his voice. "It's not a part of the rest of the architecture."

Breda nodded, resting his head on one closed fist. "Makes sense. This place is old, sure, but that archway looks ready to collapse if you so much as sneeze in its general vicinity."

"Exactly," agreed Ed. "It's almost... I don't know, primordial, somehow. The Door wasn't built into the temple. The temple was built to house the Door. We could level this place and I don't think that Gate would shift so much as a centimetre."
"From what intel we've received from our... source," began Major Miké; Breda frowned, a little leery of her intentionally vague choice of words, "this Door is more like a tear in the skin of the world than an alchemical gateway. It is, for all intents and purposes, a natural phenomenon. I suppose if one wished to preserve a rare species of plant, one would build a conservatory around it. If one wished to preserve a Portal of Truth, one would build a sanctuary in which to hide it from the scrutiny of the world."

"Not trying to come across as indelicate or anything," said Havoc, sounding like he intended just the opposite, "but all this seems to me like an awful fancy way of saying you two have no clue how we're gonna destroy this thing."

Maria Ross frowned. "Come on, Havoc..."

"No, he's right."

"Ed?"

Fullmetal huffed in frustration. "You know, despite everything that happened five years ago, we never actually figured out how to destroy a Gate of Truth. It never occurred to us, you know? But I reckon any firepower — figuratively or literally, General Matchstick — we try to throw at it, we'll just end up wasting precious time and resources. Mustang, you remember Gluttony, right?"

Roy's eyes narrowed. "He tried to kill me, Fullmetal. Of course I remember!"

"Sorry... you're old; not sure if the dementia's set in yet."

"Another time and place perhaps, Ed?" suggested Marie pleadingly.

"Fine... look, my point is," the Chief went on, ignoring the black looks Roy was shooting in his direction, "the Homunculus Gluttony had a Gate within its stomach, and no matter what stood in its path — the General's Flame Alchemy, a house, hell, even me and Ling — the fat bastard just swallowed it all up. Conventional weapons were useless against it, just as they're gonna be useless against this Door."

"Do you mean to suggest it's indestructible, Fullmetal?" growled Mustang.

Edward said nothing, electing to turn and face the Door instead, giving himself over to his thoughts.

The light from Falman's lanterns streamed through the goldthread of Ed's hair, making his entire head glow. As everyone watched him expectantly, Heymans couldn't help but think the chiaroscuroic shadow and shade made Ed look strangely seraphic. The Lieutenant could see the lines of tension in the boy's shoulders... the Fullmetal Alchemist immersed in thoughts that, were they visible, would probably present as irreconcilable an optical illusion to their eyes as the rogue Gate itself. Ed's mind was full of crazy chaotic turns and twists all coming together to form just one idea, just one word or formula. Though his calculations and introspections spun in ways that seemed without design or logic, without name or end, they always managed to dance their way back to understanding, to a blistering comprehension that almost burned the very intellectual quandaries they sought to deconstruct.

Suddenly, Ed mouthed something to himself. Breda didn't catch it.

"Fullmetal?" prompted Roy, frowning.

"All Doors open inwards," muttered Ed. "What could he have meant by that..."
Havoc, Ross, and Breda exchanged glances: they didn't have a clue what the kid was talking about. Par for course in dealing with the Elrics, but it didn't make it any less irritating. Even Mustang, no small alchemy prodigy himself, looked stumped.

Major Miké, on the other hand, sat up a little straighter, her eyes going wide. "I thought he was just being polemic," she said thoughtfully. "You don't think...?"

Ed nodded. "With him, there's always a double-meaning, right? Maybe... maybe he was telling us what we were supposed to do."

"Am I to take it this guy is your mysterious source?" interjected Breda, brow creasing in suspicion.

Ed snorted. "In a manner of speaking."

"Thanks, Chief. That clears everything up."

Roy tracked the sound left in the younger alchemist's wake as he sprinted back towards the Door. "Mind sharing your vaunted insight with the rest of us, Fullmetal?" he called after him.

"Behold, I have put before you an open Door which no one can shut;" Ed intoned solemnly; it took Breda a moment to realise the kid was reciting something. "Ask, and it shall be shown to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall open to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened."

To everyone's surprise, it was Falman whose head shot up. "Oh!" said the tall man brightly. "I think I understand now, Edward."

"Well, I don't!" grumped Havoc; not unusual in of itself, thought Breda, except this time, Heymans was in the very same boat. "What was that, an incantation or something?"

"No," said Vato, "it was a verse from the Sunda Kita, the Holy Book of Ishvalla."

"Our mutual friend gave us the answer, Major Miké!" cried Ed. "All Doors open inward, he said."

"I take it you know what we're supposed to do, don't you, Chief." Breda did not phrase it as a question.

"Yeah. We're not gonna destroy the Gate.

"We're gonna close it... from the inside."

Chapter End Notes

My Uni work involves astrophotography, so I felt star-inspired (starspired?) in this chapter. But... things are coming to a head! After the next interlude, there are only three chapters left! Just like the original manga, however, the final chapter will likely be quite a lot longer than its predecessors.

Also, how's that for foreshadowing? 'All Doors open inward' came all the way from Act III Scene II!
Oof, sorry about the delay; had a very rough few days of travel and the jet-lag was particularly unkind.

"You're looking very pleased with yourself, Actaeon."

The sniper threw her a smirk over one shoulder. "Hit the bitch right on the mark. Those transmutation circles were like fucking targets."

Winnie frowned, her face webbing in wrinkles. "My curiosity wasn't an excuse to be profane. Was it a clean shot?"

Actaeon was the sort of fellow Winnie would be pushed to describe as insouciant, heedless — oftentimes, far too much so, as though he had a serious aversion to taking anything, well... seriously. He thought of himself as being on good terms with everybody, whether they reciprocated his grating personality or not. Not a large man, not a young man, he nevertheless possessed a restless vitality that allowed him to affect some semblance of youth. In another life, he had been a drill sergeant for Eastern Polytechnic's Reserve Officers' Training Corps and something of a devotee of skeet shooting.

"Who cares if the shot was clean or not?" He let out an uncouth snort, which made Winnie squint at him critically. "So long as she can't use her alchemy, it shouldn't matter if I blew her hands clean off..."

Professor Stokes nodded slowly, her head bobbing like the drinking birdie she kept on the corner of her desk. Actaeon was a crude, arrogant snot, and he never seemed capable of sitting still, always buzzing with an energy Winnie, in her mature age, found exhausting. Regardless, he did his job effectively, and at the end of the day, he had not been invited on her crusade on account of his disposition. She needed him to shoot things, and shoot things he did.

Actaeon rubbed at his clean-shaven scalp, his voice coming out just the same as it did after a long weekend of smoking and boozing: "Truth be told, ma'am, I'm surprised the Oracle didn't retaliate."

"I'm not."

"How do you reckon that, then?" he asked, rather belligerently, the Professor thought.

"Consider where we are, Acteon."

"... Dairut?"

"Ishval," corrected Winnie patiently. Her expression turned pensive. "The last time Roy Mustang was in this country, he razed it to the ground. Though such recollections may at times be far from his thoughts, I can't imagine they're ever very far from his heart."
Actaeon made a small, dismissive noise. "The brown-nosing glory hound of Central City? The Hero of Ishval? You gotta be kidding me."

"I'm not given to making jokes," she said, her tone of voice making Actaeon’s mouth snap shut. "Besides, aside from clinically-diagnosed psychopaths, I have never met a veteran who thoroughly enjoyed killing. In my experience, if someone ends up bragging about slaughter, it is safe to assume either their story is mere fabrication, as I suspect is the case with Roy Mustang, or they are one bad day away from an inpatient psychiatric ward, like that Crimson Alchemist fellow. No matter how much someone — an enemy, a target, a combatant — may appear to deserve to be killed, something seems to dies within those soldiers who do the killing. It's contradictory, the antithesis of our species's survival instinct. And it tears them apart, poor things.

"I suspect the Flame Alchemist was, at a time, a broken man so lost in despondency that even if he did manage to find his way out of his self-made purgatory, he would never see, feel, taste, or touch life the same way again. Roy Mustang is terrified of those sensations — or rather, the lack of them — coming back to him."

Winnie relaxed her face, letting out a small sigh. Actaeon gave a malicious half smile, eyes narrowed.

"'Something dies within those soldiers who do the killing,' huh? Forgive my impudence, Professor, but that just ain't gonna wash with us."

"Well, yes, if we’re given to arguing particulars. Our perspective is far broader, you see. We understand that the Speaker of the Dead is an embodiment of everyone who has ever lived and everyone who has ever died. He is the Theoi incarnate. I suppose even a hundred, no, a thousand deaths doesn’t constitute a great loss when considered commiserate with the wealth of other lives and other selves contained within the Gate, does it? The Risen merely see a little further than most. In which case, I can't imagine our work aligns with Mustang's own ideals regarding the value of individual human lives."

"And you reckon the Elric brat feels the same way, huh?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Meddlesome little shit."

"For once, I'm inclined to agree."

Underestimating Edward Elric and his alchemist friend had been a serious error of judgement: the Fullmetal boy couldn't transmute a twig into a toothpick anymore, and Winnie had mistaken his lack of any martial alchemical ability for a unwillingness to actively avoid military entanglements. And while Professor Stokes was aware of Major Bel Miké’s station as part of Führer Grumman's personal entourage, the woman's alchemical specialty had been listed in the public record as metamorphic metamorphosis, the manipulation and transmutation of stone. Despite her state certification, she seemed more the scholar than the soldier. Even her moniker, Feldspar, sounded superficially benign. Nothing of her demeanour or titles had lead Stokes to suspect an alchemical praxis of such devastating destruction.

Remarkably, there had been no casualties among the Risen during the eruptions, whether due to sloppy planning on the part of the alchemist or an intentional aim to avoid a loss of life, Winnie couldn't say. But she had never been one to question the providence of the Theoi. Major Bel Miké's interference constituted a nuisance more than any real catastrophe. A nuisance because Mustang's men, along with Mustang himself, were for the moment out of her immediate reach. Moreover,
thought Winnie, not only had Miles and Mustang stolen away from her care, one of Mustang's pet poodles had managed to fetch the wounded communications officer, the scruffy little boy with the glasses. The lot of them were squirreled away safe in the Temple of the Theoi. However...

"Not only have they succeeded in trapping themselves within the heart of Mishaari," noted Winnie to no one in particular — she avoided talking to Actaeon when at all possible, "it seems in addition to rendering the Feldspar Alchemist useless, your shot drove them even further into the sanctuary."

"Do we want that, Cassandra?"

"The closer Roy Mustang is to the breach, the easier our job will become. Besides," she chuckled to herself, "I could do without his setting fire to all and sundry in Dairut. At least, trapped in close quarters with his officers, he'll behave himself."

Actaeon grunted. "Still think I shoulda shot her in the fucking head. Alchemist scumbags." He caught himself, eyes going wide. He stammered, "Ah... not all alchemists of course, Professor..."

Stokes tutted. "And what would shooting her leave us with, my boy? Likely one very upset Flame Alchemist throwing fireballs willy nilly across the whole basin! No," she affirmed, "his officers just needed a little nudge, a reminder of their situation. Feldspar and Fullmetal will get their comeuppance in due course."

"And what about the other chick?" asked Actaeon. "That Hawk lady."

Stokes sighed. "Truthfully, I don't really care what happens to her. She's been nothing but trouble. I'll probably let Pythos keep her... it's not as though it will make a very great difference to the General after his Ascension." Stokes smiled grimly. "Soon, Mustang's mind will be on higher things than his trite little affections."

"Give her to Pythos?" Actaeon chuckled, though the sound lacked any genuine levity. "That's not very nice at all."

"Man's got an itch, give him something to scratch. So long as it keeps him busy..."

She was interrupted by a shrill shout from the rim of the basin: "Professor! Cassandra!"

They turned to see Annika Cotte running towards them, her feet losing purchase on the loose, slippery dune. She stopped just short of their position, gasping for breath. Winnie realised the girl must have sprinted the length of the basin.

"What is it, Medea?" asked the Professor, concerned. "I thought I asked you to raise Dr. Bates on the field phone."

"I did, ma'am," the girl insisted, "I contacted him late this evening. And I told him about our situation with the Elric boy and the volcano alchemist. But..." she searched for the words, fiddling with the end of her shirt. Winnie noticed her buttons were done in the wrong holes.

"I have neither the time nor the patience for trifling, Medea," said Winnie sternly. "Tell me what's the matter."

"Well," her red eyes glistened with worry, "the Doctor said he'd ring us after he dealt with the General's girl, but I haven't heard anything back from him."

"Medea, you know he has a tendency to take his time with these things. If I were you, I'd leave him well enough alone for at least another few hours—"
"It's not just that!" she interrupted hurriedly; the girl looked immensely uncomfortable even skirting around the topic of Pythos's appetites, and the Professor could hardly blame her. Winnie allowed him his indulgences, but that didn't mean she had to like them.

"I mean," Annika went on, "I thought the same thing, and there's no way I'm gonna get anywhere near that. I was just gonna leave it, until one of our patrols at the edge of Dairut said they saw two men leaving the settlement late this evening, heading south."

"Two men?"

"Ishvalans. One was wearing the Amestrian skirt waist, the other was in full clerical garb." She swallowed. "Ma'am... they were making for Kanda."

Winnie bit down hard on her back teeth, rasping them, allowing herself to give in to steaming anger. "Ah, Major Miles," she muttered, picturing the soldier in her mind's eye, "you're a lovely young man, but your indomitable initiative does tend to irk me."


"And if the Major is indeed headed for Kanda, then it seems he received intelligence concerning the layout of the Ishvalan prefecture, which leads me to believe the Muhaddith took it upon himself to lend his assistance." Professor Stokes shook her grey curls. "How bothersome. I didn't bank on our resident alchemist killer having any real investment in the wellbeing of Amestris's finest. Another oversight on my part, it seems."

"What are we going to do?" grunted Actaeon from the ground, his rifle still trained on the temple, should any of Mustang's men try something less than amusing.

Professor Stokes schooled her expression. "We speed things up, of course."

"And Pythos?"

"All being well, Dr. Bates manages to have his fun before those two Ishvalans find him. If not..." Stokes tucked her hands into her knit sweater pockets, fishing around for her supplies. "At least the Theoi will have shown Miss Hawkeye a modicum of mercy. In the meantime," she procured a stick of chalk, held it up for her subordinates' examination, "what was that you were saying about alchemists, Actaeon?"

He went red, the blush visible even in the starlit night. "Not all alchemists, Professor," he repeated petulantly.

"Annika," Winnie turned to the girl, "can you confirm that General Mustang is in the centre of the array?"

"He and the rest of them are in the temple, yes."

"Well then!" Winnie surveyed the Mishaari Basin, the circular fold patterns in the rock radiating outward; the geology of the crater exhibited a rare fivefold symmetry...pentamerism.

Much like a transmutation circle, thought Professor Stokes.

"I think it's about time the Flame Alchemist saw the light..."

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**Elsewhere**
Occasional foundations were the only structures left intact; everything else — buildings and temples reduced to rubble, enormous marble boulders where there had once been parks and promenades — had been reclaimed by the desert, their decay the only marker of time in a place of uncounted days.

As Miles and Scar marched through the ruins, the Major thought, despite the devastation, it looked as though someone had been planting stars. Though the district of Kanda was barely recognisable as such, between the cracked floors and dusty avenues, like tiny islands in a sea of wild rosebush and sand, were nestled clusters of light, the reflections caught in the polished surfaces.

There were so many stars in the sky they cast a shimmering haze over everything, bathing the ruins in a pale glow. As Miles walked, he was hardly aware that he was walking, his footprints washed out in brightness.

But Kanda was too raw to be beautiful.

There were ghosts in that place, Miles realised quickly, uneasily. But there was nothing phantasmic about the echoes that seemed to ruminant upon the ruins. The histories were too real, the death and destruction too recent, too fresh. More an afterimage than a memory. Everything Miles could see around him was so corporeal, so material. The atmosphere seemed somehow dense and heavy and he had to fight the urge to hunch his shoulders, feeling a bit foiled by not having completely deciphered the solemnity, the sadness, of the place.

Miles couldn’t dispel a twitchy fluttering in his gut. He heard rather than saw the Muhaddith’s own disquiet: there was something puzzling in his gait, as though a weight were pulling him down on one side and his muscles were struggling to compensate for the lack of balance. His breathing, once as disciplined as that of a man in the midst of meditation, came in short, shallow puffs. His sandals made a dry rasping sound as they skated across the sand. He seemed as unsettled as Miles, likely far more so, the both of them dwarfed by the district that was a necropolis in everything but name.

There was a flash of colour in the corner of his eye. Hazarding a look over one shoulder, Miles spied a freshly-laundered, folded cassock resting on what had once been a doorstep. The fabric was a crimson slash across the white. It didn’t take a particularly prodigious mind to trace the connection between the cassock’s somber tidiness and its place at the foot of one of the blasted buildings. Strangely, it occurred to Miles that he could easily set the cassock on fire or tear it to shreds, and it wouldn’t make any difference to the cassock’s owner. But he didn’t think, despite the stifling, diseased miasma hanging over the place, the small memorial was made for the benefit of the dead. Just as the Kanda district, he suspected, no longer existed for the living.

Turning to his companion, Major Miles asked, "Are you all right?"

The Muhaddith did not slow his pace, navigating the ruins with a sobering, though unsurprising, ease. He said nothing for a long while, and just as Miles began to commend himself to silence, Scar pointed a finger towards an open space filled with juniper.

"That was the market," he said, the words deep and low in his throat. "A maze of buildings with the doorways all crowded together. The stalls were covered with magnificently bright cloth. They sold browned fish, hard bread, jewels, metals, crisp, pristine linen, juicy figs. And honey rolls... pure white and coated in sticky, sweet honey."

Miles looked around. He tried to imagine such a scene, conjure its impressions from the shadows. He saw nothing. Nothing but stones and sand.
"You remember it well," murmured the Major.

"It was my home."

A wave of saudade swept over Miles as he realised, not for the first time, that such a thing never existed for him. The concept of home felt far from his reach, and he felt sick with the longing for it. Perhaps it was the effect of the Gate on his shredded psyche. Perhaps the experience had opened doors he would much rather remain shut.

Reluctant to admit it, even to himself, he knew he had lied to the Muhaddith, to General Mustang... feigning forgetfulness because he could not bare to tell them of his personal Truth. Of home. Of Briggs. Of Olivier... and the price she had been forced to pay to save his life that night. The memories were like seeds, planted into his heart, settling deep into his soul. They had sprouted vines twining around his spine, threatening to twist his body out of shape, until the shoots festered and spoiled. The Truth had forced him to eat the fruit those memories had borne, held hostage by the branches growing arms around his neck, suffocating him one image, one blue-eyed glare, at a time.

"Nobody has forgotten anything here, Miles," said Scar quietly, as though knowing the Major's thoughts, and understanding them far better than Miles did himself. "In Ishval, we must continually wrestle with the past, build upon the ruins. It is not like Amestris where, in the wake of the Promised Day, you scraped the earth clean, thinking you could start again. We have refused the luxury of such ignorance."

"But you never returned," Miles pointed out gently. "You never came back to Kanda."

He conceded the point with a slight nod. "Things change. I am here to save the life of one who once saved mine."

The Muhaddith's words were soft, distant, but his beady red eyes were fixed stubbornly on Miles. It occurred to the Major, then, that Scar was not talking about Captain Hawkeye.

"What are you implying, sayyidi..."

The man's attention did not waver. "You urged me, once, to keep moving ahead, knowing, as I did not, that deep down inside, I was a good person, and I was worthy of a good life."

"How do you imagine rescuing Hawkeye will repay that favour?"

The Muhaddith sighed. "To answer that question, I must ask one of you."

Miles watched his back carefully, as though the line of his spine would yield some heretofore forbidden wisdom. "Of course."

"Is General Mustang in love with her?"

Miles's boot actually paused mid-stride. "You are aware," said the Major carefully, "that what you're suggesting is highly illegal."

"That is not an answer."

"I don’t have one. I’m not in the habit of entertaining such insinuations."

The Muhaddith betrayed nothing with his perennial glare. "Who is to say I am insinuating anything? While the nature of their military affiliation precludes them, perhaps, from acting upon
such affections, there is nothing in the world that can keep them from loving each other."

"Why are you bringing this up now?"

"Would you rather I bring it up in their company?"

"In truth, I would rather you not bring it up at all."

"It is strange to me," he murmured, "that you should fear such things."

"I'm not some giggling schoolgirl." Miles scowled. "What General Mustang elects to do in his free time isn't any of my concern. I simply don't care to know the details."

"And your commanding officer?"

"I don't speak for her on the matter. That being said, I'm sure our sentiments align to a certain degree."

"Forgive me, Major, if I find such disinterest difficult to believe."

"Olivier... General Armstrong is no muckraker."

"Perhaps not. But there is a difference between vicious rumour and exploitable weakness."

Miles took a deep breath. "You mean... what Stokes did this afternoon? When she had Hawkeye tortured—"

"No."

"Then I'm not sure I follow."

The Muhaddith looked back at him. "How much do you know of what transpired on the Promised Day?"

Miles grunted. "Considering I was picnicking with Grumman for a vast majority of it... not much."

"I see."

"I know you, the Captain, and the General fought together. I know she was hurt, her throat—"

"Executed. At least, that had been the intent."

"I..." somehow, Miles's reflex to swallow felt strangely inappropriate considering the topic of conversation. "I was not aware of that."

"She was going to die," said Scar. "I do not think, bereft of alternatives, the General would allow that to happen. Even if it meant sacrificing everything." He sighed again, a deep, exhausted sound that seemed to diffuse into every muscle fibre. The Muhaddith looked up at the stars as his picked through the skeleton of his home.

"Though it cages them both, Major, it also sets them free. Perhaps their devotion is likened to a ship, a presence coming neither towards them nor away, only riding that perfect line between heaven and earth, long enough for him to know that she, too, loves him in return, that what they have is real, before it slips out of sight, possibly forever."

"But what does any of this have to do with me?"
Scar fixed him with a look that froze Miles's blood. "Because," he intoned solemnly, "it is a love you know... though, granted, for another. Both you and the Flame Alchemist move towards a faith you cannot possibly anticipate. You struggle against the pain of such devotion even as you are doomed by it."

The implication in the words slammed into Miles. "What...?"

"I agreed to help Mustang's woman. But I promised to save you, Major. Because I know what it is the Truth showed you."

"I don't understand, sayyidi," confessed Miles, suddenly feeling very small, and, strangely, very scared. "I think you mistake my capacity for forgiveness for a readiness to take on more, to deal with more." His shoulders slumped. "Perhaps it was, once. Not anymore. Now... it's only exhaustion. I'm so tired."

"Forgiveness is not easy, but it is a feat far more manageable when you are not the subject of its grace. Maybe I have always be a broken recipient of grace. And in that realisation, I think I am finally beginning to find peace."

"Now... it is your turn, Major. You forgave me my sins, even as you shoulder the guilt of your love, the recipiency of which you feel yourself undeserving."

"What..." Miles swallowed. "Would you have me do?"

"Forgive yourself," said Scar simply. "You must forgive yourself for knowing the Truth."

"Forgive—"

Suddenly, a shriek erupted from the ruins, shattering the hallowed silence.

The scream tore through Miles like a serrated shard of glass. He felt his tired eyes widen and his pulse quicken, his heart thudding to an erratic rhythm like a rock rattling in box. The screaming came again, desperate, terrified, manic... but painfully human. The blood drained from Miles's face; before either one of them were aware of making the conscious decision, the Major's legs and the Muhaddithi's were pounding furiously on the uneven track, Miles's ears straining for more sounds, more clues as to where the screaming had come from. He hadn't the faintest clue as to what he'd do when he got there; he just knew, with unwonted certainty, that he had to get there, and fast.

Miles closed his eyes, but that didn't blur the images the sounds had evoked. "Oh, God," he murmured.

"Ishvalla has nothing to do with this," said Scar huskily, the emotion rising unbidden, even in him. Miles shook his head, trying to focus on navigating the ruins or, at least, ignoring the premonitions of doom that swept through him like a blizzard rolling over open sky.

Another scream sounded from an old house at the base of a dramatic siltstone outcrop, the only wooden structure in a mausoleum of bright white stone. The building was a rotting heap, bowed and broken, subservient to the elements. It seemed to have collapsed in on itself, like a loaf of bread taken out of the oven too soon. In the high winds of the alghadabs, Miles could imagine the old house moaning and creaking, as though possessed by the restless spirits haunting Kanda. The desert grasses grew long and unkempt; in some places, footprints were still visible in the dirt, tracks made by those who dared each other to venture into the twilight to search for ghosts.

There was the dull thud of the Muhaddithi's sandal on the wood before the front door swung open,
fast and with enough force to drive it into the plaster opposite. Miles stood for a moment on the threshold, his breathing suspended.

"Captain!" he bellowed. "Captain Hawkeye!"

Please, he begged silently, beseechingly, though he wasn't sure to whom he made the entreaty. Ishvalla had long since abandoned Kanda. There was only one pantheon in that house, and it was the one worshipped by their enemies. Still...

Please, just this once, thought Miles.

Let me save this one. Just this one.

"Major..."

The word was more a croak, the sound grinding against itself as though it had a difficult time finding its way out of Scar's throat. Though he could be disarmingly candid at times, the man was reticent with any inkling of ardent expression, and solicitous of his emotions to an almost frightening degree. For him to sound so shaken sent a thrill of panic up Miles's spine.

Though he heard Olivier's voice in his head, as was the case in any stressful situation, ordering him to toughen up, Miles found that, for once, he had a difficult time listening. Captain Hawkeye seemed indomitable, like she could outlast anything, weather the worst of storms with her routine poise and imperturbability. To consider her surrender seemed abhorrent, almost grotesque, like something operating in contradiction to the natural laws of the world.

As Miles clambered down the rickety cellar stairs behind the Muhaddith, it took him several long moments to rationalise what he was seeing. The cellar — a cramped space hemmed by four heavy timber walls — was covered in blood and bodies. The air was heavy and sour, tinged with the metallic sting of solder and hot iron. One figure, a large man with a shaggy black beard and cracked spectacles, had fallen against one wall. He lay on his back, not three feet beyond the radius of the staircase, in a pool of blood that was almost dried, burned to black by the Ishvalan heat, and which leant the room its sickly-sweet, abattoir odour, halfway between rotting fruit and rotting meat.

It took Miles longer than usual to distinguish the two other figures: one lay still on a gurney, the other propped against one of the gurney's legs. Miles's attention was immediately snagged by the latter.

He was grotesque. His eyes were swollen over and bloody spit drooled from his slack jaw. His skin had gone pasty grey. His head was lumpy and misshapen, as though his features had been designed and assembled by someone with only a rudimentary understanding of human anatomy. He was, Miles suspected, still alive, if only by the slimmest of margins. The man held one arm across his stomach, the backs of his hands stained in dried ripples of yellow plasma. Between the injured man's clenched fingers, Miles spied ropey brown coils, and all at once the Major fought the overwhelming urge to be violently ill.

Though the Muhaddith maintained his familiar glare, out of the corner of Miles's eye, the man looked shaken and pale.

"Look," he mouthed, gesturing to the far side of the room.

The only sound came from a small, shivering figure, pressing himself into the wall as though to disappear into it: a boy, Miles realised, his golden curls matted and rusty with dried blood, his
hands clutched to fists at his sides, every muscle trembling. He let out the occasional moan, a wretched keening sound summoned from deep within his stomach. Otherwise, he said nothing as Miles and the Muhaddith took several slow, deliberate steps into the devastation.

"What happened here?" murmured Scar.

"Nevermind that now," snapped Major Miles, more aggressively than he'd intended. "Where is Captain Hawkeye?"

"Major sir... sayyid Muhaddith."

The figure on the gurney shifted. Miles's stomach churned; he hadn't recognised her under all the blood — none of it, he realised, her own. He found himself stumbling to her side.

"Captain..." he breathed. Before Miles could ask the customary 'are you all right?' he caught himself, struck suddenly by the ridiculous redundancy of the question. Instead, he queried, "How badly are you hurt?"

"Very, I think," she said, allowing Miles to ease her head up gently; she squeezed her eyes shut, grimacing as her injuries smarted.

"Easy now, Captain," he mumbled. He made a quick appraisal of her. She was dressed in civvies, a man's shirt and trousers, which did little to assuage the Major's discomfort, vague as remembered pain in his belly. Riza's mangled lip and broken nose were caked in dried blood, congealed and cracked. The black gore had drizzled down her face like so much rain down a window pane. It was her leg, however, that gave the Major pause: the skin a deep purple from numerous hematomas, a deformity below her thigh, likely from an oblique fracture in her femoral shaft. Miles had seen the wound before, in avalanches and crush injuries on the mountain. Her breathing betrayed several broken ribs, and as Hawkeye raised an arm to steady herself against Miles's shoulder, the fingers of her right hand appeared swollen and misshapen.

"What happened here, Captain?" he asked shakily. "Who is—"

"The man by the wall is dead, sir," she intoned dully. "And this one?" asked the Muhaddith, toeing the figure propped against the gurney, like a puppet held in place by a single fraying string. The man, to Miles's surprise, groaned, and he felt Riza go rigid under his hand.

"Captain?" Miles asked carefully, concern colouring his words.

Suddenly, the man grinned hugely, open mouthed, lips quivering. "Major Miles," he croaked, "sayyid Muhaddith." His face contorted with the effort; something told Miles the man's gut should not have been shifting as much as it was.

The boy in the corner suddenly barred his teeth in a snarl. To Miles's horror, the child's incisors were caked red. At the sight, even Scar muttered something in Ishvalan... a prayer, perhaps. Miles was inclined to share the sentiment.

But, as the boy stumbled towards the man on the floor, his rusty fingernails curved to claws, Captain Hawkeye caught him in his forward momentum. Even with her injuries, despite her depleted strength, she pulled the boy to her, a hand rubbing circles into his back, pressing his ferocious, twisted expression into the crook of her neck. Miles was forced to jostle with them both.

"I always knew that boy was a savage," muttered the dying man on the floor, even as he tried to
hold his intestines where they belonged. "But for you, Miss Hawkeye?" He chuckled, the sound wet and slippery. Despite the blood, his eyes were radiant yet stern, his face, cool and unflinching. He cocked his head and smiled up at them, leaning back against the gurney. The man’s long eyelashes cast shadows over his cheekbones. He looked every part the pantomime horror. "What a waste of one's convictions."

"He didn't do it for me, Pythos," she replied, doing little to mask her hatred. "You away took the one thing he treasured, the one person he loved. You brought this upon yourself."

Miles started: the man laying on the floor, the man dying, was Pythos. The same Dr. Bates from the phone call. Professor Stokes's lieutenant. The man who had...

The *Muhaddith* took a meaningful step forward, breaking Miles from his dark recollections. The Major noted the Ishvalan's sleeves had fallen loose around his arms, exposing the deadly arrays tattooed on his skin. His red eyes were like splinters of rose-tinted glass, cutting into the prone form of Pythos.

The man coughed, a fine spray of blood spattering across his chin. "And to think..." he choked, "that diseased whelp stopped our fun, Miss Hawkeye..."

If Scar intended to kill him, Miles decided then and there that he wasn't going to stop it.

"Just die, Pythos," said the Captain quietly. "You'll never touch me again."

Dr. Bates wheezed, "You don't think so?" He grunted. "Death, like myth, is brutal in its symmetry. Take this story and strip it down... until you are left with two points. Two dots on a vast, blank canvas... separated by a sea of white." Something seeped between his fingers; the viscous fluid smelled foul. "Here," he rasped, "we have come to the first point, but I will meet you at the next... by the axle of a screaming wheel, the revolution of a clock... the closing of an orbit..."

Lendel Bates, Pythos, died without issue.

Miles looked over at Captain Hawkeye, but her caramel-coloured eyes betrayed not the slightest scintilla of sadness or remorse. There she was, he thought, sitting in the shadows, in a dead city, holding a killer, gazing at the corpse of another killer.

The boy curled into Hawkeye, his face closed in a grimace, his skin pale and clammy. Every few minutes he would scream, pulling in a stuttered shriek that somehow sounded broken and barbed in his throat. After a while, he would go quiet, just panting, utterly exhausted.

Miles should have been able to handle it — after all, he had been present for the foundering of a fair number of soldiers. But the boy’s hurt was different, somehow. It was primordial, raw and violent, the pain of a person consumed by a suffering that knew no end or limit. Miles couldn’t bear it. He left Hawkeye to murmur nonsense in the boy’s ears and stroke his hair.

Unsurprisingly, it was the *Muhaddith* who broke the heavy silence. "Captain Hawkeye," he asked, "are you able to travel?"

"Yes..." she affirmed quietly, "with help. Although," she glanced over the boy's shoulder, down at her leg, "I suspect the journey will be slow-going."

Scar grunted. "Time is not on our side, Captain."

Major Miles's expression resolved itself into a glower of irritation. "There's not a great deal she can do to rectify that, *sayyidi*. Slow-going or not, we won't leave Hawkeye behind."
The Captain inclined her head. "I... I appreciate that, sir."

"Then I have little choice, it seems," murmured the Muhaddith. He pulled his sleeves down to his elbows. His muscles tensed, the tattoos rippling dangerously.

Miles's posture went rigid in alarm. "What are you doing?"

"Peace, Miles," said Scar calmly, but firmly. Dipping his finger in the viscous crimson on the floor, he began to draw. Both Captain Hawkeye and Major Miles looked on in bemusement. "I have been far from idle since the Promised Day," he explained tiredly. The bloodied crest began to take the form of a pentagram, the array of the rendanshu, all five elements represented in perfect unison by a five-pointed star. "My brother's research was extensive, Miles. The Purification Art of the Lung Mei suggests the earth possesses a life energy, nourishing everything bound by the natural world, as does the blood coursing through one's veins."

Hawkeye's eyes widened as she watched the Muhaddith's work. "I understand," she murmured.

"Your tattooed arrays... your right arm, marked with terra and aer, along with the twin snakes of the caduceus pattern are of an alkahestric origin, while the series of arrows leading down to the wrist represent an outward flow. But your left arm is marked with the same array turned upside down... with the caduceus tattooed in an ink of an inverted colour. Its inward flow completes the cyclical pulse of full transmutation and, marked with aqua and ignis, completes the elemental tetrad."

"You are correct, Captain Hawkeye."

Miles looked askance at her. "How in the world—?"

She smiled grimly. With her broken nose and busted lip, with a face that managed to look both swollen from injury and thin from undernourishment, it was a gruesome sight.

"My father," she said softly. "was an alchemist, sir." Then, ignoring Miles’s further bewilderment, she turned to Scar: "You intend to heal me, just as the Xingese princess healed me on the Promised Day... using the alkehestry of your left arm."

"I intend to make you well enough to travel," conceded Scar. "It is... a pragmatic decision."

"I won't allow it."

Both Ishvalans rounded on her, one furious, the other horrified. "Beg pardon?" mouthed Miles, not entirely sure what else to say.

"At least," Hawkeye clarified, "not without certain conditions."

The Muhaddith's mouth twisted in a moue of disgust. "You are in no position..."

"Jin," she said with a steady, sure strength, squeezing the golden-haired boy's shoulder — he looked near catatonic, thought Miles, trapped in an unresponsive stupor from the trauma, utterly overwhelmed by the enormity of what he had done.

"Jin comes with us," affirmed Hawkeye. She glanced up at Miles. "Sir, this boy saved my life, though he may not be aware of the fact. I... I would rather not think about what Dr. Bates might have done to me had Jin not intervened."

The Muhaddith's frown deepened a fraction of a degree. "That boy is troubled."
Miles had to admire Scar for his command of the art of the understatement. "Captain," he began, "that boy murdered a full-grown man... with his bare hands." With his teeth, Miles affirmed to himself, but didn't repeat aloud.

"He needs help, sir," insisted Hawkeye. "He needs his family, and he needs love. He can't get any of that here, Major."

"Why?" asked the Muhaddith, red eyes hard. He glared at the Captain belligerently, as though her answer was in that moment the most important thing in the world to him. "Why risk your life for a creature who likely had every intent of ending it himself?"

Riza said simply, "Because I forgive him."

Major Miles considered her for a long time, saying nothing, the silence brutalised only by the etching of the rendanshu into the floorboards and the boy, Jin's, low, pitiful mewls.

Miles remembered, then, something the Muhaddith had said to him, once...

*Enduring and forgiving are two different things. One must not forgive the cruelty of the world, because it is the duty of human beings to rail against injustice and wrongdoing. But, in turn, they consign themselves to a fate of forbearance, to endure that same wrongdoing. Because someone has to come along to sever the chain of hatred, sooner or later.*

Did Hawkeye hate the boy, mused Miles, and did her forgiveness despite the fact render her merciful? If so, then to whom? To the boy... or to herself?

The Major wondered if his own capacity for mercy came from some unrealised potential to forgive himself despite his own self-loathing. His inability to harmonise his identity as a man of two worlds: Ishvalan and Amestrian. Soldier and civilian. Warrior and victim. A fighter... and a lover, too, the crux of his innermost, unreconciled yearnings. He had always considered such disparate diametrics of character so irredeemably weak, disappointing to his commander, and disappointing to himself.

But, looking at Riza Hawkeye and Scar, two of Amestris's most prolific killers, two broken people who had, at some point, lost sight of the goodness in their souls, Miles realised there were different species of strength, and that they didn't always come from a rifle or an alchemic array. Sometimes... they came from simple endurance, where the wellspring ran deep and quiet. From an unrecognised capacity for compassion and forgiveness.

Without which, Miles supposed, humanity would become much like the Homunculi, or the Risen... annihilating itself in endless retributions and misremembered histories.

"All right," said the Major quietly. "Sayyidi, mend the Captain until she can move under her own power. We must return to Mishaari as soon as possible.

"And the boy, Jin, is coming with us."
Final Interlude

Chapter Notes

Buckle up, amigos, because we're going on a feels trip.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Interlude VIII

"I don’t want to die.

"But, let’s be honest, who does? And the fact that you’re listening to this at the moment means I’m already dead, so there doesn’t seem to be any point in whining about it now, right? Yeah, I’d have rather lived a little longer. Yeah, I’m piss scared of what’s gonna, or not gonna, come next. It’s true, I am afraid of dying, in the same way you’re frightened of any experience you’ve never had before. I’m afraid of the world moving forward without me, of my absence going unnoticed. Does it make me selfish? Maybe. Does it make me human?

"Yeah… I think it does. That's some small comfort, to feel as though I'm a part of something. Like a sort of herd anxiety.

"Because, in a way, we're all dying. Some of us die for a hundred years, and some of us die for ten. But each morning everyone in the world wakes up one day closer to the inevitable. Everyone. So living and dying are actually different words for the same thing, if you think about it.

"But, honestly, death is only the end if you make the mistake of thinking the story is all about you. In some ways, dying is the easy part of life; waking up each day and living in every moment... therein lies the challenge.

"That being said, I ain’t gonna preach to you guys about how to find happiness, or tell you what you need to do to live life to the fullest, because I don’t know how to do that myself, yet. Maybe I never will. Every person is different, and there isn't some standardised procedure directing the pursuit of happiness. But, after however-many-years together, I think I know each of you well enough to at least affect some semblance of wisdom. Or, barring that, to offer, at the very least, a proper goodbye.

"Kain, without you, without the kindness you gave in that understated way of yours, without the gentleness of your personality, I don't think any of us would be quite as grounded as we are. Our team ain't that stable as a whole, always shifting from one crusade to the next, but you never stopped being your genuine self. Sometimes, I ignored you for months, lost in some new investigation, but you weren't ever mad when I remembered you again. Always easy with honest advice, but carefully phrased so you never offended anyone. You've been one of the rocks in our lives — an anchor point. Never stop being kind, Kain.

"Vato, you're the smartest guy I know. But you're also the most principled. You truly value human life, and you strive to save innocent people regardless of the danger. Due to your dedicated compassion to try to protect this country and its people, I think, even though I know you don't share the opinion yourself, you are one of the most steadfast and most virtuous people in the
military. You think your social skills are shit, but the way I see it, you’re a genius of empathy, immersing yourself in it, separating its numerous strands, appreciating its subtle nuances. You’re like a prism through which empathy can be divided into its infinite spectrum.

"Roy, Riza… the two of you personify love even in times of trouble, of hardship and war, and for that, you’re both so beautifully strong. No matter how many stresses are laid upon your collective shoulders, you show more grace than many do in times of plenty. It’s in those moments of pain and fear I see right to the heart of you and know that my faith in you — my commanders, my leaders — is eternal, that it’ll remain long after I’m gone. You are so brave, so kind, always giving of yourselves. And if nothing else, I want you to know that a soulmate is one of the nicest things you can have, and one of the best things you can be. Get what I’m sayin’, sirs?

"Jean Havoc…

"At least for a few more years, this ragtag bunch of morons needs a special kind of moron in order to survive, no matter how capable they may think they are on their own. The truth is that they need a leader, and the truth is that you are the best leader, Havo. It’s one of the things I love about you. You’re the best warrior I know, the best fighter. You’re the biggest idiot, the worst driver, a chain-smoking arse, and a truly lousy cook. But you’ve kept me safe and provided for me, in good times and bad. You wouldn’t know what to do with a malicious thought if someone taped an instruction manual to your forehead.

"You’re the best friend I’ve ever had. And I’m so sorry for leaving you alone.

"That, I think, is my biggest regret of all.

"You may think this is some weird, macabre attempt at a final farewell, and in some ways, you’re absolutely right. But when you wake up tomorrow, rather than being sad, I hope you’ll find the new day just a little warmer and brighter than the one before. Because I want you all to know that I’ve lived my life to the best of my ability, and I’m at peace. Though I haven’t cracked any codes or gained any enlightenment, whatever wisdom I’ve accumulated, I’ve tried to pass it on through these recordings. From here on in, it’s just a matter of you guys working to make a clearer path for others to follow. Hold love in your hearts and be brave. Be good. Be kind. The answers are here… we just don’t know how to find them yet. But we will. Some day, you’ll open your eyes, and you’ll see and hear what has always been in plain sight. Be patient, ‘cause it might take a little time.

"But then again, what good things ever came easy?

"I love you all. The war is over now.

"This is Heymans Breda, signing off for the last time.

"Goodbye, and goodnight."
...................... yeah
I am, again, sorry for the delay. I'm back at my home institution, which means work has started up again. Alas, the University doesn't pay me to write FMA fan fiction. If only it did! Combined with a family emergency, and compounded by the fact that I want to make these last few chapters as perfect as possible... well, writing has been rather difficult.

Nevertheless, please do enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A Long Day's Journey into Night

"From the inside."

Lieutenant Breda stood facing Ed, hands tucked under his armpits, glaring down at the young alchemist. Maria glanced between them both, head peering over each shoulder as the two geniuses sized each other up. It reminded Ross of a poker game... Breda had the same probing scrutiny in his eyes, brow furrowed as he endeavoured to interpret the tells in his opponent's expression.

Maria knew there were several different approaches to affecting a convincing tell: Heymans Breda and Vato Falman played the pure stoics, allowing their faces to becomes masks and their voices monotones for the duration of the hand; Jean Havoc, however, assumed a whole spectrum of tics, twitches, and expressions, mixing them up with a river of insane babble. The idea, she supposed, was to overwhelm his opponents with clues, so they wouldn't be able to isolate worry or excitement from half a dozen other emotions.

The problem was... Edward Elric was so fidgety, so high-strung and energetic, it was difficult to tell which of his quirks were distilled from his personality and which were put on to affect some degree of distraction. In any case, Maria could tell Edward knew something Heymans did not, and the boy was doing his damndest to keep the information to himself, as though the truth of the whole situation was somehow his to annotate.

Rather than bow under the scrutiny, the young man levelled his gaze at Breda and offered a simple nod of affirmation, his golden bangs billowing around his forehead. "Yeah. From the inside."

"So when you say 'close it,' Ed," began Jean, with no small amount of skepticism himself, "you weren't being metaphorical or nothing."

Edward shrugged, though without the use of his right arm, the motion looked oddly stunted, his shoulders tilting awkwardly. "I thought being as straightforward as possible was probably best, considering the circumstances."

"As it so happens, Chief, I'm given to agreeing with that," said Havoc. "I still think you're nuts."

Maria Ross was inclined to agree.
"You really intend for one of us to walk through that thing and pull the deadbolt? It sounds like something my Ma would say... 'close the back door, Jeany, you're letting in a chill, you wanna warm the whole neighbourhood?'... stuff like that."

"It does sound rather reductionist, I must admit," said Major Miké. "Too simple by half."

Breda grunted. "If not downright screwy."

Edward's eyebrows furrowed, looking to each of them in turn. "When have my ideas ever been wrong before?"

"You really don't want me to answer that," grumbled Falman, mirroring Breda as he crossed his arms.

"Fullmetal," began General Mustang, the pale oval of his face almost ghostlike in the gloom, as though made of tissue paper; Ross expected him to echo Falman — or, at the very least, say something derisive and dismissive, as Flame was so often liable to do whenever Ed was involved — but he surprised Maria with a gentle, patient: "When Miles tried to approach the Door, the shock and trauma knocked him into a coma."

Ross nodded, reinforcing the General's initial impression. "According to the Major," she relayed solemnly, "he was trapped by the Door for less than thirty seconds. And even that brief exposure was enough to completely overwhelm him. What you're suggesting, Ed, doesn't seem possible."

"At least," grumbled Havoc, "provided you don't wanna to end up like Major Miles."

Edward stilled, bowing his head in thought, staring at the floor as though to glean some understanding from the sand-covered marble.

A part of Maria was moved by his pause. Most of the assembled soldiers weren't alchemists, and those who were didn't, in her modest opinion, hold a candle to Edward's own innate ability. Any other prodigious genius would have been tempted to dismiss the advice of mere morals like the rest of them, but Ed weighed on their words with serious consideration, their input as valuable to him as any measure of his intuition.

He was proud, Edward Elric, and he could be tediously stubborn. But Maria Ross knew he was far from selfish.

After a few long minutes of silence, Ed queried: "Scar pulled him free, right? Major Miles, I mean."

Falman nodded. "I read over the telegraph Fuery received on the train." Casting a nervous glance towards the slumbering Command Sergeant, he went on: "Evidently, the encounter transformed into quite the physical struggle. The Muhaddith very nearly injured himself in the process of trying to wrest Major Miles free from some sort of... magnetism or force, emanating from the Door itself." The tall, thin man gulped. "As though something inside was trying to snatch him. Something alive. Something hungry."

"Less like disentangling a fish from a net," murmured Major Miké thoughtfully, speaking up from her shadowed corner, "and more like stealing a seal from the jaws of a hungry shark."

"That's it!" Ed snapped his fingers, the sound cracking across the still, stagnant air, making Maria jump. He spun to face the Feldspar Alchemist, who peered down at him in bemusement. "Shark's teeth are serrated, right? Trying to pull yourself free just makes the injury worse, 'cause the grooved edges slice into the skin. I think the Door is likewise inimical to resistance. Miles and Scar
fought the Door. We've gotta let it take us... we can't resist it."

"Like being bitten by a shark, huh?" muttered the General. "I have to say, Fullmetal, I find your choice in metaphor somewhat questionable. Even so..."

Havoc frowned. "So that's it? We just walk in and close it?"

Ed nodded.

"That seems awful easy," noted Jean. "And if there's one thing I've learned from you, Chief, it's that these kinds of things ain't ever easy."

Falman drifted over to the blonde First Lieutenant, standing adjacent to Havoc's shoulder. The Briggsman's sharp, angular face was creased in thought. "Well, from a certain angle, it's no more complicated than a typical case study of aeronomy," he offered.

Havoc looked up, scowling. "Yeah, my point stands."

Vato clarified: "Well, it seems to me Ed intends to use the Door's own physical mechanics to his advantage — in the event of alchemical decompression, with there no longer being a pressure differential, the Door may be opened. However, due to the disparate energy differential between the two realms, the Door is subject to closure if the differential increases in any capacity. This prevents any accidental opening, you see. Once closed, the Door will most likely stay closed. Is that about the long and short of it, Ed?"

"Yeah..." Edward threw a thumb over his shoulder. "Once I close that thing, this nightmare'll finally be over. That Professor woman and the Risen will have lost their lynchpin. It'll just become an empty archway."

Even as Ed finished his declaration, there was a sudden abrupt silence on all sides, hanging in the air like the suspended moment before a falling glass shatters on the ground. Every breath seemed to echo. Every eye turned towards the Fullmetal Alchemist.

Fragments of thought and splinters of silence spun into a kaleidoscopic jumble, shifting infinitesimally, falling into incredible new patterns, until Maria realised she had lost track of how much time had passed, waiting for someone to say something.

It was Major Miké who brutalised the quiet: "Edward," she began gently, "am I to understand it you mean to enter the Gate yourself?"

"I'm the most logical choice," argued Ed, crossing his arms... or, at least, trying to. He settled for grasping his right elbow with his left hand. "I mean... I've been there before. Several times." His sudden profound interest in the floor did nothing to elevate Maria's anxiousness.

She voiced her concerns aloud: "Isn't it rather..." she cast around for the right word and, finding nothing, concluded, "dangerous?"

"Oh yeah." Ed grinned disarmingly. "But that's okay. I know what I'm doing."

Havoc, Breda, and Ross exchanged yet another worried glance. Edward rubbed the back of his neck and wrinkled his nose, about to tell them, no doubt, that he wasn't afraid. Wasn't worried. Wasn't scared. Ross was familiar enough with false bravado to recognise it when she saw it, because it was not, of course, limited to alchemists, or even genius prodigies like Edward. Even so, that particular combination seemed to make his posturing and posing almost unavoidable.
Heymans cleared his throat conspicuously, catching Ed's attention. "Hey, Chief—"

He never finished what he was about to say. Before Breda or Ed could move, a manic burst of laughter sliced across the silence. The sound was sharp and sawtoothed, and seemed to tear at the insides of Maria's ears. It reminded her of the inmates in Central's prison, their insane twitterings, like the crying of corvids; the sudden laughter forced her to remember her time spent in imprisonment, forced to atone for the death of Brigadier-General Hughes, for a murder she did not commit.

Turning towards the source of the high, mad sound, the officers were horrified to find General Mustang standing in the center of the chamber, his knees slightly bent, his hands fisted in his black hair.

A premonitory chill traced its icy way down Maria's backbone. For a second, she stood again in Central Prison's grey cells, behind the heavy grey walls, in the midst of a grey silence broken only by wails and the screams of the suffering.

Ed's face went chalk-white. He ventured: "M-Mustang?"

The General took shallow, hurried breaths, his narrow chest rising and falling quickly -- too quickly, Maria thought. He was almost hyperventilating. His mouth hung open, his eyes were red-rimmed and wild, as though every scrap of his mind was busy staring at whatever it was he could see.

Him... and no one else.

As though they were the blind ones.

Suddenly his right hand shot out and grabbed at the air, his fingers curling like claws.

"The world!" he cried, his voice unnaturally high. "Oh, it's the world! It's so warm, mama! It's so warm!"

The darkness that shrouded his face was far more than just the absence of light. The shadows were thick and heavy. The air moved like molasses, interlaced with the stench of dry bones and burial, like some physical manifestation of death. General Mustang stood alone, opening and closing his mouth mutely, but Maria, sensitive to the press and presence of other people, suddenly felt as though she was staring at a crowd, a cascade of people stacked end-to-end like a line of dominoes behind the Flame Alchemist. Kinetic and winnowing, their hearts fluttering, violence ringing through a cavern of ears. Like millions of souls crying for help and irises singing for mercy, as though no greater absence of sound could be more brutally deafening.

The General's face contorted, some distant part of him fighting to turn his look of terror into one of pantomime bewilderment. To Maria's equal bemusement and dread, Mustang began to hum, his voice rising in a soft, childlike lilt:

"Little corpses, trying to greet me, hallucinations that nibble my toes, cantaloupe ants and evil cow rings, these are a few of my favourite things!"

"Dear god," breathed Major Miké.

"What the hell..." murmured Breda, looking properly frightened.

"Do you know what a cuckoo is?" asked the General, his pitch deepening, commanding their attention. He leant back momentarily, pulling up his sleeves. His pale forearms were corded and
ropey. The few freckles speckling them jumped and twitched as he clenched his fists, the veins pulsing with concentration. "They invade another bird's nest." Mustang rounded on Edward, the former dancing his tongue across his teeth and the latter failing to suppress a shiver. "Whose egg is it? What do they expect to hatch? It's all life feeding off other life, giving nothing back — but who's feeding off whom?"

"His eyes," murmured Maria, a hand clapped over her mouth. "Look at his eyes!"

"Physics asserts the objective reality of the universal wavefunction," babbled Roy, words falling from his lips, mauldering and mindless, "and implies that all alternate histories and futures are real. Everything that could possibly have happened in our past, but did not, has occurred in the past of some other world."

Maria stared in horror at their commanding officer: the General's eyes, once as black as tar, now opaque in his blindness, seemed to shift, the colour flickering between grey and vivid indigo and bright, burnished gold, like lightning licking the crests of boiling storm clouds. Somewhere, an invisible metronome seemed to tick. With the first sound, felt rather than heard, a solid, heavy reverberation through Maria's bones, a great ripple of light shot from the Flame Alchemist's eyes, coruscating across the walls.

Without warning, Mustang bore down on Edward. Before the boy could skirt out from under the charge, Flame grasped Fullmetal's broad shoulders, grinning cadaverously. "I'm normal. I'm good! Why are you looking at me like that? Your mouth is so wide. Did you know that you have really pretty teeth? I like your teeth."

"Snap out of it, you bastard!" cried Ed, though he looked just as piss scared as the rest of them, his
lower lip quivering.

"Why are you making that face?" wondered Mustang, his mouth turned down in a pout. "Why are you making those terrible sounds? Ha ha ha, little alchemist. Stop teasing me. Why don't you love me? I hate the smell of blood. Metallic. Sickly. But yours is beautiful. It stains the stone, it glows in the setting sun. It blooms from your scalp."

"Mad... he's gone mad," moaned Falman, pressing his fists into his temples, squeezing his eyes shut.

"No..." murmured Ed, staring hard into the General's flickering eyes, the darkness star-studded like a map of the heavens. "That's not him talking."

"Then who the hell is it?" demanded Havoc, voice going high with panic. "What the fuck is happening to him?"

Ed didn't break eye contact with General Mustang. "Everyone is happening to him. All those voices... I think..."

"I think they're all people who've died."

"I don't belong here," whispered Roy hoarsely, tears tracking down his face. He clutched at the front of Edward's shirt, pressed his face into the young man's chest, sobbing, "At night I travel forwards and backwards in time, seeing things that aren't meant for the eyes of others. The masters trust me, you see. One day they'll take me away for good, so don't be scared if I just disappear... be happy that I've escaped." Then, in a voice so quiet, so wretched and raw Maria almost didn't hear it, the General whispered: "Edward... Edward... help me..."

"General! Hey, Mustang!" Ed tried to pry the Flame Alchemist's hands from his clothes, but the latter held on with an almost martial resolve, as though Fullmetal was the only thing keeping him from slipping away entirely. "Talk to me! You're still in there, I know it... you're too much of an arrogant ass to allow yourself to get out-performed by anyone!"

"The evening's light, silvery, casts its dull brightness onto the trees — trees gelid in this blue light of winter," he muttered, his voice changing again, to something almost feminine. "But whiteness dominates the pines and evergreens, though the trees are steeped in vibrant grades of silver. I hear notes in the mist, like silvery chattering, coins in a pocket, the jangle of keys. Music in its most perfect piquancy."

This was what the Risen wanted, thought Maria suddenly; when the understanding hit her, it was almost enough to drive the breath from her lungs, bringing her to her knees.

Roy's riddling, rambling nonsense... it was almost like listening to prophecy. To a divine, chaotic language, a billion souls speaking through one mouthpiece.

Hearing the General speak — every word, every voice, infused with a different inflection, every ghost of memory shining out of his eyes as a new colour — was like following someone excitedly relating a story, only to find the words petering out, the path getting narrower the further along he went, the undergrowth taking over in coils of snarled, grabbing brambles. Mustang was going insane as the voices of the Gate tore through his system like so many millions of drunk drivers. He was babbling, as though with fever, his face at once dangerously pale and flushing alarmingly with every breath. The place inside his head seemed half-imagined, shimmering and blurring, just like his eyes.
Maria felt a suffocating fear engulf her heart. He was slipping away, their commander, and there was nothing they could do to stop it...

"Edward Elric!" snarled Mustang, suddenly glaring at the boy with an arresting viciousness.

"Get this vainglorious moron clear of the temple,‖ ordered the General, barring his teeth, his face twisting into an expression that was part pain and part panic. He went on: "Get Flame out from the centre of the array!"

Though it was the first lucid thing Mustang had said, Maria didn't have a blind clue what it meant. Not so the case for Major Miké, it seemed. "Will that help?‖ she demanded, looking as shaken as the rest of them, and if possible, even paler than usual.

"It's not as though this can get any worse, Sophie, now can it?"

Sophie? wondered Ross, growing more confused.

"No." The Major grit her teeth. "No, you're correct. As per bloody usual.‖ She sighed. "Damn."

It suddenly occurred to Maria that her superior officer was no longer talking to Roy Mustang. Her attention swung back to the flickering light in the Flame Alchemist's gaze. It was as though a different man was looking out from the window of the General's snuffed-out eyes, shadows shifting inside his skull.

And those indigo irises retained none of Mustang's strident compassion. They were just a touch too bright, too wild, to feign kindness or pity. Though simmering with urgency in the shadows of the chamber, they seemed to regard anything outside of their private concerns with a slow, molten apathy, as though such trivial things weren't worth the effort or energy of prolonged interest.

The man — or whatever man Mustang had become — pulled against Ed. He hissed in a voice that sounded harsh and grating, like he was forcing the words out between tors of dry coral: "This chamber is the focal point. The array can be likened to a parabolic mirror, an alchemic magnifying lens. We are standing at the point onto which alchemic energy parallel to the axis of transmutation is focused. The further the distance from the array's principle plane and focal point, the weaker the transmutation will become. So long as your General remains in the centre, the array will continue to siphon energy from the Gate and transpose the latent diffusion into Mustang's pretty little head. Get him far enough away from this location, and the diffusion should weaken."

"And what if it doesn't?‖ demanded Ed, glaring up at the bigger man. "What if he's stuck like this?"

"I never took you for a defeatist, Fullmetal Alchemist;‖ Roy grinned a most un-Roylike grin that still somehow managed to look more like a grimace. "Evacuation is a temporary reprieve. The transmutation will only cease entirely when the breach has been sealed or the alchemist responsible for this little soirée has been killed. You have neither the time nor the manpower to bandy around strategy. You know what you have to do... so do it."

To Maria's surprise, before Ed could answer the creature — or creatures — speaking with the General's voice, Lieutenant Breda surged forward in two huge strides. He wrested Mustang's uniform from Ed's grip and held it tight enough for Roy's face to redden. Breda leant in close until his nose was less than an inch away from his commander's. Before Mustang could utter a word, the General was rewarded for his efforts with a merciless backhand to the jaw. Roy's head snapped back.
"Breda, what the hell?!" cried Havoc, alarm clouding his face.

Heymans ignored his friend, glaring into Mustang's eyes. "Tell me something, you evil little sonofabitch," he snarled, "why the fuck should we believe you?"

"Because Lieutenant," Not-Mustang said the word dangerously, spitting poison like a viper, "I would rather have my jugular munched through by a chimera again than remain trapped forever inside Roy Mustang's head!" His lips curved wickedly, cocking an eyebrow suggestively; "On the rare occasion I actually indulged the possibility of possessing his body, this wasn't quite the arrangement I had in mind!"

"Lieutenant Breda," began Major Miké urgently, before the First Lieutenant could strangle his superior on the spot. She reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder, looking straight into his green eyes; she lowered her voice and spoke with devastating gentleness: "I understand your reservations, my boy. More than you will ever know. I know you don’t trust him. But in recent days, he has saved Edward and myself from more scrapes than you’d be lead to believe. And if you listen to him now, you’ll have a better chance of saving your commanding officer. If you won't trust him, then trust in the fact that he is as desperate to be shut of this world as we are to be shut of him."

"So this is your mysterious contact, huh?" growled Breda, still glaring at Mustang. "You and the Chief been taking your cues from the Crimson fucking Alchemist?"

Maria Ross's stomach churned. She could not soften the stab of hurt when she considered the immensity of Major Miké's betrayal.

"He is the only Gate Dweller, the only soul who has passed on to the next world, with the self possession necessary to communicate with us," insisted the Major. "And for all his sins, Lieutenant, he has yet to lead us astray."

Breda wasn’t impressed. "He acts all human now," he spat. "But scrape the human bits away and you’re left with just another monster."

"Of course," deadpanned Miké. "Then again, by that logic, you could scrape the monster bits away instead just as easily. And what would that leave you with?"

"Are you actually defending him!?"

"Of course I'm not. Monsters are real. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win. If we must endure the help of monsters, Lieutenant, then I would much rather sign a contract with one who abhors his existence almost as much as we do." On an impulse, she reached for and grabbed Breda's hand. "Lieutenant, I trust you. And I trust him. Now, do you trust me?"

"If you could shelve your quibbling for two seconds," muttered Mustang, throat tight from the grip around his collar, "if you don't get your commanding officer clear of the focal point in the next, oh... two, three minutes?... you won't have very much of a commanding officer left. I don't think your petty personal disinclinations should be your primary concern, do you?"

After throwing one more black look towards Major Miké and General Mustang both, Heymans glared at Ed. "D'ya trust him, Chief?"

"No," said Edward gravely. He took a deep breath. "But right now that doesn't matter. The rogue Gate, the diffusion, Doors opening inward... that's all from him, Lieutenant. We couldn't have gotten this far without Kimblee's help."
"And why would he want to help us?" demanded Breda, his voice waverling slightly, Maria noticed. "After everything that bastard did..."

"Because," said Ed, "he wants to die."

"He..." Maria swallowed, trying to wet a tongue that had gone dry and fuzzy, "that thing... one of those things inside General Mustang's head... just wants you to kill it?"

"Yeah. He's not helping us out of charity. It's self interest, plain and simple."

"He wants us to kill him, huh?" Breda's grin was a bit scary -- lips curled back, teeth barred. "Then I guess, for once, our interests align to a certain degree." He released Mustang's collar. "Alright then, monster. Let's get you gone."

Mustang smiled weakly. "Thank you, Lieutenant," he croaked softly. "Not a quitted rook today..."

"Never, Boss. Major," began Breda, turning again to the Feldspar Alchemist, "if Kimblee shows up again, sir, you think you can reason with him?"

"Yes, I believe I can."

"Then take the General outside. Falman!" Heymans called over his shoulder: "Help Major Miké cart Flame Boy's ass out of this chamber!"

"Err... right! Yes, sir!"

The two soldiers shouldered Mustang between them, barring their ears against his nonsensical babbling as they guided him into the periphery chambers of the temple.

Despite his earlier enmity towards the entity in the General's mind, and despite his own fear, Heymans's expression has resolved itself into utter inscrutability. Maria couldn't tell what he was thinking. "Chief, come here!"

Ed Elric stood straight, his golden hair flying back, his face set with determination. Maria could hardly believe that less than five minutes ago, the young alchemist had been as bent with despair as the rest of them, panic and worry for his beloved commander, his friend, clawing at his heart.

"You said we can't blow up this temple, right?" asked the Lieutenant.

"No," affirmed Ed. "I told you, the Door isn't a part of the building... it wouldn't—"

"What if we blew up the Door itself?" he interrupted.

Gold eyes darkened. "Huh?"

"Maybe..." Heymans's brow furrowed as he puzzled out the possibility. "Maybe we don't gotta send anyone into the Door. If we could close it by force..."

"How?!"

"Dynamite."

"You're joking..."

"Not about this, kid. If we lobbed a couple sticks of dynamite in there, I reckon that'd be enough to knock that damn thing off its hinges."
"That's the craziest thing I've ever heard."

"I don't give a rat's ass if it's crazy or not! Is it viable?"

"I don't know!" Ed considered for a minute. "I mean... maybe. I dunno... the force of the detonation might be enough to trigger the pressure differential..."

"If there's even a chance," said Heymans firmly, "then we gotta try it."

"And where the hell are we going to get the dynamite!?"

Breda grinned grimly, though there was no mirth in the expression. "This is a dig site, Ed. There'll be charges in any one of the storage depots. You just gotta fetch 'em."

"Wait!" cried Maria. "Heymans, there's more than a hundred hostiles out there! You can't send him there alone! Let me help!"

"Ed's the quickest one here," argued Heymans. "And the smallest."

"Hey...!"

"It's nothing personal, Chief: if he wasn't dead to the world, I'd send Fuery! Look, the excavation grounds are crawling with Stokes's goons, and the depots are couched well within her territory. You're small, you're nimble, you're quick... and you have the best chance of escaping their notice. Sending an entourage with you would just attract unwanted attention. 'Sides, with Feldspar already out there, she can guide you through her little minefield."

Ross didn't like it — her every instinct railed against sending Ed out into the field unaided and alone. But she believed in Heymans's logic, in his strategic prowess, in much the same way a man in Ishval believes in rain; it was something she desperately needed, and though the world didn't seem ready for it, the reassurance of its stubbornly-persistent possibility kindled the smallest flicker of hope inside her chest.

"Go, big guy!" urged Breda, giving the kid a shove, sending Ed stumbling towards the entrance of the chamber. "Roy's not got a whole lotta time."

"R-right." Edward's bemusement transmuted into a steady, steely resolve. "Right," he said again, with far more conviction.

He bolted across the chamber like runner at a start gun, his right hand clutched tightly in his left, holding the dead weight of his arm away from his thigh. He quickened his pace to an all-out sprint as he heard shouting sound from outside, cries of alarm from Feldspar and Falman. The slapping noise of his shoes resonated around the walls of the temple with a clanging echo, automail against marble, metal on stone.

Maria knew she ought to have felt some relief: the General was, for the time being, free of the influence of the Door. But she couldn't shake a sudden breathlessness, as though the composition of the air had changed, as though the wind had shifted. She remembered, for a moment — as she watched Heymans turn back towards the Gate — Roy Mustang's alchemy, the sparks ignited by his gloves, exploding outward in a ball of red flame shadowed in black smoke. She was shocked to find that she felt far less emotion than she thought the memories warranted. Just a cold thrill at her being a witness, a kind of bleak wonder at the fury of chemical interplay, and a relief that she wasn't the target of the fire herself, but was instead safe on her side of the glass, trapped with her foreboding and her faint sense of doom.
Then, breaking Maria from darker thoughts, Jean Havoc muttered hoarsely:

"Heymans... why did you lie to him?"

Heymans ignored the question, his singular attention remaining fixed on the Door. Maria wondered if he’d even heard Havoc. She searched frantically for something to say that would catch his notice, stop his solemn and, frankly, terrifying speculations.

Ross, watching Breda’s flinty green eyes, made even sharper, more burnished, in the harsh demarcation between lamplight and shadow, could almost see his thought processes at work, addressing the inconsistencies, sensing the incongruities. Evaluating the possibilities.

“Hey, Heymans,” said Jean, a little louder than before, dropping the titles and honourifics, not really giving a damn who overheard the breach of etiquette, “there...” he swallowed, his face pinched in an ugly little frown, arms hugged across his chest, “there aren’t any explosives in the supply depots. You said so... you said so yourself, before...”

Maria’s mind raced, searching frantically for some degree of sense, some understanding… and not finding any. She could only watch, helplessly, as Heymans worked through his complicated thoughts, making connections, comparing all the terrible convergences from the last few days to, Maria suspected, his own foregone conclusions. Parsing through the things Edward had said, and the things the young alchemist hadn’t needed to say.

As the silence grew long and heavy, thick enough to hang transfixed in the air, something softened in Breda’s severe expression, a sigh escaping seemingly of its own volition. The First Lieutenant looked, for a moment, almost peaceful.

No, Maria corrected herself. There was no peace on Heymans’s face, only iterations of beautiful brokenness.

An acceptance that pained him to his core.

At last Breda’s attention returned to his present circumstances, his eyes finally focusing, narrowing on Havoc.

“What do ya know,” he said quietly, tone sarcastic but bereft of humour: “you do listen every once and a while, Havo.”

Jean’s fists clenched until the bones pressed against his skin, the tendons in his hands jutting sharply. “Then why the hell did you send Edward out there!?” he demanded, his voice cracking.

“’Cause if he’s busy out there… he won’t be in here. He won’t be gettin’ any ideas about closing that Door.”

Maria felt as though each word was striking her in the sternum, hard enough to bruise.

“Heymans...” she began softly, her fingers clutching the hem of her uniform, “what are you saying...?”

She didn’t need to ask: she already knew. She could see the impossible, unthinkable resolution growing on Breda’s face. But she thought... she thought if there was some way to convince herself of her mistake, some way to interpret her own suspicions as the meagre stirrings of paranoia, the possibility was as good as real.

“All Doors open inwards,” said Heymans quietly, his back towards the archway. “That’s what the
Chief told us, right? That means the opposite is also true: it locks away from the closer, shuts the Truth on His side of the Gate and us on ours. Strikes me that whoever’s gonna have to close the Door… he’s gonna be stuck on the wrong side. Locked out of his own world.”

The realisation broke over her in a black, crushing wave, and Maria staggered under the force of it.

Havoc’s blue eyes widened alarmingly. But whereas Maria was stunned into silence, the First Lieutenant, it seemed, found his solace in anger. "Heymans, stop fucking around. What sort of shit talk is that?"

“Don’t worry about it, Jean.”

“Don't worry...? Fuck off!” Jean Havoc — brave, kind, stupid Jean Havoc — braced his fists against the floor and heaved his upper body into a sitting position. "You got the kid outta here so he couldn't close that Door. Why?"

"Because, Jean," said Breda solemnly, "I'm gonna close it for him."

To Maria’s horror, Havoc began to drag himself across the floor, his useless legs splayed out behind him, his face contorting in a rictus snarl of pain and fury.

“You’re not leaving me here, you rotten bastard!” he gasped. "If you think for one goddamn second—"

“Jean!” Maria tried to intercept the blonde man’s manic scrabble across the sand, but the look he shot her radiated such venom, such hatred, Ross took a few wary steps back.


Heymans sighed. “Havo—“

“No! You promised! You said you wouldn’t leave me... you promised...”

Jean yelped as a muscle spasmed in his spine, sending him face-first into the dirt. His bruised, broken body hit the ground with a hollow thump that made Maria want to weep. Jean lay there punching uselessly at the sand, screaming into his fists and crying out whatever was left of his heart. Gradually he quieted and curled himself into a tight ball, with his arms wrapped around his head. He rocked pathetically back and forth, whimpering and muttering curses, profanities and the frightened, timid pleas of a beaten child.

“Don’t leave me here alone, you selfish prick,” he sobbed.

Heymans crouched in the sand, and, ignoring the indignant, furious fists beating against his body, gazing unflinchingly into the blaze of his best friend’s anger, he gathered Jean into his arms, pulling Havoc's back flush against his chest.

Heymans murmured, “This is somethin’ I gotta do, Havo.”

“Let go of me!” snarled Jean, trying to twist his upper body out of Breda’s grip. “Let go, damn you!”

Heymans went on undeterred: “There used to be days where I thought we were okay, or at least we were gonna be. We’d be hangin’ out somewhere and everything would just fit right and I’d think, it’ll be okay if it can just be like this forever. But of course nothing can ever stay just how it is
forever, Havo.”

Maria Ross knew, then. She understood it all. Any anger and hurt she harboured dissolved, giving way to blind, screaming grief.

"I am not," growled Jean, gasping with exhaustion, his arms trembling, "going to let you waltz into that stupid fucking Portal!"

“I know you're not. That's why I gotta do this—”

“NO!” cried Havoc, almost a scream, “I won’t lose you! Not you too! Not like Hughes! Not like Buccaneer! I won't!”

“Jean, would you just listen for one goddamn minute!?” shouted Breda. “Someone’s gotta close that Door from the inside, and I’m not about to let the Chief throw his life away!”

“Then let me do it!” begged Havoc, his eyes swimming. “Me and my stupid, stupid legs… please, Heymans. I'm useless to Roy... useless to us. Please... lemme do something meaningful.”

“Once the Door is shut, you’ll have ‘em back, those legs of yours. Then you can take Catalina on that date, yeah? Go dancing… you always bragged about your crap dancing, Jean.”

“I don’t want…” he hiccupped, upset bubbling in his throat. Havoc’s face had gone grey with pain; tears poured down his face, his blue eyes awash with grief. “I don’t want any of… that shit. I just want my friend. I need you, Heymans.”

“We can’t have everything in life.”

“I don’t care! I'm not gonna let you just... let you just...”

Havoc couldn't bring himself to say the word.

“You’re not letting me do nothing. This is my choice.”

“Like hell it is!”

Maria caught the rising fury in Havoc’s eyes just before the blonde man swung at Heymans, the former’s knuckles connecting with the latter’s cheekbone, splitting the skin. As Breda’s head reeled, Jean lunged at him again, grabbing blindly at the other man’s face, fingers clawing at his mouth, his eyes, his hair... anything they could reach.

“Stop it!” cried Ross, surging towards them. “Stop it!”

Jean threw his upper body behind another punch, hitting Breda’s jaw with such force blood pooled into Heymans's mouth. Breda winced, pain erupting from the point of impact. But Jean’s swings were wild, uncoordinated, and his clumsy aggression was nothing compared to Breda’s cool, almost clinical calm. The bigger man wrapped one arm around Havoc’s skinny throat, held it there as the blonde man tried so desperately, desperately hard to move his lower body, to wiggle his way free.

“I’m sorry, Jean,” murmured Breda. "I’m so sorry. But we can't really afford to argue about this any more."

“Go to hell, you sonofabitch,” sobbed Havoc, his eyelids growing heavy, his arms falling slackly to his side.
“Yeah, well…

“That’s the plan.”

As Havoc drifted into unconsciousness, his head slumping, Breda eased the officer down to the sand, mindful of bumping his legs. Heymans parsed a few strands of blonde hair from his slippery forehead, his hand lingering on his friend's brow, before lurching to his feet...

And facing Maria Ross with her arms outstretched, standing between him and the Door.

Maria shuddered uncontrollably. She didn’t know it was she began crying, but once the tears started, she didn’t think they would ever stop. They fell fast and heavy until she could barely see Heymans standing in front of her. She only felt him resting his hands on her upper arms.

"Please don't do this," she whispered.

“You gotta be brave for ‘em, Marie,” he said quietly. “Brave for Havo and the rest of ‘em.”

“You can’t,” she keened. “You can’t just leave us.”

“But I can’t let the Chief take the fall for this. He's so young, Marie. Al’d never forgive us. Roy’d never forgive us. Edward’s got Win waiting for him back home. I couldn’t live with myself if I took their future away from them like that.”

“But what about the rest of us? Heymans…”

“Marie,” he whispered. “You just have to trust that this is the right thing to do.”

"Please, Heymans,” she begged. "Please..."

They stood facing each other for a long, long time.

“You,” he said quietly, smiling a small, sad smile, “you, of all people… despite everything that’s happened to you, you ain’t bitter. You ain’t cold. You’re still so good… still so kind. If I had the Boss’s alchemy or Ed’s ability to work miracles, I reckon I would give you your heart's desire in an instant. And I’d wipe away your tears and tell you not to cry.

“But I’m no alchemist, Marie. I’m just a soldier. There's nothing I can do or say that'll make this okay.”

Maria felt a sudden surge of stubbornness, like molten ore burning in every nerve, her body going warm. She understood, then, what manic energy had possessed Havoc, even in his critically injured state. “Then let me go with you, you idiot!”

“No can do, Lieutenant.”

“I won't let you face this alone!”

“And I won't let you give up on life so easily, Marie! That numbskull Denny'd follow me right into hell and eviscerate my ghost!”

She wanted to slap him. "How can you joke at a time like this!?"

"Because it's all I can do!” he cried, flinging his arms wide. "Because I'm so, so scared, Marie. And right now, the only thing giving me a little bit of courage is the thought that once this is all over, you'll move on and eventually live a long, happy life. That’s all I ask. You promise me that, and
I’ll feel goddamn invincible.”

“Why?!?” she demanded. “Heymans… why won’t you let me return the favour?” She pulled in a thick, wet sob. "Let me help you... please... we need you. I need--”

He flew towards her and flung his arms around her, pressing his cheek against hers.

Maria had been hugged before, but never with such urgency, such desperation. The move was so sudden, her arms were still pinned to her sides. Even so... there was something so warm in the gesture, something that felt right, smelt right. She let her body sag, her taut, aching muscles growing loose. He gave her the respect of an equal but cradled her like a cherished child. In that embrace she felt her worries lose their keen sting and some manner of hope raise its head from the sand. Perhaps it had been there all along, but without his love it had been trapped, like crystals in a stone. She felt him brush her dark hair back and kiss her forehead gently...

“I don’t think it makes any sense to try to extend a friendship that was only meant to last a season into a lifetime, Marie,” he said hoarsely.

Maria Ross leaned forward with a wail and took him into her arms, holding him against her, warm and alive and vital.

It was only faced with the imminent realisation of losing him that she understood how much of him was piled inside her, in endless stacks. His life and hers, intertwined, going on in a repeating loop, without a break. His memories, his words, his manner, which, sometimes, Maria hadn't thought deeply about or dismissed as silly or inane when she was with him -- even their argument on the train platform from the day before -- dropped like stones in her heart, creating tidal waves.

Maybe, she thought, maybe there wasn’t any hierarchy in friendship, and no sharp demarcations in degrees of love. It existed in and for itself, and for those who stood by her when she was hurting, when she was sad, when she was grieving. Who helped her -- one small person in a big, unfriendly world -- feel not quite so lonely.

"I love you, Heymans,” she murmured.

Maybe... what he felt for her was worth being scared for, and hoping for, and living for. Maybe worth dying for too, if that's what it came down to.

"I know, Marie. Thank you.”

It was the tacit law of loving people: the prospect of sacrifice. But, she knew... when her friend committed himself to sacrificing something precious, he was not really losing it. He was passing it on to someone else. To Edward and Winry, to the life they would have together. To Roy. To Havoc.

To her.

“Tell Jean…” Breda swallowed. His placid expression faltered for a moment. “Tell Jean…”

“He knows,” she whispered hoarsely. “My dear, dear friend… he already knows.”

“Alright then,” affirmed Breda, releasing her slowly, before clapping his hands together. Then: "I think it's time for me to go, yeah?"

He turned from Maria, who fought the urge to grab his shoulders, to pull him back to her, as though she could somehow protect him as Jean could not. He faced the darkness of the Door. It was like
stepping up to the gates of a forbidden, haunted fortress. A ghostly horde, she knew, was lying in ambush within. A host of black memories.

“Come on then, you bastards,” said First Lieutenant Heymans Breda. “Do your worst.”

He stepped towards the Portal. Maria choked down her raw sobs.

Be brave, she urged herself, be brave like Breda.

For Breda.

Watching his final march was like holding a butterfly. Or a heartbeat. Like bearing witness to something complete, and completely alive.

Heymans closed his eyes. As he moved towards the Gate, and something dark and writhing erupted from the void beyond the threshold, she thought she heard something… the sound faint, fleeting… Singing.

“It's a damn tough life, full of toil and strife,” murmured Breda, stepping through the Door, “we Easterners undergo… and we won't give a damn when the gales are done how hard the winds did blow.

“For we're homeward bound from the Northern grounds with a good mark taught and free, and we won't give a damn when we drink our dram with the girls from East City.

“Rolling down to East City, me boys, rolling down to East City.

“We're homeward bound from the Northern grounds, rolling down to East City…”

And then he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

"I was set free! I dissolved in the sea, became white sails and flying spray, became beauty and rhythm, became moonlight and the ship and the high dim-starred sky! I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life..." -- Eugene O'Neill, Long Day's Journey Into Night

Artwork courtesy of avent (thank you mate)
Act VIII Scene II: Paper Doves

Chapter Notes

I ended up editing a lot of the last chapter because the writing was rather sloppy. Anywho, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Weight of the World

It was very quiet, very cold, and very, very dark.

He hung, suspended, captive to the void. He could sense his body in only a strange, periphery sense, a fragile thing collapsed in a crumpled heap between two worlds. All around him, he could feel the pressure of the Gate, probing at him. Something black and teasing and without name began to trawl though his brain, sifting through his thoughts, his emotions. He tried to speak but he felt as though he had no throat to speak with, no sounds to form the words. Sundered by the silence, he felt every journey, every encounter, every conversation torn from him and toyed with. Every place that he had ever been to, every name he had ever heard, every face he had ever seen, examined and digested.

But the pain that had initially burned like fire had faded away to an icy numbness, like drowning in the nightmare depths of the ocean. Dark. Intoxicating. Cold. Black filled the edges of his vision; the only thing he could hear was his own heartbeat. Seconds passed as he floundered there, then, abruptly, he began to notice the voices. Thousands of them, words without name or end, meaningless murmurs. They swarmed over him, clutching at him, as though they wanted to help him, he realised. As though they wanted to save him.

If he was in any scene of mind or body to laugh, he would have laughed. They reminded him of toddlers, those voices, of children -- throwing a tantrum when things didn't go their way, naive to the darkness they themselves inhabited. It was almost ironic.

He could feel the energies of the Gate Dwellers streaming through him. He suddenly knew all of their long and tortured histories; he felt the pain of separation as they were torn from the physical world by their deaths, knew the anguish of being isolated from the rest of the universe, rotting beneath the skin of reality. He could sense the primal, almost animal greed they felt as the vastness of his living, breathing memories were spread out before them like nutrient-rich scum on an anchor, teasing them, but tethering him.

He hadn't felt the weight of his mooring when he first stepped through the Door. But he almost imagined the chains tightening around his wrists, the tightness returning with a vengeance.

He decided, then, that he wanted to be shut of it. He found himself sloughing off other memories, other times, other places, shedding them like sunburned skin. All the baggage that was weighing him down, keeping him pinned to the bottom. Let go of it all, he thought to himself, and he might just float free.

Memories peeling away, layer by layer. Streaming out of him like tears.
Then, suddenly, there was perihelion. The point of his closest brush with the sun.

Magnesium light torched every thought and tore whatever fine threads still held him together. Then he was plummeting in every direction; breaking up like a signal: jammed, dispersed waves of his consciousness flung out beyond the remotest orbits. Only their voices, the cries of the Gate Dwellers, injected into each hairline fracture, had lent him some degree of cohesion. They had been a centre of gravity around which he could gather the pieces of himself back together again. But the voices had gone abruptly quiet, leaving him with only the shattered core of himself. The ruins of a system once called... once called...

Then there was Nothing.

Just White.

An endless, featureless void. Without surface or edge, without time, without space. It was the kind of brilliant white that made even fresh-fallen snow look grey, the kind of white that seared his retinas, rendering him temporarily blind.

He blinked rapidly, holding a bladed hand to his forehead, casting about for an abrasion to mar the perfect monotony.

Suddenly, standing in front of him, smiling broadly, as though it knew something he didn't, was a Figure.

eh e l l o   t h e r e

He stared. The plume of his breath billowed out, quickly dissipating in the blinding white. "Hi," he said.

The Figure hummed thoughtfully. It stood at about his height, about his girth, spoke with a voice that was like hurling words into darkness and waiting for an echo.

I   d i d   n o t   e x p e c t   t o   e v e r   s e e   y o u   h e r e

"Yeah, well... join the club."

a r e   y o u   h e r e   f o r   s o m e o n e   i n   p a r t i c u l a r

The Figure grinned, almost affably, though he doubted the Figure felt emotion so much as feigned it. Though the Figure's smirk was friendly enough, showing rows of dazzling teeth, he couldn't suppress a shudder.

a   f r i e n d

a   f a m i l y   m e m b e r

o r   d i d   y o u   d o   s o m e t h i n g   n a u g h t y

"I'm no alchemist, pal," he corrected the Figure irritably.

o h

h o w   t e r r i b l y   i n t e r e s t i n g

t h e n   w h a t   a r e   y o u   h e r e   f o r ,   l i t t l e   i n t e r e s t i n g   m a n
He turned around, then. Behind him, he found to his complete lack of surprise, was a rather large Door. It opened inward, the panels solid metal, heavy, the most uninspired shade of grey. The surfaces were flat and shiny, like the outside of a stainless steel refrigerator. There were no handles, no locks, no hinges, nothing to get a grip on. The top and bottom, even the sides, lay so utterly flush with the frame he knew that, once closed, there would be no hope of jimmying it open even if he had a thousand years and several more thousand crowbars.

Across the threshold, there was darkness, a world etched in charcoal, night and day blended into one another. He took a deep, shuddering breath, and tried to think of lighter things.

Somewhere, beyond the grasping greed of the Gate Dwellers and the suffocating blackness, he imagined he felt the heat of the distant desert, the smell of baking sand, the godawful stench of cheap cigarettes...

"I'm here to close a Door," he said simply, turning back to the Figure. "It's letting in a draft."

"I see. You are no alchemist, little man, but you are willing to pay the toll, yes."

"I was willing as soon as I stepped up to the Gate."

"Such where withal; you must be very brave."

Even though he knew the Figure was mocking him, making fun of him, he realised it meant no malice by its humour. It found him amusing in the same way a child found peek-a-boo amusing, as though its understanding of humans had not yet found its own peculiar object permanence.

"I'm not brave," he said gently. "This is the easy part."

"Do you value your life so little."

"Perhaps it is not worth enough to shutter the Gate, eh."

"No, maybe it's not. But this is the best you're gonna get, pal, so like-it or lump-it."

"Is that the Truth."

"It's my Truth."

"Are you frightened."

"I was. I don't think I am anymore."

"Tell me why."

He sighed. "Because this is just a part of life. Sure, we get shouldered with burdens, some of 'em good, many of 'em not so good. Things happen to us. Loved ones die. Others get crippled. Others go blind. We lose our way, for one reason or another. It's not difficult to do. Life is hard and then we die alone. That's how it works. Death's a door, just like this old Door at my back. Except dying... it's a door only one person wide. When you go through it, you do it alone. But it doesn't mean you gotta be alone before you go through the door. And believe me, those guys I left behind... they aren't alone on the other side." He shrugged. "And you know what? That's enough for me."
The Figure grinned, a small pouting of its lips, a tilting of its head. It smiled at him, and then its gaze shifted to a spot over his shoulder, towards the Door, and the smile widened.

The Truth laughed.

you know, it said.

you might be interesting company

He returned the grin with one of his own. "No, I'm no alchemist," he affirmed. "But... I think we'll get along just fine.

"So tell me... you gotta pack of cards in here?"

Elsewhere

"When did you learn to drive a car?"

Scar scowled sidelong at the man in the passenger seat. "Do you imagine I travelled across Amestris by virtue of my own two feet?"

"I had always assumed that Yoki fellow drove you everywhere you needed to go."

"Implying that I allowed him to remain in my company with the express intent of having him serve as my chauffeur."

Miles paused for a moment, considering. "Why else would you keep someone like him around?"

Scar grunted, his shoulders rising and falling in a conciliatory gesture. "I concede a point, Major."

Their exchange made Riza smile a little. Though the motion no longer smarted, it seemed to pull at the skin of her face, as though her flesh had been stretched too thin over her cheekbones. Like tanned leather, in a way, warm and worn.

It was, she supposed, a consequence of Scar's alkehestry, a redistribution and transmutation of muscle that had turned her thin and lean. Every attempt at moving was more a negotiation than an order, the periphery aches and pains radiating from her head to the tips of her toes. Though the tenuous patch job was by no means perfect, it was still infinitely preferable to peering out through purple grotesqueness in the middle of her face. Her hand, leg, and ribs had been likewise healed, though, like the Xingese princess from five years ago, Scar in no way suggested his healing substituted for the care of a proper doctor and several weeks of bed rest.

Riza was inclined to agree: she felt as though some self-sustaining energy had been siphoned out of her. Though she knew she could never repay the kindness Miles and Scar had shown her, and though a part of her took solace in their comforting presence, she longed desperately for some solitude, a real haven for her tired mind, a sanctuary for her wounded body and soul.

She wanted to be alone with the one person in the world who never made her feel lonely.

Years of dire necessity and stringent etiquette had diluted her yearnings for such things, but the bricks that built her heart suggested a brief permeability when she did indulge certain thoughts, when she was very very tired, or very very sad. Her memories of him seemed to work a certain faith into the fabric of her soul.
As the Risen's stolen jeep jumped across the desert, she imagined what it would be like to see him again, watch him whip off his uniform jacket and wrap it around her, like an armoured cape of impossibly bright blue. Then he would wrap his arms around her too, for added protection. And allow Riza to bury her head against his broad shoulder.

And under the soft, warm shell of her commander's coat, Riza would feel naked and newborn, and acutely conscious of both facts. Due to the efficacy of Scar's alchemy, she would greet the General with a healed body: inviolate, fresh, unscathed, free of sin. But inside, she was still old, broken. And, of course, there were still scars left to mar her surface. There were still wrecks, old and recent, littering the deepest parts of her.

Even in her innermost thoughts, any sounds she imagined making upon their reuniting dissolved into silence, her words particulating into the stale, stagnant air.

'I've got you, Captain,' he would murmur to her, because it was all he could bring himself to say.

But that was okay... because it was all Riza wanted to hear.

Not that, of course, such unrealised desires would ever make themselves known to the likes of Scar or Miles, nor change anything about the way Captain Hawkeye behaved around her superior or guarded his carefully-crafted plans for Amestris's future, but she was human, after all. She was human, and she was hurting terribly, and she knew some things lay far beyond even her control.

That the world, for all its alchemical alignments and scientific certainties, continually confounded her with its predilection for not making a great deal of sense.

Next to her in the back-seat, Jin Hakuro sneezed, wrenching Riza from her thoughts.

She hazarded a glance at her companion. Though the boy had been rendered borderline catatonic by the shock of what he had done to Pythos — the memories of which, Riza knew, would haunt her at unconscionable hours for many nights to come — stealing away in the Professor's car, leaving the empty carcass of Kanda behind, had roused Jin from his stupor. He fidgeted incessantly as the vehicle rattled over the sloped terrain, rubble and ruin giving way to open desert. The sun was beginning to rise in the east, the first rays of burnished gold dancing through the dust. The dawns, Riza realised abruptly, had not changed much since the War. Before, watching the muted light of the sunrise from her nest, what Riza had imagined should have brought warmth to a new day had only seemed to solidify the reality of loss. In the dark they had had only the smell of cordite and blood and bombs and fire to contend with, but under the radiating glow of the clouded sky, there had been no hiding. Even as the rising sun streamed through the goldthread of Jin's curls, illuminating his pale face like something divine, Riza wished with all her might that it would sink back down below the horizon, so she could have more time to grieve, to forgive, to forget, to process her abrupt change in fortune. But she could no more dismantle the sun than she could the unreconciled yearnings of her innermost thoughts.

Because it was eternal, the dawn. Riza rested her head against the window, felt the press of its grainy texture against her forehead. It was always sunrise somewhere; the dew was never all dried at once; a shower was forever falling, a vapour forever rising. Perpetual sunrise, perpetual sunset, perpetual dawn and gloaming, on deserts and cities and battlefields, each in its time, as the world turned eternally.

Jin made a tiny, tattered sound in his throat. His angelic appearance was belayed by the splinterly light in his blue eyes.

Without preamble, without reason, Jin ignored the crusted black blood on his knuckles as he stuffed his entire fist into his mouth.
Hawkeye grimaced. "Don't do that, Jin," she admonished gently. She made no move to touch him.

The boy glared at her with such intensity, such vitriol, Riza could have sworn the interior temperature of the car rose by several degrees. Both Major Miles and the Muhaddith trailed off into silence; though neither turned his head, Riza could sense their undivided attention, wondering, no doubt, how their confrontation would play out.

The Captain swallowed; the back of her throat felt red and raw. "Your hands are dirty, you'll get sick."

"Hungry," muttered Jin through his fist, knuckles pressed against his teeth, breath hissing.

"You can't eat that," she said, quietly but firmly.

Jin's pupils dilated, until only a slivered crescent of blue peeked out from behind the eclipsing black. "Eat you, instead?"

"No," said Riza.

"I'll skin your eyeballs with my teeth."

"I would rather you didn't." Scar had offered to bind the boy. While Riza had stalwartly refused at the time, in retrospect she wondered if perhaps her decision had been made in haste...

"Is everything quite all right back there, Captain?" came Miles's sonorous voice from the passenger seat, far more solemn than she was accustomed to hearing.

Before Riza could answer him, Jin's slobbery fist flew to the side of his head and he hit himself, hard. Hawkeye, on instinct, made a grab for the boy's skinny wrist, but Jin retreated into the seat, trying to wedge himself between the chassis and the door. He clutched at his hair as he squeaked:

"He's like me! Got that crinkly insect crawling in our ears and we can't pick it out! Can't pick it out!"

Riza didn't need to rely on her fluency in reading body language to sense the sudden tension radiating from Major Miles.

"Beats in brain matter," muttered Jin. "Lives in the line of our skulls. If you run a needle over the ridges, what song would we play? What voices would we hear?"

"That boy..." murmured Miles.

"What is it you want from me, hmm?" trilled Jin, cutting across whatever the Major was about to say. The boy mimed a grating, posh tone of voice: "Why is it you're so hostile towards me? Are you after an apology or a bribe, Major? Perhaps what you really want is to know how each of your kinsmen died? It is a request I am only too happy to oblige."

Miles let out his breath in one long exhale, a nameless, formless something hanging untethered in the air. "Only one man has ever said those words to me," uttered the Major in his low dulcet. "And that man is dead." His red eyes shifted, finding Riza's amber ones in the rear-view mirror. "Captain, who is this boy?"

Hawkeye sighed, her chest rising and falling slowly, remembering, for a moment, the dull ache in her abdomen from her ribs knitting back together. "Jin is General Hakuro's son," she said quietly.
Scar made a non-committal sound. "His mind is gone."

There was no derision or degradation in the Muhaddith's voice — it was, Riza supposed, a simple statement of fact, devoid of appraisal. For a man who was once known the country over for dealing out death and judgement, he seemed reticent to prolong the practice. Content, or perhaps consigned, to his place in the margins of the world.

As Riza considered the man's curious, though characteristic, taciturnity, she couldn't help but wonder if the scarred Ishvalan, like her, found some solace in his solitude, in the act of shutting out the rest of the world, holding himself separate from it.

But if Riza and Scar remained sober and stolid, then Major Miles was positively stoic. His red stare was flat, almost dull, as he stared out the front windshield. The only motion came from the reflection of the sand and the rising sun, motes of light spinning in tightly-knit pirouettes out into the gloaming dawn.

"The boy encountered the Truth," said Miles quietly. It was not a question.

Riza hid well her surprise, giving a curt nod to her superior officer. "From the same breach Professor Stokes means to use to control General Mustang." She explained, "During the initial excavation of the Mishaari site, Jin drew too close to the Gate of Truth——"

"And the prolonged exposure drove him insane," finished Miles, his voice as flat as his eyes. "The boy saw too much. His mind snapped."

"Yes... but sir, how——"

"Captain," said Miles gravely, "I, too, saw the Truth."

Riza was too stunned to say anything at first, but she could not deny that the Major's strange lack of presence suddenly made far more sense. He had taken to gazing straight ahead, only half-aware of a world outside the claustrophobic comfort of the car, of Scar's hands stroking the wheel, the almost soundless changing of the gears, the dancing motes of dust as they adjusted to each other quietly. Though the Miles she remembered from Fort Briggs had never worn his heart on his sleeve, he was far from cold. The man sitting in the front seat, however, seemed somehow numb, as though some of the light and life had gone out of his world. Major Miles seemed to regard everything involving other people with a newfound wariness, a hesitation, as though the fact of their being there was in some way painful for him. The emotions, whether they were joy, sorrow, love or pride, were so deep and sharp that in the end they left him feeling raw, exposed and in pain. The human heart was not designed to operate outside the human body and yet, Riza suspected, his heart ran the risk of becoming bared, beating forever through the exposed girders of his chest.

"Major," she ventured, carefully, "was something taken from you?"

Miles shook his head slowly, a few strands of white coming loose from his severe tail. "This Door is not the result of human transmutation, Captain," he said. "Unlike the others, I surrendered nothing to the Truth."

"It is as you say, Amestrian... a breach. A crack in the world." The Muhaddith sighed. "Through which people fall, and things are lost."

"My contact with the entities within the Gate of Truth lasted less than a minute," said Miles. "Not long enough for my mind to atrophy, perhaps, but long enough to know the forces within that Door ought not to be trifled with."
Riza bit the inside of her mouth, centring on the Major's words. "Sir," she began, "please don't mistake my question for a lack of concern for your own well-being, but what did you mean... 'unlike the others'..."

A feeling of dread started to build in Riza's chest as Scar peered over his shoulder at the other Ishvalan, eyes narrow and probing. Miles, on the other hand, continued to stare resolutely out the front windshield.

"Major..." breathed Riza. Her hand clenched in a fist. She held still, waiting for Major Miles to say something, to tell her he had misspoken, that he had been referring to the alchemical rebounds of human transmutation as a principle and not the small group of soldiers waiting for them in Dairut. To set her mind at ease with the reassurance of empty rhetoric.

But there was a visceral presence beneath the words, waiting for her, though she endeavoured not to see it. The risk was too great and her fear too definite: it took, at that moment, an awful specific form, a pervasive and perpetual sensation of dread and disquiet. It grew in the lining of her stomach like a tumour.

Finally, Miles looked up at her. His eyes were hard, letting no emotion show.

"The breach lets things in as well as out. Undoes resurrection. Collects on its returns," he told her, his voice pitched low. "Consequently, Lieutenant Havoc was paralysed. And General Mustang was blinded."

Riza felt as though her blood was sloughing slowly through her body, sick and tainted. Horror swelled and grew before her face, like a warm, bluish boil, growing in her mouth, choking off the words, its eclipse casting a shadow in her eye.

"I see," she murmured, feeling suddenly very tired.

"I'm sorry, Captain."

"Is he safe, sir?"

Miles's eyes softened a fraction of a degree. "Yes. General Mustang and Lieutenant Havoc both. Young Edward Elric is looking after them."

"Edward is with them?" she probed, one eyebrow arching in surprise.

"Yes, Captain." Miles humphed. "A lot has happened in your absence."

Riza closed her eyes, her mouth curling into a small, sad smile. A wave of remorse washed over her, the stale odor of it soaking into her clothes and lingering in the windless stuffiness of the car's interior and the desert tracks to nowhere; heavier than angst, slower than panic.

"I have grown complacent, sir," she murmured into the window glass. "I should be there, with him."

To Hawkeye's surprise, it was Scar who spoke up from the driver's seat: "Captain," he muttered, "if you did not act as you did in defence of your commander, it is likely he would already be lost to Professor Stokes. A life is a terrible burden to assign to anyone but yourself. Have you not suffered enough trying to maintain your own existence? You cannot possibly ask yourself to do the same for your commander, as well. And I do not think the Flame Alchemist would thank you for sacrificing your own life for the sake of his safety."
Miles threw his countryman a sharp look, as surprised as Riza by the statement. "Regardless of General Mustang's disinclinations," she said stonily, "the simple matter of rank renders his life more valuable than mine. I am duty-bound as a commissioned soldier and honour-bound as his adjutant to protect him. I failed to take into account the possibility of the Gate's influence on his eyesight when I made my decision on the train, and as a result, my commanding officer is blind in a war-zone."

"Do you regret your actions?" asked Scar.

She sighed. "They were necessary at the time. But the situation changed... I failed to change with it."

The Muhaddith took an abrupt left turn, the ground rising in a steady incline as the jeep approached the slopes of the Mishaari crater. "That is life, Captain," he said simply. "There is far less shame in acknowledging a mistake than allowing it to fester."

"You sound so sure."

"You cannot see a past that did not happen any more than you can foresee a future yet to come." A grunt. "I am a man who has known my far share of regrets, Captain. More than you will ever know. They are as eternal as this desert."

She considered the back of his head, his white hair, once shorn short, pulled into a severe tail to match Miles's own. "Are we never to be free of them?" she murmured.

"You must learn to accept them. I do not think highly of those with nothing to complain of and nothing to regret. I do not respect people who have never fallen or stumbled. Their virtue seems to me to be of little value, because life has not yet revealed its difficulties to them."

It was strange, Riza decided, to hear the circumspect Scar so talkative, and Miles so silent. The Major had gone as deathly quiet as Jin, and like Jin, seemed determined to wedge himself into the gaps in the cracked leather upholstery. His fingers on his knees picked at persistent threads trailing from his trousers.

Ahead of them, the sun blazed across the sand. The road rose sharply, until they passed over the ridge of the basin and began their descent into the valley below. As the ancient ruins unfurled from beneath the jeep, Riza realised, in that moment, that they were all of them wrapped up in their own private contradictions. A murderer turned messiah; a man both besieged and embraced by his uniform blues; a boy tortured by his own cognisance; a woman who found it necessary to protect the man she loved from a distance, and yet could not bear to be separated from him.

What sad creatures they were, she marvelled.

The unified diametrics, in some way, resolved themselves into a paradigm she could half-recognise, an equivalent exchange composed of opposition, as primordial as the concept of original sin and conscious awareness of human fallibility. Contradiction as the perpetual agent of transformation in human affairs. Theirs seemed an admixture of instinct and reason, kindness and cruelty, immorality and seeking redemption.

Riza's attention once again drifted to Scar. The overwhelming sense of anguish, and with it, the need for redemption, had driven him to endure the terrible weight of catastrophe, both carried and caused by him. Hawkeye remembered, abruptly, that it had been Major Miles who had steered the alchemist killer onto a path of absolution. It was strange, then, that Miles should trail behind Scar... more like a shadow filling the space beside him than any guiding hand in the darkness. Whatever
had happened during his encounter with the Truth, it had changed him irreparably. Contact with the Gate may not have taken his eyesight, but Major Miles seemed somehow rendered blind. She wondered if, perhaps, Scar's quiet, collected wisdom was in some way his own means of returning the favour, an attempt at leading his friend back home.

Cogitating on the possibility, Riza caught a whiff of something sweet under the lingering smells of hot sand and burning rubber. She inhaled deeply, instinctively wanting to savour it, but then she nearly choked when it landed on her tongue with a bitter tang. The smell was so strong, she actually made a face.

"What is--" she began.

Then the heart of the crater erupted.

Around the centre of the basin -- the focus seemingly a pair of huge white pylons, the only freestanding structure in the entire site -- a lance of blue-white light pierced the gathering dawn -- an array of five columns, Riza realised, squinting against the rising sun, from five deep shafts in an irregular pentagon half a mile across the valley of the basin, blended into one by the steadily-decreasing distance. An instant later, there was a blinding flash, like sheet-lightning, and a huge ball of blue light belched upward, leaving a series of smoke-rings to float more slowly after it, scorching the air like burning solder. A strange, incandescent electricity rose, twisting, writhing, changing shape, turning to dark smoke in one moment and belching flame and crackling with lightning the next. Riza could have sworn she saw the small hairs on the back of Scar's neck stand on end. He brought the jeep screeching to a halt before the edge of the excavation site, burying the tires in the sand.

"That's alchemy," murmured Miles, the first words he'd said in many minutes. The light turned his red eyes the colour of dry blood.


"Jin," said Riza, struggling to keep a tremor out of her words, "what is happening... do you know? Jin?"

"I see little point in interrogating him, Captain."

"A hunch, sir." Hawkeye met Jin's manic blue eyes. She began quietly: "Is this what Mr. Priam said was going to happen, Jin? Is this why you wanted to play with Roy Mustang?"

"Risen! Risen!" he cried in a high falsetto. "God of all ways, but only Death's to me, once and again, O thou, Destroyer named, thou hast destroyed me, thou, my love of old!"

Scar and Miles exchanged a glance, but what bemused her superiors merely confirmed her suspicions.

"Could the Door be the cause of this?" wondered the Major aloud, eyeing the blue light warily.

"No, sir," said Riza grimly. She patted Jin's arm, intending to comfort; the boy recoiled from her as though her touch had scorched him. "There is an old story about a Xerxian princess who was given the gift of prophecy, but was also cursed by the gods so that her true prophetic statements would not be believed."

"The story about Cassandra," confirmed Miles. "Do you mean to suggest Professor Stokes is performing alchemy, Captain?"
"She must be using her own formulae to direct the souls on the other side of the Gate into the General's mind," said Riza, swallowing down the bile burning the back of her throat. "She's using the entire crater as an enormous focusing lens, directing the diffusion of alchemical energy the distance from the focal point to a corresponding principal plane."

As she spoke, Hawkeye twisted her torso and fished around in the boot of the jeep, finding one of the bolt action rifles and several rounds of ammunition left over from the Risen's attack on the train. Miles's eyes went wide as the Captain kicked open the car door.

"Hawkeye, what are you doing?!"

"The archaeologists recognise this vehicle as one of their own," added the Muhaddith with a note of caution. "They will not attack us so long as you remain inside. But the illusion will not hold for long if you elect to leave."

"If Professor Stokes is the one responsible for the transmutation, Major, sayyid Muhaddith," explained Riza breathlessly, "then I'm inclined to suspect she's using the entire crater as a huge focusing array. She'll be overseeing the calculations from the heart of the circle, near that temple in the western sector."

"I was more referring to what you intend to do with that rifle, Captain," snapped Miles, irritation colouring his face.

"With respect, sir, I imagine it's fairly self-explanatory." She took a deep breath, felt the desert air blaze a burning trail down into her lungs. "I won't let my commander come to harm, Major," she said quietly.

"Your injuries--!"

"This is something I have to do." She stepped out of the jeep.

"I'll make it an order, Captain Hawkeye!"

"I'm sorry, sir." She allowed herself a tiny smile as she looked back over her shoulder. "But I know General Armstrong gave you express orders to disobey General Mustang under certain circumstances. If you believe he has issued a dangerous command, correct? As it so happens... my superior gave me similar orders."

"Hawkeye..."

"Goodbye, Major Miles. Protect the boy. Bring him home." Then, in broken Ishvalan, to the Muhaddith: "Ishvalla go with you, merciful Scholar."

Then she was out of the jeep.

And Riza Hawkeye was running.

The clangour of the initial transmutation had died away -- the five columns of blue light burned with an eerie silence Riza recognised well from a life spent amongst alchemists. The pale, bleak sun that glittered so blindingly from the white sand and bleached marble ruins struck sheens of silver from the corners of her eyes, making her feel as though jaws of teeth were closing around her, glinting in her peripheries. The excavation site near the temple was empty, any personnel having long-since retreated to safer distances. No matter how revered their leader or their alleged messiah, thought Riza, with no small measure of disgust, Stokes's followers were not so keen to meet with Roy's own fate.
The very thought made her breath snag painfully in her chest. Pulling the bolt of her rifle, ignoring the sudden bruising pains in her abdomen and the limp in her gait, Riza scoured the ruins for her quarry.

The warmth of the desert made her feel sticky and suffocated. Her clothes and hair, slick with perspiration, clung to her skin. Sweat rolled down her back in thick, salty beads. She could feel her heart throb inside her rib-cage. The top of her head felt as though it was roasting. She began bouncing slightly as she jogged, her footfalls shifting in the loose sand, which did nothing to bolster her pace. She was soon reduced to lopsided stumbling. Hawkeye was vaguely aware of a stinging in her right leg, just below the thigh. Her lungs felt ready to burst, her chest rising and falling with sharp stabs of pain, as though her ribs were still broken. Her throat was so dry...

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, Professor Winifred Stokes -- the one the Risen called Cassandra -- was not difficult to spot. She stood before an ancient arcade of columns, the stone pillars flanking the wide courtyard before the temple's entrance. The rising sun glanced off the polished white of the pylons, forcing Riza to squint. The small woman was a vague silhouette standing in front of what had once been a processional causeway, holding a piece of chalk in one hand, grey curls blowing about her face in the tempest of her alchemy. She stood with her plump arms crossed, her back bent slightly with age, watching the ensuing transmutation with a quiet, collected patience, as though she was checking lecture notes on a blackboard.

"Stokes!" croaked Captain Hawkeye, bringing her rifle to bear against her cheek. Her words were as jagged and sharp as splintered glass, as the light in Jin's eyes... "Get on your knees, Professor."

Professor Stokes turned around sedately. Her eyebrow rose in an apathetic, lazy arch, regarding Riza with a certain degree of surprise but a distinct lack of concern. "Oh." The old woman hummed thoughtfully. "You're still alive, are you? You're not hobbling around like me when my arthritis acts up, so I can't imagine Professor Bates hurt you too terribly."

"Pythos is dead," said Riza flatly.

"I gathered that, dear. Though I can't say I'm terribly distraught over it. Did you kill him?"

"Jin Hakuro bit through his windpipe. It took him ten minutes to die."

Riza tried -- and failed, to her shame -- not to acknowledge the small glimmer of satisfaction at seeing some of the colour drain from Stokes's face. "How savage," she muttered. "And let me guess, Miss Hawkeye, you're here to finish the job?"

"It's Captain," growled Riza, cocking her gun a little higher, "and I'm here for my commanding officer. Tell me where Roy Mustang is."

Rather than acquiesce, Stokes let out a giggle, even covering her mouth with the back of one small hand, as though the pair of them were gossiping over tea.

It infuriated Riza quite beyond sense.

"You stupid girl!" laughed Stokes with genuine mirth, genuine amusement. "It doesn't matter where he is. It doesn't matter if you pull that trigger, and it doesn't matter if you dash into that temple and drag him out by his toes! The transmutation is done... it's over, dear."

"You're the architect!" snarled the Captain. "You can stop it! You will stop it!"

"For the record," Professor Stokes went on as though she hadn't hear her, "I've never had any
illusions about you, Riza Hawkeye. I knew you and your precious ideals were silly and frivolous and empty-headed. I knew your love for your superior was deceitful. For people like me, dear, it's a tool used to manipulate and ruin anyone who is stupid enough to hold on to it. And at the risk of belabouring a point, my girl, I want you to know that I firmly count you among that company."

"Stokes, stop this! Please... your lieutenants are dead. Grumman will not remain ignorant of the situation for much longer. End this now... before anyone else suffers for it."

"I think you mistake my inability for unwillingness, pet. I'm sorry; I should clarify," Stokes's dark brown eyes glittered like a snake's: "the transmutation is merely a focusing mechanism. There is only one way to stop the Ascension and it is, I'm afraid, something of a terminal one. There is no way to stop the birth of the Speaker of the Dead."

In that moment, the gloaming light seemed shadowed, her hurt surging like the tide on frigid sand. Her knees threatened to give, and the pain in her leg was strong enough to make her vision swim dizzily. Nausea rolled in her stomach, and her sure, steady hands began to tremble.

Stokes tucked her hands into her cardigan, watching the Captain's unravelling.

Riza had been tortured, brutalised, assaulted, very nearly something far, far worse. She had been willing to die in order to free herself from her role as the Risen's puppet, their hostage, and a means by which to control Roy. But the pain, the fear, the horror of the last two days couldn't hold a candle to Hawkeye's sudden suffocating sense of loss -- the prospect that, despite her best efforts, despite every broken bone and bruise, despite thinking of nothing else save keeping him safe... she had failed in that very same duty.

Though the reality of it made itself known in the mocking smirk on Professor Stokes's face, it remained beyond Riza's comprehension. She had known such grief and loss only once before, in the White Room under the Third Laboratory, watching a Homunculus's violet eyes glitter cruelly in the peroxide-bright light.

He could not be gone.

Riza blinked. She felt something hot and wet splash on her hand. She made no move to wipe the tears away, although, unlike five years ago, she made no move to collapse to the ground in despair, either. It would have been far too painless, she realised.

Because her memory was all she had left of him, anymore. Moments and feelings, captured in amber, strung on filaments of reason. Chipping away at memory over time was tantamount to the wholesale destruction of a person, killing them as surely as a rifle bullet through their skull.

So, instead, Riza forced herself to remember.

In her mind, she imagined crossing and recrossing their tangled histories, tracing the labyrinths they had mapped of each other's lives, its dingy mazes: each assignment, each mission, each door, every war, every corridor in headquarters, every room in her childhood home, every dune and nest in Ishval... even the bed they had shared on the night after the Promised Day, if for however brief a time. What he said, what she said, what they did, what others did to them. Even the times they argued, fought, parted, agonised, rejoined. How they’d loved to cut themselves on each other, taste their own blood. How ruinous they were together, how broken.

But how else could they live with themselves, in the mire of amends and promises never made, except in the midst of ruin? They had been each other's salvation.
Until that moment, Riza Hawkeye had not understood that hers was a story about lonely people, about absence and loss, and the reasons why she had taken refuge in her sadness until the damask had become indistinguishable from every other pattern in her life, like someone who had escaped into the pages of a novel because the man she loved had seemed, at times, little more than a ghost inhabiting the mind of a stranger. So perfect was the idea of him. So vast was his distance.

So impossible their fulfilment.

If the world truly operated according to the laws of equivalent exchange, and each person was, in of themselves, a mess of contradictions and unified diametrics, then they were reciprocal, her and him. A pair as perennial, as perfect, as alchemy.

They were each other's reflections, the mirrors through which they could glimpse their own small manner of Truth.

He was her Truth.

And now... he was gone.

"I think..." murmured Riza, her words dropping like stones, "I think I'm going to have to kill you, Professor Stokes."

Cassandra prophesied, humming quietly to herself, "Is this love, Captain Hawkeye?"

"No," said Riza.

"I just want you to die."

Rather than respond, Professor Stokes took a small step backwards, inching the heel of her boot across the sand covering the courtyard. Riza matched the movement, maintaining the distance between them.

"So much for those ideals of yours," said Stokes tartly. "This seems a poor way to memorialise your beloved commander, Captain. Although... the Hero of Eastern Rebellion, the engineer of the Ishvalan massacre, the man who murdered thousands with his own two hands... I suppose some sacrificial slaughter retains a certain poetic consistency."

"I don't care," said Hawkeye hollowly -- her own words stabbed like needles in the roof of her mouth. "You killed him."

"He's still very much alive, dear."

"No... you killed him."

Stokes hopped over a wrinkle of black rock, tiptoeing on the sand. "Well," she mused, "if you're going to shoot me, Miss Hawkeye, you had better get on with it. Someone is bound to notice us, sooner or later."

Her hands grew steady. She released a long breath. "Do you have anything else you want to say, Professor?"

Winnie Stokes smiled primly as she looked skyward, the blue light of the crater's array dancing in her eyes. "I want to sing my own dirge," she said; it took Riza a moment to realise the woman was reciting something: "I pray to the sun, to this last minute of life: let my enemies pay with blood for what they did to me. I'm just a killed slave, easy fistful of death. But you, oh humans, oh human
things -- when a man is happy, a shadow could overturn it. When life goes wrong, a wet sponge erases the whole picture. You, you," Stokes's head snapped down, staring directly at Riza, freezing her to the spot: "I pity."

Then, the Professor turned on her heel and sprinted across the courtyard.

"Stokes!" cried Hawkeye, shouldering her rifle. She took off after the Risen’s leader, trying to close the gap.

She could not afford to miss the shot.

Running across the causeway was like running into a different microclimate: Hawkeye felt as though her lungs were slowly filling with water; the air smelled strange, almost rancid, each breath devoid of oxygen, and the marble underfoot burning through the soles of her shoes with martial ferocity. Though Ishval was hot, the courtyard was hellishly warm, making it exceedingly difficult to breathe.

Hawkeye didn't care.

"Get back here, you coward!" cried Riza; she tasted her tears on her lips.

"Bring him back," she whispered to herself, pulling in a tiny, tortured whine. "Bring him back."

*Bring him back.*

"RIZA!"

She looked up, towards the shadowed entrance of the temple pylons, at least a hundred yards away.

She saw the two tall, pale soldiers first: one with silver hair, glinting in the morning light, the other with a long, raven plait, trailing behind her like the tail of a comet.

And carted between them, black eyes blazing, a look of such anguish on his face it stole her breath away, was...

*Bring him back.*

"RIZA, STOP!"

Distracted by the sound, Hawkeye was too late to veer aside as Professor Stokes caught her upper arms, deftly swinging the Captain in her momentum until the two women stood chest to chest, over a rumpled patch of earth, the ground black like charcoal and burning like fire under the rubber of Riza's boots.

"The Forevertime for the both of us then, Riza Hawkeye," murmured Professor Stokes, clutching the Captain to her, pinning her arms at her side.

Riza caught the smell of rotten eggs. The air seared her face. The ground seemed to shift, rumbling through the marrow of her bones.

Then both she and Stokes were falling, something large and pointy planting itself in Riza's side and sending her over the patch of black earth, towards one of the ruin's marble bases. Her wounded leg twisted awkwardly under her body weight, and Riza's head cracked against the corner of the pedestal, breaking her fall. As red and black spots coruscated across her vision, she felt a
superheated wind buffet her face, the smell of sulphur and burning wool, a hissing in her ears like steam from a kettle. And somewhere -- close by, she suspected, though the sound seemed distant, dim -- someone was screaming. Screaming in such pain Riza Hawkeye wanted to weep.

The last thing she heard, before she lost consciousness, was someone bellow:

"MAJOR MILES!"

Chapter End Notes

ohmigawd there's only one more chapter... (but it's gonna be hella long so yay???)
Act VIII Scene III: Paper Doves

Chapter Summary

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

-- W.H. Auden

Chapter Notes

AO3 community member avent has done an absolutely stunning illustration of Roy from Act VIII Scene I, which I've embedded in the correct chapter, and can also be viewed here: https://imgur.com/a/VBGaB. Ta, avent!

We've come to the end, my friends.

I know it's just a wee bit of fanfiction, and I know it's nothing liable to catch very many eyes, but writing this story has been an absolute delight and a welcome respite from a crazy few months. This past half a year or so, I've been stationed literally an ocean away from home doing research, and being so far from my friends and my family could get dreadfully lonely at times. But every time I posted a new chapter, I always woke up the next morning looking forward to reading such lovely and thoughtful comments from each of you. Writing this story gave me something to do, but it also gave me some much-needed company.

I hope, as always, that this final instalment meets your expectations. It's been so much fun, even if it has been scary and painful and sad, at times. But life can be, if nothing
else, scary and painful and sad, and just as Arakawa-San’s characters find their own ways out of their dark times, so, too, will you find your way out of yours.

Enjoy, and thank you.

- K.T. (Hoopy)

(also dear lord forgive me, this final chapter is looooooong)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Into Nothingness, Into Everything**

**Somewhere**

The wind howled, piling up snow in drifts, blinding the night with ice-white dust. He walked bent over against the cold, protecting his eyes with his arms. Trees and boulders loomed into view before vanishing, swallowed in the white. His breath billowed pale in the numbing air.

Snowflakes whirled about his head in delicate, frozen fractals, alighting on the backs of his hands; he brought a few close to his eyes. Each form seemed to encompass a billion pinprick galaxies, slow bursts of nuclear life amidst the mountain cold. At the sight, he imagined the rough sphere of the cosmos blossoming within each drift, growing as he watched, life pushing forward against the night.

The moment seemed to go on forever, even as the sky grew blacker and the snow fell thick and heavy, clumps of wet flakes drifting mindlessly down, the air moist, the ground giving way softly underfoot. All the while, he held the fractals in the palms of his hands, contemplating the infinite cascade of life and death and resurrection. Perhaps, like some tacit law of entropy and thermodynamics, the recurrences of destiny bound by the snow and the silence were cyclical, never created anew, merely extant in new forms, new worlds, new life.

He supposed the poets and the alchemists had glimpsed it; it encircled the world, and hence it encircled him. It swallowed its own tail, endlessly feeding on its own selfhood, a curve of a geometric figure, each part with the same statistical character as the whole. It was everything there was and would be. Fighting it would be like battling a pattern, or shouting against the snowstorm. The glimmer in his eyes reflected the light of the cosmos and all its tiny battles. Yet, inside the conception, the grand poem of encirclement, of recurrence and resurrection, a single life still blazed.

**Her life.**

She was a desolate figure, mournful and lonely on the rocks, beckoning him with her wistful song. Her eyes were the colour of raw winter mornings. Under the darkening sky, her blonde hair looked almost white. She belonged in elements as wild and freezing and beautiful as she was: the snow, the cold, the hollow pitilessness of the mountains, where her subsumption made her a part of something important, something whole.

He reached out and touched her, her life. It was, in that moment, a short life, and an infinite one. A life that had known love, and pity, and laughter. That had known pain, and grief, and fury. He presented himself to her, and she saw in him what he could not see himself.
He wanted to go home.

She took his hand.

Cold and silence. Nothing quieter than the snow. The sky screamed to deliver it, a hundred furies flying on the edge of the blizzard. But once the snow covered the ground, it hushed as still as his heart...

Elsewhere

Three Days Later

I

“You seem a man with something pressing on his mind, Master Elric.”

I was trapped in the dark borehole of his thoughts, Ed hadn’t heard Major Miké’s approach, sidling up to him with a jauntiness belayed slightly by the thick white bandage around her hand and the scorch marks on her clothes. Her face was streaked with soot. Dark umbras pulled at her eyes, making her look, if possible, even gaunter than usual.

Without waiting for an invitation, or even for Ed to acknowledge her presence, Sofia plopped down on the station platform next to him, stirring the sand, making Ed cough conspicuously. The Feldspar Alchemist seemed not to notice the sound, or the way Ed glared at her out of the corner of his eye. She watched the desert, lost in the rhythmic percussion of the wind upon the sand, the babble of voices from Dairut and the hiss of steam from the incoming trains. Her blue-purple eyes were steady on the horizon, pale face infused with a rare blush of colour as the noonday sun climbed higher in the sky. Ed didn’t know why, but Sofia’s thin mouth bore the semblance of a smile, just enough to show that she was enjoying her strange thoughts, whatever they may have been.

Ed scooted slightly away from her, yet stayed quiet, allowing the Major to remain lost in introspection a little while longer. After a few seconds, Ed shaded his eyes and peered across the broken waste of desert, trying to see what held the Major’s attention, and not finding it.

The moment passed, and Ed crossed his arms across his knees, rested his head on the tops of his folded wrists. He wasn’t really in the mood for Major Miké’s -- for anyone’s -- company. He’d squirrelled himself away in one of the unused station terminals with the express purpose of steering clear of conversation. And Ed figured part of avoiding thoughts about something was not encouraging opportunities for that something to makes itself felt... hence his hiding from the Amestrian coalition forces. From the Major.

From Mustang.

From the aftermath of the Accident.

Ed’s stomach clenched. He grasped at the leg of his trousers, scratching at the fabric to avoid raking a hand through his hair.

He considered, for a moment, asking Sofia to shift herself, but Ed found he couldn’t summon the energy necessary to try. He was fatigued, too tired to even eat. His right arm ached.

And he was terribly, terribly sad.
The woman at his side looked skyward. A few white clouds drifted lazily overhead, too few and far between to punctuate the high, hot sun with the respite of shade. The sky was a brilliant blue, as blue as Winry Rockbell’s eyes, and the air seemed cooler, sharper -- cleaner, somehow, as though the wind had wiped the world clean. The breeze played with the tailing ends of Sofia’s hair, and Ed stared at her in surprise, noticing the glaringly obvious for the first time.

“You cut it off,” he murmured.

Her hair shone like the sea at night, the black strands utterly white where the bright rays of the sun glanced from their surfaces. Sofia, however, just snorted. “You could teach a masterclass in misdirection, Edward,” she noted ruefully, not denying the fact she’d lopped her long plait clean off, but not dropping her earlier inquiry, either. She could be as tenacious as a splinter, thought Ed, and far more irritating.

“You’ve done a marvellous job of avoiding everyone’s company these past several days, my boy. No easy feat, considering Grumman's managed to marshal every reserve force from Eastern to Briggs.”

Ed knew the truth of it: everything had happened so quickly... too quickly, some would say, as though the hand of some unknown, unseen intelligence was directing the complex dance of their lives. Ed put it down to Kimblee’s ghost and the discomforting, though predictable, pleasure the bastard took in manipulating them all, watching them fall in to step to the tune of his perverse music. The Fullmetal Alchemist suspected it was situational convenience more than true compassion that had ensured Kimblee's involvement worked in their favour...

The Amestrian coalition reserves had arrived soon after the Accident, padded, Ed had noted at the time, by members of the Ishvalan clergy and regional security forces. It made a sobering sort of sense: Grumman wanted to avoid any overt demonstration of Amestrian military aggression in the region. Under the direction of the Eastern and Northern battalions, Stokes's followers had been swiftly apprehended. Stokes herself was in military custody.

No one had died. No one had sustained even serious injuries.

No one... except those involved in the Accident.

Ed hazarded a glance at the Major. If she knew what he was thinking about, she gave no indication of the fact, and Ed suspected she wouldn't thank him for bringing up that particular topic...

Instead, he muttered, “I’m waiting for a train.”

“Are you expecting someone?”

Ed scowled. “Not that it’s any of your business, but yeah, actually.”

A sage nod. “Young Miss Rockbell?”

The scowl deepened. “Lucky guess.”

"Pretty girl... blonde hair, bright eyes, carries her toolbox around like a life jacket on a particularly leaky boat?"

Ed gawped. "How...?"

"Oh, don't give me that look, Master Elric. She arrived on the last supply train from Youswell, accompanied by Master Sergeant Brosch." The Major rasped her teeth, gnawing at an errant
as she mused, “Not that I’m one to indulge rumour and hearsay, but according to the military grapevine, Winry got wind of your predicament through her Xingese connections. Evidently, she wouldn’t leave Grumman’s inner office until the old man promised her a berth on one of the emergency transports.”

“She’s here?” mouthed Ed, butterscotch eyes going wide. "Now?"

Even though his heart pounded against his ribcage and his head buzzed with a sudden rush of adrenaline, he made no motion to move. Granted, he had stowed himself on one of the unused platforms, still under construction, but he realised, abruptly, that he hadn’t been keeping track of the incoming trains in the station proper. Winry was probably scouring the streets of Dairut for him at that very moment.

Ed, still, made no motion to move. His paralysis did not escape the Major’s notice, and she looked down at him with an emotion Ed couldn’t entirely place. In any case, her usually wry, sarcastic face wore the expression strangely, but not insincerely.

"If you'll forgive my impudence for a moment, Master Elric,” said Sofia gently, "provided Miss Rockbell does have an inkling of what's been happening in Dairut, I imagine she's quite keen to see you safe and sound."

Ed said nothing, counting the grains of sand at his feet. He reached a hundred before Major Mike asked:

"Are you avoiding her for the same reason you're avoiding the rest of us, or is there an exceptional motive you've yet to make me aware of?"

"I told you, Major," murmured Ed, his voice thick, the words dark, "it's not any of your business."

Without missing a beat, she went on: "If you think back for a moment, Master Elric, the Führer himself charged me with watching over you. Our... well, our mutual friend may have made Grumman aware of the situation with Stokes, and our illustrious leader may have responded in his usual perfunctory fashion, but I have not yet been recalled to Central. I am still, technically, your escort, and so that rather does make this my business."

"Yeah, well... I don't exactly think this falls within your purview as a state alchemist." Ed blinked rapidly, tilting his head towards Dairut, so he couldn't see Sofia in his peripheries. "Why are you doing this, Major?" he asked bitterly. "I don't want it, and it's not like I've ever done anything for you."

"You have been my friend," replied Sofia quietly. "And as your friend, I'm worried about you, Edward."

Ed ignored her as he ran his hands over the floorboards of the platform, the sand-smoothed bark, feeling the blisters, the curling. It was like the paint that flaked from the side of his house, coming loose under the soft skin of his hands. He pushed harder, almost digging his fingers into the timber, the bark cracking and falling confetti-like before being lost in the sandy litter between the floorboards. Despite the baking heat, the ground felt suddenly cold under his feet. Above the awning of the disused platform, the boughs of the junipers swayed almost imperceptibly in the hot breeze, throwing crooked shadows across the ground like so many grasping fingers.

The sudden fear he felt, then, the guilt and pain, was not unlike the approaching trains. The feeling was almost nightmarish in its inevitability, as though it didn't matter how fast or how far Ed ran from it... he never managed to gap the distance. His feet had become heavy, his body slow, until he
felt almost set in concrete on the tracks. It occurred to him that all he could do was wait to be destroyed, wait to be nothing more than blood and bone fragments.

"Edward," began Major Miké; she released a chest-deep sigh, "it's not your fault, what happened."

The train hit, and Ed clutched his knees, bracing himself for the impact. "Major--"

"It's not your fault."

"Stop saying that!" cried Ed, rounding on the other alchemist in a sudden fit of fury and frustration. "It is my fault! I was a damn idiot and I left him there to die! I should have seen it... I should have paid better attention, not given in to the stupid, stupid hope that everything was gonna be okay..."

"Hope is never stupid," murmured Sofia, eyes straining against the brightness of Dairut. "And regret, I've found, is the most useless form of guilt. It always arrives too late to do any good." She closed her eyes for a moment. "Your regret can no more undo the Lieutenant's fate than mine can undo the Accident."

The cord that bound him to the Major seemed to lay slack on the ground, expanding with the distance between them. Ed suddenly wanted to slip away into the silence and become nothing, floating unloved and alone in nowhere. It was no less than he deserved. "I killed him," whispered Ed.

"You did not kill him, young man," said Sofia, far more firmly. "The Lieutenant did what he did deliberately. He gave his life freely. If you regret it, shackle the demon of guilt in your mind, it will take you from us as surely as the Gate took poor, poor Heymans. And then his sacrifice would have been for nothing."

Ed could feel his eyes stinging, growing warm. He looked at his feet, then up into the sky, into the endless blue. His expression was heavy and hard from the lack of tears. "If I'd just stopped to think... it's the job of alchemists to question, to interrogate, to deconstruct and reconstruct. I took a lie at face value, and now... now a man's dead. Because of me." Ed buried his head in his hands. "Because of me." He let out a ravaged, ragged sound he hesitated to call a laugh. It was the only thing he could do to stifle a sob. "I heard an Ishvalan priest say once that we're just the imaginings of God. Maybe this proves it. I can't face Winry like this, Major. I can't...

"I don't deserve her."

Sofia turned to him, her face tight, every thought focused on masking her own sadness, her indigo eyes growing dim with the effort. A strange look passed over her ascetic face and for a moment, Ed thought the sauntering, sarcastic alchemist was going to burst into tears. But just as quickly, the look vanished and was replaced by utter conviction. Ed had just enough time to spy her bandaged hand in his peripheries before the Major reached out and hugged him to her fiercely.

"You are a good, kind boy, Edward Elric," insisted Sofia, pressing her cheek to the crown of his hair. "And you acted out of bravery, out of compassion, out of empathy. Because you believed, with all your heart, that there was a solution."

Ed stiffened, taken aback by the sudden physical contact. Then, slowly, stiffly, he lent into the embrace, closing his eyes. She smelled, strangely enough, of tilled soil and tomatoes.

"What do I tell her, Major?" mouthed Ed.

"Tell her the truth," said Sofia gently. "Tell her a brave man saved the world."
"And the Accident..."

"My burden, my boy. Not yours. Put it out of your mind."

"But how can she forgive us, forgive me, after what we've done?" demanded Ed desperately. "I made a promise, Sofia... I promised Al... I promised, no one else would die because of me. Because of my mistakes."

"And you don't know how you can face the woman you love," finished Sofia, quietly, "bowed under the weight of such guilt. Am I right?"

He breathed, "Yes..."

"I know, my boy. Trust me... I know." She released him, though still grasped him firmly, her hand a welcome weight on his shoulder. "I miss my mum," she said softly, with unwonted tenderness. "I miss my home. I even miss Solf, in my own funny way. I had once thought myself incapable of ever loving, or being loved in return, because my association with the nadir of humanity forfeited any right I had to the pursuit of happiness. That I was destined to go on being miserable, and lonely, and so desperately sad. When my mother died, Edward, there was a space of time where I seriously considered joining her. My guilt was so great, it eclipsed everything else. I could see nothing from under its shadow.

"But, in a way, it’s like in those old hero stories," she said quietly, gazing at the desert, but not really seeing it, "the call to go on a journey takes the form of a loss, a wound, an inexplicable longing. Or a burning of a house," she shared a meaningful look with Ed, who shifted uncomfortably under the intensity of her scrutiny, "whatever the case may be. When any of these things happens to us, it seems we are in some way being summoned to make a transition, which, by its very definition, means leaving something behind. The paradox you face, Edward, is that loss is a path to gain."

“But I can’t lose her, Major,” said Ed, clutching his knees. “I’m so afraid of losing her…”

“And no doubt you’re asking yourself... why love what you might lose? When it comes to love and loss, acceptance is never easy. We can't make someone see all we have to give, make them love us, or make them change. All we can do is stop wasting time. Take the risk. Live, and trust their love in us. Because fear of loss can destroy you as readily as the loss itself."

Ed found his head falling back, looking directly at the sun, his eyes narrowed to a tired, strained squint. Poor bastard, the Fullmetal Alchemist thought to himself, his gaze remaining fixed on the brilliant orb hanging in its zenith.

The sun must get pretty tired, Ed mused, of watching us make the same damn mistakes all the time.

"What do I do, Major?" he asked quietly.

"I can't tell you that, Edward."

He sighed. "Thanks."

"Do you love her?"

"Yes."

"Well, then..." The Major seemed to consider, and for a moment Ed expected her to say something
meaningful and profound. Then the Feldspar Alchemist smiled again, stuck her hands deep into the pockets of her trousers, and rose to her feet in one fluid motion. She took a pensive turn about the platform before murmuring:

"Why don't you tell her that?"

Sofia nodded towards the station, over his shoulder. Puzzled, Ed pivoted on his stoop...

To find Winry Rockbell staring at him.

Edward Elric stared back.

Her expression seemed suspended between grief and joy. Seconds passed as Ed took in the sight of her, struggling to comprehend the reality that he wasn't staring at one of the heat shimmers of the desert. She looked tired and dishevelled, worn from the long journey. Leaves and dirt and grease spattered her overalls. A few strands of flyaway blonde hair had come free of her ponytail. Her cornflower-blue eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep.

Ed thought she had never looked more beautiful.

His mouth opened and closed; for all his alchemical knowledge, all his genius, he struggled to formulate so much as a single coherent thought.

"Hey, Win," he managed weakly, not even noticing, in that moment, that Sofia Bel Miké had slipped quietly away.

Winry's hands, one holding her toolbox, the other a patched leather suitcase, began to tremble.

Her eyes welled with tears before Ed could beg her not to cry.

"You idiot," she whispered, sniffing noisily.

Even with the benefit of hindsight, Ed had no idea how the ground between them seemed to vanish, but one moment they were apart and the next they had collided. One of Ed's hands clasped around Winry's lower back as the other tangled in her hair. With each soft touch more tears fell, tears neither of them bothered to wipe away.

Ed closed his eyes, thinking that there was nothing like an embrace after an absence, nothing like fitting his face into the curve of her shoulder and filling his lungs with the scent of her.

He wanted the moment to never end, wished for it in the shy, sly way Hope managed to crawl out of a box in a children's fairytale -- after everything and everyone else has escaped.

He felt as though there was nothing else in the world, nothing else that mattered, other than the single purpose of that present moment. That there was nothing else to do, and nothing else to pursue.

Nothing... save the most important thing of all.

Perhaps...

Ed clutched Winry to him, with both arms, and considered: perhaps, despite the injunctions mandated by equivalent exchange, his beloved alchemy was not omniscient. No human being could ever trade the courage needed to live every moment for immunity from life's sorrows. The thought ran counter to every truth Ed held close to his heart; he had breathed the belief that there
was always a deal to be made, a bargain to be struck. It was as Sofia once told him: alchemists were paradoxical creatures, bolstered by their own fragility, their dependence on aligned oppositions. The belief that, if one did the right things -- was good enough, clever enough, sincere enough, worked hard enough -- he would in some way be rewarded. It circumscribed the reciprocity of the world, the very science that framed his soul. He knew, of course, that what he thought and how he acted affected the quality of his life.

But something had changed -- Ed hesitated to call it a shift in the paradigm. It was too intrinsic, too innate, to suggest it was some transient transmutation: Edward had simply not seen it before.

But he was not blind anymore.

Perhaps it happened when Sofia Kimblee revealed herself in the car ride through Central. Perhaps it happened when Roy Mustang's soul and his self fled from his snuffed-out eyes. Perhaps it happened when Lieutenant Breda pushed Ed out into the nothingness of the night, into everything. Perhaps it happened in the aftermath of the Accident.

In any case... Ed realised, then, that though many things were subject to his influence, many others were not. And over the last three days, Ed had struggled to see the evidence that the universe worked on a simple meritocratic system of cause and effect. Bad things happened to good people -- all the time. Illness and misfortune came to those who followed their soul's desire. Obscurity came to the suffering. Death came to the brave. Ed realised the only thing he could do, the only thing he was bound to do, was to journey into a deeper intimacy with the world, to live his life without any promise of safety or guarantee of reward beyond the intrinsic value of his full participation.

He didn't know what was going to happen. But he knew, in that moment, what he had to do.

"Winry," murmured Ed, "'member what I said, before, during our last phone call... that there was something I had to tell you..."

She released a breathy little laugh. "You don't waste time, do you Edward?"

"Not for this." Suddenly, he pulled away from Winry, holding her at arm's length and trying to ignore his burning-hot face. "Winry Rockbell..." he said, his mouth tasting like sand, "I love that you get a little crinkle above your nose when you're looking at me like I'm nuts. I love that after I spend the day with you, I can still smell your automail grease on my clothes. I love that you are the last person I want to talk to before I go to sleep at night. And it's not because I'm lonely, and it's not because of this mess in Ishval. I understand, now... that when you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible."

"Ed," Winry's blue eyes narrowed shrewdly, regarding him, Ed thought, with a leery little squint, "are you sure you're okay...?"

"Marry me."

"... pardon?"

"Winry... marry me."

She stared at him, dumbfounded. Ed felt himself wilting under her withering glare. Suddenly, there was no trace of tears, not in her eyes or in track marks on her reddening face. Her gaze was narrow, rigid, cold. Hard.

"You... moron, Edward Elric!" she seethed.
Winry pitched forward and Ed grimaced, squeezing his eyes shut, bracing himself for a knock on the head or a kick in the shins. Instead, he let out a muffled yelp as Winry moved her head close, until their noses were almost touching.

He stood frozen, from both fear and excitement. She lent in, so her forehead rested against his. She closed her eyes. "Thank you," she said in barely more than a whisper.

"For..." Ed swallowed. "For what?"

"For finally asking me." Her voice wavered, and Ed barely had time to cogitate on the reason why before she kissed him.

Slowly, inexorably, he pressed his lips to hers. The motion was soft and gentle, not chaste, perhaps, and though there were no fireworks or sparks or halos of light, Ed supposed there didn't have to be. A wave of warmth spilled out from his heart and rushed to every corner of his body: the cracks in between his toes, the crooks of his elbows, the tips of his ears. Every inch of him saturated with love.

It was, he supposed, the only answer he needed.

The world was not made right by their union. The guilt remained still. With a little stuttering of his heart, Edward Elric saw himself as destined, despite his highest science, to live and die in uncertainty, a thing blown by the winds, a thing like the junipers left to wilt in the sun.

But, perhaps, not wilting alone.

Not ever again.

II

"So that's it, then. Lock, stock, and leaky barrels."

He flashed his teeth in the barest hint of a smile, though there was no one present to fool with his attempt at good humour. "Yes, sir. Though I somehow suspect we'll be wading in Stokes's mire for some time yet."

"How do you reckon that, my boy?"

Roy sighed, his head falling back against the wall as he held the phone closer to his ear. His eyes still burned terribly, and he blinked rapidly in an effort to clear a sudden fuzziness. "Reconstruction has suffered a major setback," he explained wearily. He was so tired... dominated by a profound sadness, fatigue engraved on his pale face. He hadn't eaten in days, and he had no immediate desire to do so. Not, Roy thought grimly, that the man on the phone needed to know that. "The entire Mishaari Basin has been declared uninhabitable after the... after the Accident. According to Feldspar, such large volumes of steam erupted over such a short space of time, the structural support for the crust above the magma chamber was almost completely compromised. The ground surface around the ruins has collapsed inward, leaving a tectonically unstable sinkhole."

"And you're worried the entire place could blow, am I right?"

"In so many words, Führer sir. We've been forced to abandon Mishaari."

Roy could almost see Grumman stroking his moustache. "Well..." he drew out the phoneme of the word like a thoughtful sigh, "that does put a hiccough in your Al’Arshif plans, my boy. Although..."
something tells me Al’Arshif is not on the forefront of your thoughts at the present time, General Mustang."

Even separated by the telephone line and innumerable miles of open desert and countryside, Grumman could still read him like a book.

For several long minutes, made even longer by the metronomic quality of Grumman's breathing on the other end of the telephone, there was total silence, the kind that proceeded the most horrible sadness yet to come. It threatened, as it had done many times over many hours, to swallow him whole. Roy concentrated on the presence of his superior and thought not about the Mishaari ruins or the Accident or the figure convalescing in the ward adjacent to the phone booth.

Grief — terrible rending grief — echoed within the hollow cavern of his chest, sustained on its own reverberations.

"How are you, Roy?" asked Grumman gently. "How is everyone managing?"

"Sir..." Roy cast around for the right thing to say, something that would allow him to maintain some professional bearing. Finding nothing, he admitted, his words congealing in his throat like a lump of fat, "I lost one of my men."

"I know, General. And I am so sorry."

"It happened again, sir. I couldn't save him. I couldn't--" Roy felt his mouth twitch, his throat hitch. "I promised... after I lost the Brigadier-General... I promised I would protect them."

"Roy," began Grumman gruffly, "listen to me for a moment, my boy, because this is important. It's Amestris's worst kept secret that you have your eyes on the top spot, on my job."

Mustang squirmed, but he knew there'd be little point in denying it.

"General... take a bit of advice from someone who may very well one day become your predecessor. In this line of work, you must think of grief as being something like a battle. After experiencing enough of it, your body's instincts take over. When you see it closing in like an enemy squadron, you harden your insides. You prepare for the agony of a shredded heart. And when it hits, it hurts, of course, but not as badly as it might have done before, because you have locked away your weakness, and all that’s left is anger and strength." The old man heaved a heavy sigh. "At least... that is what I would say to anyone with even a fraction of your empathy. But you've always been different, Roy. You don't feel things halfway, but you won't start a war by raising an army to fight. You won't bring back the dead by dying yourself."

"I care about my men, sir," he said. "As their commander, it is my responsibility to keep them safe, and I have continually failed in that responsibility."

"You think those boys don't know the risk, Mustang? They're soldiers."

"That doesn't make it better. That doesn't make it right."

A pause. "Lieutenant Breda was close to you." It was not a question.

"He was my friend," said Roy simply.

"And he was very brave, General. The Congress convened in emergency session late last night, and an unanimous motion was passed to bestow your man with highest honours, effective immediately. Major Heymans Breda."
Much good that does him now, thought Roy bitterly. He managed a weak, "Thank you, sir."

Another pause; Roy likened their exchange to reading a newspaper with the print washed into a deliquesced blur by the rain, patchwork paragraphs broken by the silence. It was usually so easy to speak with Grumman, but something seemed torn from all possible avenues of conversation.

It was his own fault, Roy acknowledged. His sadness. His pain. Grumman was a man with an entire country to run; Roy was just a soldier with a hole in the fabric of his life where before there had been the presence of a beloved friend. And no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to sew it back up again.

For a moment, Roy forgot about the phone in his hand as the memories began to creep forward from the hidden corners of his mind. Passing disappointments. Lost chances and lost causes. Heartbreaks and pain and desolate, horrible loneliness. Sorrows he thought long forgotten mingling with the sting of still-fresh wounds.

With Maes, he had been too late. With Heymans, he had been too lost, too blind, to his friend's intentions. And sometimes, he realised, the hardest goodbyes were the ones never said, the ones that hung in the back of his mind like a dark cloud. There was still so much to say but no one to say it to because the person he wanted most to hear it was already gone, leaving only the sorrow, the regret, a wound so deep it didn't even bleed. Like a puncture, an ache that didn't heal but just hurt.

And Roy didn't know if he wanted it to heal. That'd be too much like a final goodbye.

"Sir," he said instead, trying to ignore the catch in the words, "I want you to understand how grateful I am for your timely response. I don't know how you were made aware of the situation in Dairut, and to be perfectly frank, I don't really care. Regardless of whatever means you may have had at your disposal, the arrival of the coalition forces likely prevented many more lives from being lost."

"I only wish I had mobilised soon enough to save the life of your strategist, General," murmured Grumman. "And to prevent the Accident. Speaking of which---"

"There's been no change," relayed Roy stiffly, hoping, as always, that his superior would drop the subject, and preparing, as always, to be disappointed.

"Well... do let me know if anything does, General. Although I'm sure she'll be the first one to find out."

Grumman didn't have to specify who. "I'm sure you're right, sir."

Then: "And my granddaughter?"

Roy felt a prickle race up his spine. "Resting," he managed. He didn't realise he'd knuckled his hands until his fingers began to ache.

When Grumman spoke up again, Roy thought he sounded terribly tired, his words dropping heavily, the ripples radiating outward, like stones in still water. "Do look after her for me, Roy."

The guilt burned the back of his throat like sick and for a moment, Roy worried he was going to vomit all over the medical pavilion. Even after three days, even after the coalition forces rolled through Dairut and Stokes was taken into custody and the key thrown away, he still couldn't bear to tell the Führer the entirety of what had happened to his adjutant. A part of it came from a desire to protect Grumman from the harrowing details of the suffering of his beloved grandchild; far more came from Roy's own inability to reconcile such recollections himself. His guilt was
corrosive, burning the lining of his oesophagus, and there was no escaping the acute awareness he had of the fact that he had come dangerously close to losing her, and that she had suffered every minute of the separation. It spoke less to his incompetence as a commanding officer, and rather more to the mutated monster he had made of their relationship, both professional and personal, that she found it necessary to sacrifice so much, to give so much, that she ran the risk of leaving nothing for herself.

Not even enough to ensure her own survival.

Roy knew he was walking on thin ice: the ice of what remained of the trust between officers, carrying the weight of immeasurable guilt. And knowing, with each step, the cracks were growing deeper.

He didn't realise the line had gone quiet, didn't hear the *beep beep* of the dead connection, until someone cleared their throat a little ways behind Roy's right shoulder, waiting, perhaps, for him to ground himself once again.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, sir," came a deep, almost masculine voice.

Roy scrubbed a hand over his face before replacing the field phone on its receiver, wishing it was someone else, *anyone* else, who had been tasked to talk to Grumman. "It's no worry, Feldspar," he said quietly, crossing his arms and resting against the wall. "We were finished."

Major Miké regarded him placidly, but didn't offer a comment. Instead, she recounted briefly: "I found young Edward, as you instructed me, sir."

A glimmer of something bright broke through his damask of doubt and worry. "Is he well?"

"As well as can be expected, given the circumstances, General. You were right to suspect his blaming himself for what happened. The boy takes every hurt into his heart, as though in an attempt to bleed the pain from the air. He cares so much, sir, I would even go so far as to hazard too much."

You and me both, Fullmetal, thought Roy ruefully. "Did you manage to connect him with Miss Rockbell? I was told she arrived on the last train."

"Yes, sir."

"And?"

"How do you feel about being a groomsman, General?" she deadpanned.

Roy grunted; to his credit, he gave as good as he got. "I'd say it should have happened years ago. I already rented the tux."

Major Miké smiled thinly, but maintained a respectful silence. The attempt at humour fell flat.

Roy looked up at the tall, stooped alchemist. "I find it interesting," he mused aloud, growing serious, "how both Winry Rockbell and Führer Grumman were made aware of the situation with Professor Stokes, and arrived in Dairut well before any of us had the chance to establish outside contact."

"Serendipity, sir?"

"We're alchemists, Major."
"And as such, General, perhaps there are things in this universe we cannot control, even as there are the things we can."

"Let fate, coincidence, and accident conspire, Feldspar; human beings must act on reason."

"And what does your reason tell you, sir?"

"That three days ago, inside that temple, I spoke with a voice that wasn't my own. Thoughts that weren't mine." He struggled to suppress the shiver. "It was as though another man was wearing my body like a second skin. And my reason tells me that just before we arrived in Dairut, Edward said that it had been Selim Bradley who directed you to the deserts of the East. The boy once played host to Pride, and Pride devoured--"

Even the desert wind slackened for a moment, as if unwilling to blow without Sofia's permission.

"It seems to me, sir," she said quietly, "that you place too little faith in fate."

Roy frowned. "And you don't?"

"To a certain degree. I truly believe we can either see the connections, celebrate them, and express gratitude for our blessings, or we can see life as a string of coincidences that have no meaning or causality. For me, I’m going to continue believing in miracles."

"And what if those miracles are orchestrated by the devil, Major Miké?"

"Even Lucifer was once loved, General. Perhaps all sacrifice and suffering is in some way redemptive."

"And in this paradigm of yours... what grace, exactly, has forgiveness?"

Her indigo eyes narrowed on him shrewdly, and Roy knew in that moment he had accomplished nothing with his tangled and tangential philosophising, his poor attempts at bewilderment. Sofia saw too much. She understood far more.

For a while, comfortable in their shared aloneness, both Roy and Sofia were reticent to vocalise their thoughts, reluctant to break the grey stillness of Dairut's medical ward. But as Major Miké's brow furrowed and smoothed, and she clicked her tongue against her teeth, Roy began to nurse his own suspicions, and indeed, her questioning felt less like genuine inquiry and more like the tailing end of an ongoing conversation, a part of something the Feldspar Alchemist had bandied back and forth inside her head.

"Are you asking for my benefit, sir," she voiced aloud, "or for yours?"

Roy did little to feign surprise where there wasn’t any to be found. He had been wondering the same thing.

Though he found he did not have an answer. Not yet. Perhaps not ever.

"If you ever see him again," muttered Mustang, "that devil of yours, tell him... tell him thank you."

Sofia sighed. "I suspect none of us shall ever see or hear from him again, General, which is for the best, I suppose. And even if we did, he never placed any stock in the value of gratitude. Of kindness."

"If not kindness, then what?"
"Absolution, I expect."

"Then... it's equivalent exchange again."

"It always seemed to be, with him."

Roy crossed his arms, considering her. "And what about you?" he asked. "Do you feel you're owed anything, Major?"

She chuckled. "No more nor no less than any other man, General. I didn't want to come to Ishval, you know. I railed against it with every fibre of my being. But there is something about this desert that seems to possess a peculiar type of magic. It can't be claimed or owned -- it is a piece of cloth carried by the wind, never held down by stones, and given a hundred names, shifting like the sand. I think the Ishvalans have it right, sir: Dairut is a place of faith, where we go to disappear into the landscape. To forget, and be forgotten. It is as though, being here, I have exhausted my own future, and are thus free of time."


"The Führer has given me a proposal, sir, and I intend to accept."

She was almost smiling, smiling as though something good were about to happen. Her face fell into an expression Roy had never seen before. Under her acerbic personality, under a face like cut marble sans the polish, was someone more vulnerable than he could have guessed. In an instant, he understood what it was the Major intended to do.

"You're staying," he murmured.

Sofia nodded, her bob of black hair falling in feathery curtains over her eyes. "Eastern Command has a new vacancy," she explained. "I believe, out here, I may be able to do some good. I have spoken with the Muhaddith, and it seems in light of recent circumstances, the Ishvalan clergy are in dire need of a high-ranking Amestrian representative."

Roy remembered suddenly: "Eastern Command was General Hakuro's stomping ground. Where--"

"Southern Headquarters, sir. According to Master Sergeant Brosch, the Major General requested a transfer early yesterday morning. Grumman granted it without compunction." Sofia's watchful eyes peered out at the vast tracts of desert. "Not that I count myself an expert in such things, but I understand there is a world-renowned mental institution in Aerugo. As part of the current detente, there are ongoing negotiations regarding doctor visits and the exchange of breakthrough psychiatric research. Southern Command is an integral part of those deliberations."

The Flame Alchemist looked away, drawing in the dust with the toe of his boot. "I see."

"But to answer your earlier question, sir, as to whether or not I am owed anything," said the Major, deftly changing the subject, though leaving Roy with the lingering suspicion the topic of conversation had not shifted at all: "I do not believe life mandates a fair trade in such things. But between the giving and the receiving, the black and the white, exchange and equivalence thereof, lies many shades of grey -- where most of us live our lives. Not perfect, not by long chalk... but not beyond redemption. Perhaps, in that liminal space, we become like this desert. We're just creatures of pure potential, beyond the time shackling us to past pain."

Major Miké pivoted on one heel, giving the General a crisp salute, which Roy was too bemused to return. Sofia seemed not to mind.
"Excuse me, sir," she said briskly, "I should locate the officer in charge of the cleanup."

Roy's expression crumpled, something heavy sinking into the pit of his stomach. "She's still around, then."

The other alchemist pushed a breath out through her nose. "May I speak candidly, General Mustang?"

"It's not as though you've been speaking with reserve for the last ten minutes."

"Fair enough, sir."

"But by all means, Major."

"I believe you ought to make yourself scarce. I think it best your paths do not cross at this time."

Even as recently as a few days ago, he would have been affronted by the insinuation behind the words. But knowing what he knew about the Accident, Roy could recognise the simple sagacity, and, in some regard, the ironic wisdom of the Major's advice. As he was in no hurry to tempt fate any further, Roy bobbed his head in a half-hearted effort at acknowledgement.

"Give the Captain my regards, sir," called Sofia over her shoulder, emerging into the blinding white of Dairut's spartan streets, the surfaces of the roads and the buildings shimmering with the sheen of a polished mirror. So clean and smooth, Sofia Bel Miké seemed to trail reflections behind her like so many shadows. Like echoes and recursions.

Roy left the Major to her duties and, before he had the chance to talk himself out of it, pushed open the infirmary door.

Dairut's makeshift ward was predictably utilitarian, and like so many other things in Ishval, the architecture seemed inimical to creature comforts. The room was devoid of beauty. While the wallpaper was clean, the colour was, Roy thought, dim and uninspired. There were no decorations save the curtains separating the in-patient beds. The fabric had once been the kind of green intended to remind people of spring-time and hope, but it had faded so much, the hue was insipid. Unlike the rest of Ishval, the arched windows were fitted with a fine mesh screen, to keep out the flies. Even in the midst of the desert, beneath the smells of sand and sweat, Roy couldn't help but notice the miasma of disinfectant and polystyrene, something so like the surgeries of Central, the General half-expect to see Dr. Knox groaning and griping as he orbited about the room's single occupant.

Her smile, though tired, endeavoured to reach to her eyes. Roy reciprocated after a fashion, though his own smile remained limited to his mouth, unsure of what would happen next, wary of being drawn into a conversation he was not yet ready for.

"Good morning, sir," said Riza quietly, her throat dry.

Something twitched under his shirt; it took Roy a moment to realise that, despite the sweltering heat, they were goosebumps, erupting up and down his arms. "It's afternoon now, Captain," he replied, sidling up to her bedside.

Her amber eyes drifted to the window. "That was careless of me," she muttered, frowning at the noonday sun as though to scold it.

He almost smiled at the mental image. "How are you feeling?" he asked gently.
"Tired, sir," she admitted. She swallowed, and the motion seemed to pain her. "May I have a glass of water?"

Roy handed her the paper cone by her bedside. Hawkeye's once sure, steady hands were all frailty and caution, shaking gently as she reached for the drink. Roy felt a rod of ice in his chest at the sight of it. Her skin seemed ashen where she moved in the sunlight, the colours subdued, the planes and contours of her arms rendered in shades of grey. Even the blonde of her hair seemed diluted, as though her entire being had been bleached by the sun. When she was finished, Roy took the cup without a word, placing it back on the table.

"Thank you, General," she supplied dutifully. Roy gave her a stiff nod, muttered something to the effect of an acknowledgement.

There was a long stretch of awkward, but in some ways significant silence. It occurred to Roy then that he couldn't remember the last time he had been uncomfortable in Riza's presence. The only former occasions that sprang to mind were the quiet evenings spent in her company during his apprenticeship, when he was so terrified of Hawkeye Sensei inferring something illicit in their aloneness, Roy had taken a more profound interest in the hem of his trousers than the pretty girl standing next to him at the sink.

At that moment, the air between them seemed bloated with inevitability, like something about to snap with the painful recoil of gunfire. He didn't fail to see the irony.

After a while, Riza began to fiddle with the sheets, and Roy released his breath in one long, resigned sigh. He stuck his hands in his trouser pockets and bowed his head, resting his chin on his chest. Outside, the white tenements, like calcified stone, whistled with a brisk wind blown through from edge of the open desert, and Roy felt suddenly tired beyond any tiredness he had ever felt before.

"The doctor said your leg might have to be reset, Captain," he began, not knowing what else to say, and finding some mainstay of consolation in the procedural predictability of routine.

"I imagine it's for the best, sir. I would rather a few weeks in hospital than permanent disfigurement."

Roy managed another stiff nod, despairing at the abrupt end of his intended avenue of conversation. He could no more steer himself from the trajectory of their discussion than he could bring the First Lieutenant back...

"Riza," he began gently, trying to keep his voice steady; he watched one blonde eyebrow rise in a surprised arch. Roy bit the bullet and admitted: "I read your report."

She regarded him as though he were a voice on the radio and not a person present at the foot of her hospital bed. It was as though the words were circulating in her mind and had not yet found their way into the world. Over the last few days, when she did deign to speak, she spoke to Roy differently than she did the other soldiers. The Flame Alchemist couldn’t quite place the shift. A kind of anxiety, a hesitance, was as close as he could manage. And Roy, in a most uncharacteristic show of accession, realised he was reluctant to bring it to her attention. In a way, he didn't blame her. It was proof of sanity, he thought bitterly, that he made her uncomfortable.

"Was there something the matter with the documentation, sir?" she asked quietly.

If he were in a drastically different scene of mind, he would have laughed. Even in her condition, recovering from injuries so gruesome they made Roy nauseous just to think about, her penmanship
and administrative manoeuvring had been perfect. He would have expected nothing less of her.

No... his issue did not rest in the filing of the report...

"More so with the contents of the report itself, Captain."

Light shifted in her whiskey eyes, like a glass prism, her thoughts splintering into a million different colours. "I see, sir," she murmured. Any other man would have missed the slight slight tension in the lines of her shoulders, the sudden straightening of the slope of her back, as though she was bracing herself for what was to come.

Roy found himself staring at the wall over her left shoulder, the same shoulder Envy had torn to ribbons during the Promised Day. "You did it again, Hawkeye," he breathed, his voice haggard.

She blinked. "Sir?"

The words left him, unaltered and uncontrolled, before he could manage to mangle them into some semblance of calm, collected reproach: "It's just like with Lust, Captain," he said stiffly, the words pained. He knew he must have looked so grave... Hawkeye was staring at him with evident alarm. "You lost your firmness of person, your will to fight. You wanted them to kill you."

Something strident and stubborn flashed in her features, her expression hardening. "If you had read my report, sir," she said stonily, "then you would know I acted in the interest of protecting my commanding officer."

A voice in Roy's head tried to remind him that Riza should never have to justify herself, not to him, but Roy found in that moment he had forsaken any desire to listen. "You can't give up on life... I won't allow it."

Hawkeye made a concerted effort to rise, the motion breaking down into a wincing hiss from her pained ribs. "I did what I deemed was necessary, General," she managed. "I acted in the manner I thought befitting of an Amestrian officer."

"I know, Captain," said Roy urgently, every part of him begging to be believed, "And I know that sometimes the things we carry become too much for us. We are burned down, but somehow we have to pick ourselves up and keep going."

She stiffened, looking askance at him, genuine shock making her pale, wan face go slack. "Do..." she had to take a moment to collect her thoughts: "Do you think, by consigning myself to dying, I was somehow surrendering to their *interrogation*?" she asked, the words low with disbelief. It took Roy a moment longer than usual to realise she had forgotten to add his honorific. He chalked it up to sheer exhaustion; under vastly different circumstances, she would have been mortified by her own indiscretion.

Roy watched Hawkeye for a few quiet moments, trying to untangle the meaning behind her words, the beating of his heart and her stare constant things. He could see the dark circles under her eyes and a blush high on her cheeks, whereas the sun and the sky beyond the window were clear and pale. The perpendicular lines, the harsh oblique angles, between her body and the brightness felt strangely standardised, the moments falling away with the cadence of sand in an hourglass. When he thought of time, he inevitably thought of Riza Hawkeye and the uncanny certainty with which he could anticipate revisiting the same places, crossing and recrossing the lines of their lives like footsteps braiding together in the dust.

For a moment, despite the enmity raditating from his subordinate, he felt close to something he
could not quite describe.

"I did not give up because of the torture!" she hissed abruptly. Her hands had fisted in her sheets. "So long as I was alive, the Risen had a means by which to control you, General. The decision to end my life was purely strategic!"

A high-pitched whine sounded in Roy's ears, making him sway with a sudden wave of dizziness. "Strategic..." he parroted. "Strategy had nothing to do with it! It was short-sighted! It was stupid, Captain Hawkeye! You lost faith in us... you lost faith in me—"

"How dare you." He had never heard her quite so angry, her words dangerously soft. Roy froze. "I beg your pardon?"

Her lip curled. "You heard me perfectly well... sir," she added the honorific entirely as an afterthought. "General... one of my fellow officers, and one of my best friends, is dead. He gave his life in order to save yours, to save everyone in Amestris. I ask you, sir, please... don't dishonour his sacrifice by suggesting either of us acted with anything save the safety of our commander and our country in mind." She squeezed her eyes shut. "To imply anything else invites weakness, and I assure you, sir, Heymans's sacrifice took a measure of courage you couldn't begin to imagine. Do not insult his memory by suggesting otherwise.

"And as for me... this wasn't the first time I've come close to death, General Mustang, but it is the first time I've been involved in this part of it, this strange, terrible prospect of saying goodbye to someone you love..."

Roy felt as though his own heart might stop beating just from acknowledging the sheer weight behind her words. The sadness, the sorrow, and the loss, they were living things, coupled with her devotion, her love, as surely as any unified diametric. It was almost alchemical in its incontrovertibility.

He felt something trickle down his face and he wiped it away irritably. When he looked at the back of his hand, he found trails of wet carving paths through the thin film of dust on his skin.

Rain in Ishval, he marvelled.

"Riza," he began quietly. "There is something you failed to take into account... to kill you and me, there would only ever have to be one bullet."

"Sir—"

"I can't afford to lose you."

Perhaps, this was what they had always been, whether it was for a each other or for their cause — the readiness to give and not ask for anything in return, the unquestioning willingness to lose everything, even if that loss was something as precious as life itself. He had known this woman as the rest of the world had not, and the pain of living without her was far more than a mere penalty he paid for the privilege of having been young with her, having grown up with her. What once was life, he thought, was always life, and he knew her image would preside in his mind as a sort of measure and standard of brightness and repose in his dark, guilt-ridden world. And tucked inside the moments of his great sadness — his feeling of being punctured, scorched and stricken — were moments of the brightest, most swollen and strident happiness he had ever known. One moment there would be a wall of joy so tall it could not be scaled; the next, he felt as though he was falling into a pit of despair that had no bottom. He realised — as, he suspected, Riza did, too — that he
could not have one without the other, that their great capacity to love and be happy could be experienced only with the great risk of having their happiness taken from them — to teeter, eternally, on the edge of loss.

"I can't lose you," he repeated, bereft, suddenly, of anything else to say.

"For that, sir," she murmured, "I am so, so sorry."

"Sorry..."

She rubbed at her tangled blonde hair like it was a bother to her, her voice coming out like she was speaking through a mouthful of glass, blood pooling between the words: "Your despair has always been my deepest fear, though I tried for years to save you from it. There were nights where all I dreamed of was the Promised Day, tailing you under the streets of Central... like following a walking corpse, always blind. Don't you see, sir? It is what I fear the most in all the world, the thought of what my loyalty might make of you — dead on the inside, lost in your own prison of hatred. Somewhere from which I can't save you. Your weakness is my failure... I have failed you General..."

Unable to wait any longer, Roy bundled her into his arms. She stiffened and made to lurch out of his grip, but before Roy could recoil from her in horror at his own gross breach of personal and professional etiquette, her head tucked under his chin, and he felt her weight settle against him. He held her tight as her words spilled out of her without prior composition, only this time, she made no effort to choke them off:

"And when this is over, sir," she whispered hoarsely as he wrapped his arms around her; she couldn't keep herself from weeping brokenly, "you can help me in finding a way to forgive myself."

Tortured by her tears, he clasped her tighter and rubbed his jaw against her temple, his voice a ravaged whisper: "I'm sorry," he told her. He cupped her face between his palms, tipping it up and gazing into her eyes, his thumbs moving over her wet cheeks. "I'm sorry." Slowly, he bent his head, covering her mouth with his. "I'm so damned sorry."

As they came together, he found himself wishing he could tell her about the first time he had looked on the back of her neck as she sat on a fraying swing in her father's yard. Of the feeling that had never let go of him since. To talk to her of the great waste of years between then and now. A long time gone. And it was pointless, he knew, to think how those years could have been put to better use, for he could hardly have put them to worse. There was no recovering them. He could grieve endlessly for the loss of time and the damage done therein. For the dead, for Maes and Heymans, and for his own lost self, for all the pain and suffering he had caused, and all the while, his grief not changing a thing.

Nevertheless, over all those years, he had held in his mind the wish to kiss Riza Hawkeye.

And there was a redemption of some kind, he believed, with all his being, in such complete fulfilment, of a desire so long deferred...

III

"I hate this fucking country," she muttered to herself.

The desert of Ishval was covered in rolling hills and ruins, a vast, undulating sea of white siltstone.
Wind skimmed the dunes, raising a fine haze of sand from the rosebush and juniper, and the sun beat down on her head mercilessly. Sweat rolled off her nose, stinging her eyes, making her hair stiff with salt. Her wool uniform clung to her oppressively, the material simmering and stiff. Every breath tasted like dirt, and her tongue felt coated in fur, her lips chapped and dry.

She longed, something fiercely, for the mountains.

Ishval, to her, was like stepping on the goddamn moon. She had no way of knowing what anything meant, no way of translating the landscape. On the mountainside, at least, she could anticipate an avalanche or a blizzard from the changes in the wind, a shift in the snow drifts, like tells that betrayed any attempted deception. But Ishval told her nothing about itself, on any level, not in the way even the most desolate stretch of Briggs told her about the gails that had blown over it, or the snows that had or had yet to fall. Ishval was a waterless void, as empty and endless to her as the space between the stars. The desert was a different world, with a different order she didn't understand. Not because it wasn't beautiful — not grand and magnificent like Briggs, perhaps, but strident in its brushstrokes of bright colour. No... Ishval confounded her because, as she ran her eyes over the rocks and dirt, she had no way of knowing what the tiny alterations in the colours meant.

It was a mistake new recruits often made, thought Olivier Mira Armstrong, in the Northern winters, that the coldness of the Briggs mountains was somehow seasonal, that with the spring warmth it would transform, become as green as they were. They were mistaken. Even in the summer there was no softening of the chill. It had never bothered General Armstrong; she knew she was, above all things, a creature of consistency, even bereft of the consolation of ordinary people who strive for even an inkling of happiness in their work. Her service was done without a smile; fast, efficient, mechanical. There was no greenery at all, no change in the colour of her fortress. It was a clean life. A monochromatic life, and in many ways, the simplicity of it was inimical to camouflage. Things did not remain hidden for long on the mountain.

But she didn't speak the language of Ishval. What secrets she was meant to interpret from the rolling dunes, the heat and high, white sun... she couldn't say.

She sat under a juniper tree, in the meagre shade cast by the branches, crouching in the leaf litter, and watched the Ishvalan people amble through the streets of Dairut. A few of the teenagers, she noted, were missing limbs. Several of the elders were without an eye, or an ear, or scarred, or leaning heavily on their canes. There was, she realised quickly, a distinct lack of young men and women... the age of those who had fought in the uprising.

Death was always more tragic when it came to the very young, and yet the ancient clung to life with equal desperation. It was much like the desert itself... things tended to endure. The sand just soaked up the suffering. Perhaps it was because she herself was so far away from home, but the thought suddenly made her feel very lonely.

Though her commission in the most inhospitable region in Amestris brought her further away from other people — though her duty demanded her placement far outside the world's sight — she had yet to develop a yearning for being alone, unkempt, untended. Despite the solitude of her station, she believed she had all the company she would ever need, thanks to her underlings.

Recent years, and recent circumstances, had tested her conviction to its outermost capacity.

Ishval made her realise that though she craved solitude, she hated loneliness.

She had always believed every single person was a little civilization built on the ruins of any number of preceding civilizations, but with their own variant notions of what was beautiful and
what was acceptable, what was right. Though Olivier knew people had a tendency to interpret
fortuitous resemblances as actual likenessness, she suspected the self deception merely enabled
some to live with the inviolable, intraversable, and utterly vast distances between them and the rest
of the world.

She took a deep breath; gradually, she managed to get control of her breathing. Her heart beat more
steadily, and the pounding of the waves inside her subsided slowly. The stillness of the simmering
afternoon fell across her like a dusky reflection. She closed her eyes and turned her face to the sun.

"Ishvalan security forces have secured the last of Stokes's followers. The Council has agreed to
surrender the suspects to the Amestrian military police for prosecution, including the Ishvalan
citizens."

General Armstrong cracked open an eye, glaring at her company. "I didn't expect your people to so
readily acquiesce to the extradition order," she grumbled.

A grunt. "Ours is a cooperative law enforcement process, General."

"That's well as may be, but the consensus in the Congress is that the autonomous region of Ishval
does not have any obligation to surrender an alleged criminal to a foreign state, because one
principle of sovereignty is that every state has legal authority over the people within its borders."

"A certain tall, grey-haired officer was keen to point out that the crimes committed took place
approximately two kilometres outside of Ishvalan territory, so even if the Grand Cleric were so
inclined, any claim we made for the lawful return of any individual pursuant becomes null and
void."

Olivier humphed. "Sounds like this officer knows his international treaties."

"You could have just requested Stokes's return to Amestris, General Armstrong."

"Truthfully, sayyidi," she said drily, "I couldn't risk the Ishvalan Council saying no."

The Muhaddith crossed his arms and looked daggers at her, his expression shrouded in shadow. He
kept the hood of his chasuble up to hide his face from the nosier soldiers, wary of his being
recognised. General Armstrong had been asked by Führer Grumman to personally oversee the
operation in Dairut on account of her familiarity with Scar's true identity.

And, of course, for other reasons...

"Was there something else you wanted to say, sayyidi?" asked Olivier, mindful of the usually-
taciturn man's stubborn presence at her side.

He said a great deal with his silence. There was something in his red eyes, perhaps. Something in
the tilt of his head, a kind of quiet defiance. He was older than most of the Briggsmen, but he wore
the same expression. And somewhere, buried far beneath, was a kind of sadness akin to resignation
in everything he said and did.


There was a patient forebearance in his gaze, and rather than soothe, it made Olivier long to hit him
with something heavy. Like a tank.

"He's conscious," said Scar quietly.
Armstrong’s body went rigid. She imagined her eyes burning like frozen nodes of incandescent gas. "Grand," she muttered. "What do you expect me to do about it?"

"I was informed by Lieutenant Falman that he has refused skin grafts, and will not allow himself to be seen by a doctor."

"That's his decision, sayyidi."

Scar's head snapped around, and the expression on his face, the sockets of his eyes like cups of molten brass spilling down his cheeks, was suddenly dark and dangerous. In those brief flashes of anger, Olivier thought he looked far more like his old self. "His wounds induced metabolic and inflammatory alterations that predispose him to complications, General," growled the Muhaddith. "If the wounds grow infected, he could die. He is fortunate he did not die in the first place."

"He made his decision!" snapped Olivier. "I won't strip the man of his dignity any further by crying over him like some wretched war widow!"

"You would forsake him..."

"The law of this world is that the strongest survive, Scar!"

"There is no strength to be gained from allowing our friends to come to harm, General Armstrong. Only weakness. A truly evolved being is one who values others more than he values himself, and who values love more than he values the physical world and what is in it."

"Then do you suggest it's strength that drove him to risk sacrificing his life to save that of a criminal? Of Stokes?"

Animosity burned in his red eyes, and Olivier could tell she was likely the root cause of the problem. "He did more than save Stokes's life," he said lowly. "He saved the life of Captain Hawkeye, as well."

"Oh yes," snarled Olivier, anger dripping from her words like poison. "Mustang’s pet dog. Just another casualty in that man's goddamn crusade, isn't it?"

Scar blinked at her; it was strange, seeing such an innocently bemused expression on his brutal features. Something softened in his eyes that somehow only managed to make Olivier even more furious. If it was pity on his face, Armstrong had half a mind to run him through with her sabre, the consequences be damned.

"It is the Flame Alchemist," murmured the Muhaddith. Dust swirled between them in the late afternoon air like they were standing in some ancient library with old books being pulled from high shelves. "You hold him responsible..."

Olivier knew some catastrophic moments invited clarity, exploded in split moments: smashing a hand through a windowpane and then finding the blood and shattered glass stained with red all over the floor; falling out a window and breaking some bones and scraping some skin; stepping on the wrong patch of ice and sinking under the weight of a mountain pack into the freezing blackness. Scar's observation struck her with that same sense of sudden disaster.

"It's not enough that he has to drag his own people into ruin," she hissed savagely, her hands balling to fists. "It's not enough that he has to pull innocents into his interminable war. That inveterate loner chooses to spend his existence with people whose individual lives must seem to him to hold all the gravity and value of a goddamn mayfly’s! Even when, for once, he seems to truly value one of his subordinates, their association runs its course and ends in exactly the same way as all the
Olivier knew the world she encountered in her military experience was one in which she was continually faced by choices equally absolute, the realisation of some of which inevitably meant the sacrifice of others.

But Mustang's world did not mandate sacrifice. It mandated slaughter. The simple fact of involvement was akin to a death knell. The Flame Alchemist had, in his desperate bid for power, taken the life of Brigadier-General Hughes. He had taken the life of Lieutenant Breda.

He had very nearly taken the life of her most beloved officer.

"When he pushed Captain Hawkeye and Professor Stokes free of the geyser," murmured Scar, with a gentleness Olivier had not expected of him, "he was not thinking about General Mustang. He understood then, as he does now, that his Truth rested in an act of courage, that it was, in some way, defiance and sacrifice and pain, something that cannot be won without giving away something else in return."

"He's a fool if he believes that," said Olivier bitterly, swatting beads of sweat from her brow to give her taut muscles something to do. "A goddamn fool."

"He is no more a fool than you or I, General. Or anyone else who has ever sought to give their existence meaning."

"I will not accept that." Olivier glared out at the desert, feeling strangely disconcerted — not that she would ever admit that to the likes of Scar. Even so, she could almost feel the heat from the intensity of the Muhaddith's eyes on the side of her face. He smelled strange, too: grainy and sharp and saccharine, like hot sand.

She grit out through clenched teeth: "I will not accept self-destruction as the only means by which a man can give his life value."

"I do not think it was self-destruction that motivated him."

"Then what? What can possibly be worth this?"

He peered at her sidelong as he got the measure of her intent, but did not say any more for some time. His eyes were a bright brown-red, like the claret-coloured sky after a sandstorm. They were very striking, highly intelligent eyes that seemed to see through barriers as though they didn't exist, rendering them to something like the crumbling stone laying ash-like on the ground underfoot, the dust mantling every surface. And there it would remain until the wind carried it away or the rain washed the world clean. Which, Olivier supposed, being Ishval, might not happen for a long, long time.

"With respect, General Armstrong," he said quietly, "I think you already know the answer to that question."

Olivier scowled. "Do I?" she muttered.

"It is what drove Captain Hawkeye to save her commanding officer, and what allowed Lieutenant Breda to face his death with dignity and grace. It is the reason why I love your adjutant as much as I did my own brother, and why I cannot bear to see him in pain and unhappy."

"I'm his commander, sayyidi, not his shrink. If you're looking for someone to guide him in a little healthy soul searching, you've come to the wrong woman."
"It is not him who will be doing the searching," said the Muhaddith gravely, in a way that gave Olivier pause as she tried to work out how best to counter. For such a stubborn, silent type, Scar had the uncanny — and rather irritating — knack of knowing exactly what to say, voicing aloud thoughts she couldn't seem to orientate even inside her own head.

Buccaneer used to do something ostensibly similar; in his absence, Olivier's instincts had grown dull, and now she could no more avoid the implications granted providence by Scar's unwonted insight and intuition than she could the forthcoming conversation with a certain subordinate officer.

What a pathetic, hypocritical creature she was, Olivier thought bitterly. Though she touted survival of the fittest as her creed, and indeed, the tacit law of kill or be killed governed every facet of life in the Briggs mountains, and though she knew a weakness had presented itself, she couldn't seem to cut it out, to let it go.

To let him go.

She was tempted to blame Mustang again, his peculiar brand of duty that managed to be both brave and brutally destructive, but she knew a part of this was her own doing. It would have been easy to attribute her own losses to the pernicious martyrdom Mustang inspired in others. Blame him for the shadows of ruin he trailed behind him through the desert. And perhaps that was the seed of it, but from that one little seed had grown the bulb of a flowering plant. And Olivier knew, all her muddled motivations crystallising at once into a single, sharply focused thought, that she was the one who nurtured it, let it wrap around her neck, choking the air right out of her like the yellow orchid vines snarled across the railway tracks.

That she had, in some way, stumbled into a desert of her own creation.

She knew why the Accident had happened. She knew why it was her man gravely wounded, and not Hawkeye or that bitch Stokes.

She knew, and the consequence of her knowledge was enough to take her breath away.

"He's awake, you say?" she murmured.

"Yes."

"I had better debrief him, then. The sooner I'm out of this godforsaken desert, the better."

The Muhaddith have a solemn nod, the barest bob of his head. As General Armstrong stalked out from under her shade, she spared a single glance over her shoulder, only to find the massive Ishvalan standing with his arms crossed, his alkehestric tattoos twitching, glaring his perennial glare. Already, no doubt, he was dreaming of a refined solitude, alone in his indecipherable desert, a motionless ark in which to seek refuge from the unending deluge of their tragedy.

The streets around her man's office, which had once thronged with life, stood empty. Gone were the food vendors and the women in their bright clothes selling hand made goods from carts and baskets. Gone were the children who played amongst the crowds with their games and laughter. Gone were the stores with their windows of fine clothing or delicacies. Even in the afternoon, all Olivier had was the dusty street and the wind for company.

She did not knock on the door, and like all homes in Ishval, it was not locked. She marshalled her resolve and pushed herself into the small, spartan space.

The dark room seemed a place without consequence. Olivier felt the air move like cool water, the
aroma of paper and dry stone hanging low in the air. With each movement something new came to her eyes, a tiny fragment more of the plain furniture and messy desktop took form, as though they were waiting for her to make them real.

She found him sitting at his desk, staring at nothing, long arms hanging limply at his sides, barefoot and bare-armed.

"Major Miles," Armstrong greeted him gruffly.

Her adjutant turned to look at her, bleary-eyed and unshaven. He looked lean and hungry, swathed shoulder to shin in bandages under the fabric of his shirt. His white hair had been shaved down to the scalp. His red eyes seemed dull, shadowed by his dirty, dim little corner.

"Hello, sir," he murmured. "It's..." he swallowed thickly, "it's good to see you."

Olivier grunted something noncommittal, stepping up to her bent, broken adjutant.

According to the report of one Major Miké, Professor Stokes had lured Captain Hawkeye into an area of unstable geothermal activity. The ground had erupted, sending a tall column of boiling-hot steam into the air.

Riza Hawkeye, and, incidentally, Professor Stokes, had suffered only superficial injuries.

Someone had pushed them out of the way.

An Accident, Major Miké had told Armstrong. A terrible, terrible Accident.

Olivier's blue eyes narrowed. She made a sound midway between a sigh and a snort.

She touched Miles's shirt lightly, little more than a brush of her fingertips. The cotton felt starchy, stiff. Suppuration had crusted yellow on the fabric. Armstrong made a small noise of disapproval.

"When's the last time someone changed your bandages, Major?"

"They haven't."

"Excuse me?"

"I've been doing it myself."

Olivier humphed. "Well," she muttered, taking in the state of her adjutant, "you've done a shit job of it."

Miles continued to trace the abrasions in the siltstone walls. "I don't have a mirror in here, sir," he said softly.

Olivier glared at the back of his head. She unbuttoned her uniform jacket, took it off, folded it slowly and deliberately before placing it against the wall. As she rolled up the cuffs of her shirt, she considered berating him for failing to look after himself. She considered marching right back through the door and dragging a doctor in to see him. She considered ordering him to ask for help.

But she didn't.

If Miles wanted anyone's assistance he would have sought it himself. He was not a slave to vanity, nor did he suffer any messianic tendencies.
He just didn't care anymore. About himself. About whether he lived or died. About anything, really, she suspected.

A part of Olivier could understand that. Could empathise, even, if she were one given to indulging such sentiments. But she also knew the endurance of pain did not necessarily equate to a desire to end one's life. Miles's time on the mountain would have glaciated such latent, dark desires. In a place like Briggs, suicide summed to an unnecessary and detrimental gap in a regiment, a sharp, man-shaped absence where before there had been an able body. No, Olivier affirmed. Miles's stubborn, silent suffering was not his avenue of escape. It just happened to be the only means by which he could force everyone else to look away from his shame. He did not want to die; he wanted to hide.

And Briggsmen do not hide.

Olivier kicked the leg of Miles's chair, almost sending him tumbling out of it.

"Shirt off," she said gruffly.

A kinetoscope flicker, a spark of panic, flashed briefly in Miles's red eyes. Good, affirmed Olivier. "Sir..."

With an effort the General bit back her impatience. "That was an order, not a request. I won't ask you again."

Olivier went to her kit bag, starting unpacking the necessary first aid materials: fresh bandages, swabs, a tin of silver sulfadiazine. When she turned back to Miles, he hadn't moved. In the half shadow, his eyes were as empty as the bloody desert sky. He tried to fix his tongue in a protest, but she bore down on him, her lip curling.

"You insubordinate little—"

"I can't, sir."

"What?" she snarled, the word cracking like a whip.

"I can't," he repeated, his voice pitched at his usual low dulcet but devoid of any emotion — flat and featureless, the words so glassy everything seemed to slide off them. "It's stuck."

"It's stuck."

"I can't lift my arms that much yet, General."

Olivier said nothing. Instead, she gave his dirty shirt a tiny tug with a thumb and forefinger. It held fast to his back, his injuries having wept through the dressing, tacking to his clothes. Pulling the shirt off himself risked the removal of the tenuous film of scabs. Olivier set aside her medical supplies.

"Reach as far as you can, Major," she ordered brusquely.

Slowly, like lifting the handle of a rusty pump, Miles raised his arms, until he was pointing his fingers straight in front of him. Though he soon began to tremble with the effort, his face betrayed nothing: none of the pain, none of the shame Armstrong knew was there, simmering just below her adjutant's placid surface. Were she any other woman, Olivier would have found his uncanny quiet unnerving. As it was, the lack of small talk and mindless jibber jabber presented a welcome respite. With the silence, she could focus.
She grunted, "Hold still." Save the involuntarily quiver, Miles didn't budge.

Placing the rest of her supplies on his desk, Olivier situated herself between his outstretched arms. She reached over his shoulders until she had a grip on the hem of his shirt, just above the seat of his trousers. Her nose puckered. In such close proximity, he smelled dreadful, like blood and sweat, the sourness of stale bandages. Either he hadn't let them bathe him, or the medical staff in Dairut were as useless as every other goosestepping moron in Amestris's godforsaken excuse for a military. When the General secured her grip, the fabric crunched. It had hardened to the consistency of cardboard, rigid with dry fluids.

Olivier almost started when Miles rested his chin on her shoulder, cheek against her neck. She felt his heart beating through his thin chest, too sedate, too slow; heard his breath shush the small hairs behind her ear.

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. All she could see was the top of his head, a fine eider of white hair where before there had been a tail. "Something the matter, Major?"

A quiet, "No, sir." She felt the words ghost across her throat.

With no explanation forthcoming, and Olivier growing increasingly keen to distance herself from the rankness of Miles's clothes, she gave a tiny, noncommittal shrug: suit yourself.

She pulled his shirt up, rolling it off his skin. She felt Miles seize under her hands, opening and closing his mouth mutely. He didn't so much as whimper.

Olivier removed the disgusting article of clothing with as much care as she could muster, with far more gentleness than her cracked, calloused hands seemed capable. Miles's bandages, once white, were closer to yellow, brown. Some red. The wrappings had come loose; most fell away with the removal of the shirt.

Even by Olivier's standards, the injury was devastating. Her adjutant's entire left side was mottled and raw, the flesh a glistening white. The burns radiated out from the space adjacent to his spine, curling under his arm, constellating his ribs. The scars would mar him forever. Olivier could still smell a lingering waft of smoulder, could still feel the heat of them so close to her clenched hands. As angry as the injury looked, Miles's cheek against her throat had gone clammy and cold. She could feel him digging his chin into her collar bone, burying his head there. She ignored it.

She was glad to be rid of the shirt, balling it up and tossing it into one corner. Retreating until she was leaning against his desk, Olivier got her first good look at him. He didn't meet her eye, staring at the window instead, even though the drapes were pulled shut.

Miles was no muscle-bound behemoth like many of the soldiers Briggs tended to attract. At times, standing beside Buccaneer, he had seemed almost slight. He had always been lithe and strong, as tough as gristle. Hair as white as the mountain snow, pulled into a severe tail. Sharp sideburns. Sharp eyes. Sharp cheekbones. Everything about the Major seemed honed to a fine edge, as though a hand on his face would come away bleeding.

That man was long gone.

Olivier sighed; the sound slipped out before she could bite it back. Miles was sick, thin; she could count every one of his ribs. His shoulders jutted to two bony points, clavicles pushing prominently against his skin. His arms hung limply at his sides, exhausted from holding them erect. With his white hair shorn aggressively short, she could trace every curve of his skull.
"You've lost weight, Major," mentioned Olivier, voice rough and low.

"I hadn't noticed, sir."

She peered around his pokey office. The thin drapes were dusted in sand, as though they hadn't been opened in days. His cane rested against one wall, likewise neglected. His last meal lay untouched by his bed. It would attract flies soon, she noted distastefully.

"Falman tells me you're not eating."

"Falman should tend to his own knitting, sir."

Under different circumstances, the General would have agreed. Instead, she grunted, "You barely sleep. You rarely speak, and when you do, only in monosyllables."

"I have nothing to say, sir."

"You seem to have plenty to say to me."

Finally, his head swivelled to face her, the movement glacially slow, pulling at the fine scabs on his deltoids. "You're my commanding officer."

"And if I wasn't?"

His tone didn't change: "If you weren't my commanding officer, General Armstrong, I would be dead."

She furrowed her eyebrows, taking the tin of sulfadiazine in hand. The cream was cold on her fingertips. She stepped behind him, appraising the damage. "Melodrama doesn't suit you, Miles," she muttered.

"No." He hissed when she dabbed the ointment on the worst of his burns, but didn't cry out.

"I'm pleased we agree."

"No, General," he said softly; the pain he refused to show in his burnt and broken body leeched into his words: "I was actually contradicting you."

Wouldn't be the first time, Olivier thought ruefully. Finishing the delicate work, she reached around Miles for the roll of fresh bandages. Abruptly, his hand found her arm.

He didn't grab it. He didn't have the strength; his grip was frail, and the General could have shrugged him off with ease. But then a memory surfaced, an infant Catherine Elle latching onto Olivier's pinky finger with surprisingly martial resolve. Miles's touch reminded her of her baby sister's: the grasp of one helpless, afraid of slipping away.

"If you were not my commanding officer," he managed, "then I would have been taken to one of Bradley's concentration camps and shot."

Her face fought a grimace. A lance of pain, an arthritic ache like wounds in wet weather, cut a ragged neural route through her head. Another memory made itself known, perhaps one that had never really disappeared in the first place: darkness and dread, the smell of lanolin, the press of dirty fingernails. It seemed to sustain itself on its own cruel reincarnations, resurrected in many forms, on many nights.

"I made a judgement call," she said stonily. "That's why I command Briggs, Major: I am able to
make the difficult decisions."

"Not like that," he murmured. "Never like that."

"It's a waste of your time and mine cogitating on it now." She steeled herself. "Now, I'll attribute your persistent grip on my arm to your fatigue and injuries, Major, because if you were in any lucid frame of mind, you would know better than to ever lay a hand on me."

Miles didn't seem to hear her. His grip tightened in insistence. "I buried it until I no longer remembered there was anything to bury. I couldn't put a name to it. But... held in its creases was its ability to change everything, organically, forever."

He was rambling. His eyes held the glazed intensity of inebriation or shell shock. "Major..."

"It left permanent wrinkles in the fabric of our souls."

"Major Miles!"

"Every night, I laid awake with your memories flooding through my eyes, with the hope to be with you when sleep arrived. I just want to sleep, Olivier... I want to sleep."

He sobbed then, a stuttering intake of breath that seemed to tear at his larynx like the neck of a broken bottle. She swallowed her dismay, throttled it until it suffocated, because it was all she could do to keep the panic from leaving her as a scream.

But the anger remained, flaring like a grease fire. Olivier ground her teeth. The sound was almost bestial, a snarling, stubborn frustration. She dragged Miles into a standing position by his shoulders, her hands epaulets over collar bone and muscle. Looking into his eyes was like peering through something transparent, staring at the back of his skull through windows of rose-tinted glass. She clutched him, all the while telling herself it wasn't to keep him from slipping away.

Merely to shake some goddamn sense into his skull.

“Listen to me, you selfish prick;” she hissed in his face, close enough for their noses to touch. Their eyes locked: red and blue, fire and ice. A unified diametric, a tacit law of equilibrium they could not escape: “People die all the time. That’s what people do. We are killers. We prey on the weak. We live on things that once lived themselves. Ishval, Briggs, the portal of goddamn Truth, it doesn’t matter. We’re out here, unaided, alone, by virtue of our own strength. And it’s not perfect, Major Miles. It’s survival of the most adequate; it doesn't matter whether or not we’re the fittest. All that matters is that we beat the alternative. That we survive, and our enemies do not.”

“If you regret, even for an instant, the world will pass you by and the future will leave you behind. I will leave you behind. You can’t buy back opportunity, Major. Ever. Time takes no pity on any heart or any soul.” She snapped, “And neither do I.”

Miles hunched his shoulders. He stared at the space near her ear, a reaching in his eyes, as though considering something profound, trying to pull it back with the intensity of his focus.

“Pity,” he murmured; finally, he lifted his head to her. Their breaths mingled. She was close enough to feel the heat radiating from his wounds. “There must be something terribly wrong with this world if I find virtue lurking behind such a monstrous thing.”

Miles began to chuckle, softly at first, his face turned to her shoulder. Then out loud, his head
rolling away from her to the soft recesses of the ceiling, laughing into the dark, red eyes bright and full of something she couldn’t name. She faced his narrow throat, cabled and exposed. Achingy vulnerable.

“I gave myself to you sooner, General, than I ever did to any other being,” he whispered hoarsely. “Do you know why? Because when you saw me spitting blood you told me to swallow it; because, when I screamed, you let me run my voice ragged; because I wept, and you saw redemption where all others saw pain; because you are the only human being who has never pitied me.”

Olivier tried to release him then, alarmed, giving a startled, stifled, “Miles…” before her adjutant gripped her hand and held it tightly, clutched it until her knuckles began to grind together.

His face, once so empty, so desolate, had gone rigid with such a severity of expression Olivier felt suddenly ill at ease, the switch ricocheting with the jar of a violent car crash; she imagined she felt the whiplash.

“I am going to say a mad thing to you, Olivier Mira Armstrong,” he breathed: “I loved you all at once, and with everything I am. You are all the strength I will ever draw from this world.”

His eyes, unblinking, the pupil reduced to a pinpoint, were a colour crimson Olivier had only ever seen before in the fires of Central Command, Major Kimblee’s grotesque explosions, the surface of the Philosopher’s Stone...

His words detonated memories intense enough to blot the fact that they were not hers — or, at least, not hers alone. And his face, straining after hers, yearning, earnest, ignited a sudden unhappiness so immense it took her several long moments to see that his expression had changed, a tenderness tempering the severe contours of his face.

“You…” Olivier murmured. The word slipped away before she could secure her grip on it.

“You paid my price,” said Miles. “that night in Fort Briggs. The Truth… He showed me. I know, now. That you’re right... it’s not about survival of the fittest at all.”

She wondered why her eyes were burning until she saw the tears in his.

“Terror, fear, strength… the things that govern our lives, Olivier, might make us kill, but love will make us die. We die for love. For you. Our commander. Our Queen. Buccaneer understood. Breda understood. They were willing to give up everything for love, even their lives. And don’t you see, that’s a denial of the most basic of all human instincts: survival.”

“You’re a goddamn fool, Miles.” She dropped her head.

He dropped his, too, whispering, “And it is worth my pain. It is worth my anguish. But it is not worth yours...” and put his hand gently on the back of her neck, touched his forehead to hers.

“That is not your decision to make,” she said with miserable, exhausted anger. “I protect my men.”

“Yes.” He squeezed. “And that is why this is all so sad, Olivier.

“Because you love us, too. When you shouldn’t. You shouldn’t… it is weakness. It is suffering… it—”

She was very careful with him, taking pains to avoid his burns. She cupped his face, thumbs tracing small circles in his temples as she pulled him closer. He tasted like the desert, like sand. Like salt. It didn't take him long to respond. He had always been adept at occupying her blind
spots, filling the space beside her like a shadow; that's what made him so good at what he did. This new closeness, or perhaps the denouement of a closeness so old neither one of them could remember a time when it did not exist, did not dull the potency of his instincts.

He seemed to have very little interest in obeying their chain of command; she had pulled the trigger, but he was the proverbial recoil, and she felt him in every muscle. His teeth grazed her lip, sending a fierce jolt down into her abdomen. The space left in his wake did not remain empty for long. His fingers raked through her scalp and, through the haze, she could see a few strands of yellow plastered to his forehead, tacked there by their sweat. Gold against bronze. Metallurgy. Alchemy. Perhaps a science with no name at all.

His breath began to rise in sharp knells, gasping. He shifted his weight forward until she found herself stumbling back, almost pulling him over with her. Still, he reached behind to the small of her back, latching her to him. The cold swell between his stomach and hers collapsed. A distance breached. The other hand slipped between them to pull at the buttons of her shirt.

The sun broke through the ragged tails of the shades and she realised, abruptly, how gorgeous he was: there, holding her, fixed in the landscape of his desert, red and white and gold and so beautifully alive. They were as distorted as all their careful distances, their edges eroded until they blurred and intermingled. Their separations masked by the dappled light and the taste of him.

New days, she thought, as he chased after her, teasing and biting and tasting. The stars changing, the snows blowing cold on a distant mountain; but in that moment there was just them, silently machinating towards the joint of flesh and flesh, while the ground stayed still enough to dance, unmindful of what happened above it.

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IV

Shadows stretched across Mishaari, reaching up the walls of the crater like fingers as the faintest motes of starlight began to twinkle. In the north, a bank of dark clouds was building above the ridge of the mountains, the tops of the silstone buttes fading in the misty half-light. The last pigmented bands of sunset gilded the sides of the ruins in burnished gold.

At Jean Havoc's feet, the hill sloped suddenly away, and for a moment, he imagined leaping off, falcon-winged, to soar over the dunes, following the setting sun to its painted horizon. The sky burned scarlet, then amethyst, emblazoning the enormity of the desert firmament, before darkening to obsidian at the edges of the world. As the night deepened, light from Dairut's distant fires blinked more frequently until the canopy at his back, burning between the dark waves of sand, sparked with benign embers under the star-speckled sky.

"I have slipped the surly bonds of earth," murmured Vato Falman at his side, high cheekbones throwing shadows like tear tracks down his gaunt face. "And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings; sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds..."

The Second Lieutenant reached down and rubbed Kain's skinny back, the Master Sergeant releasing a violent hiccup, teetering precariously on his crutches. The boy's silent weeping was worse than violent sobs or screaming. His beetle-black eyes welled up with a sadness his young years should not possess. They showed his soul, aged by years of gritty work in the military machine, where he was no more than a cog made of flesh and blood -- and all the more expendable for it. The silence of his sobbing was eerie, like he had wasn't entirely sure what sounds to make, like a baby drawing his first breath.

When the words hadn't come, the tears did. The mourning was supposed to be something dignified
and stoic, but Maria Ross cried like a child, noisily, with running snot and choking sobs. She was not ashamed of it. Jean pressed close to her, and he felt her short black hair prickle his ear as her head fell against his shoulder.

Falman intoned, his words thick with grief: "I have done a hundred things you have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared and swung high in the sunlit silence. I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung my eager craft through the footless halls of air."

Jean couldn't really see anything through the stinging in his eyes, rubbed raw by sand and tears, but he felt Ross's presence at his side, her lips trembling and her body heaving with emotion.

"Up, up the long, delirious burning blue, I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace where never lark, or even eagle flew."

"What a bunch of poetic bull," muttered Jean, but his voice wasn't angry. It was hollow, tired, thick and limpid with his tears.

He felt Maria take his hand, holding on tightly. He suddenly found himself dreading the moment when he would have to let her go. Her deep brown eyes looked like pieces of coloured glass in the red light of sunset. She leaned into his touch, desperate for the contact. Jean felt smooth and still — desperately numb — a fly drowning in amber. They remained like that for an endless moment, hung in time like the sun from the sky, waiting and watching each other.

"And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod the high untrespassed sanctity of space, put out my hand, and touched the face of God."

For a long time, nobody moved and nobody spoke. The silence beat on their faces and backs. Then, Fuery sniffed, swiping his hand across his eyes, letting out a weak, wet sob. Falman, without thinking, pulled the boy to him, draping an arm across his narrow, trembling shoulders.

"If I have one hope," said Ross mutely, her words little more than a whisper, husky with profound sadness, "it's that, if there is a God, He sat over the dark nothing and wrote us into His story, and put us with the sunset and the desert as though to say the beauty of it means we matter, and we can create within it even as He has created us."

"And one of the greatest acts of creation you can do is to find someone who is secretly lonely and be a friend to them, if only for a day," managed Kain; his words were near unintelligible beneath his tears. "But he was our friend for years."

"I will miss him," murmured Vato. He pulled Kain closer, letting the boy weep into his shoulder.

For a while, they stood together in the dry, crackling heat, watching the way the sky at sunset resembled a sheet of fire, and looking out over the overwhelming emptiness and severity of the open desert. Quietly, Vato and Kain turned to go, the former helping the latter hobble along on his crutches, supporting him in their precarious descent down the slopes of the basin, back towards the town glimmering at their backs.

Jean and Maria remained. Above them, the sky turned to a light, dusky purple littered with silver stars. As the light ebbed, so too did the warmth of the day, until all that was left was the chill of twilight and the promise of the cold desert night.

Jean prodded the folds of his consciousness for sadness, but the crystal had particulated to chalky powder, had blown thin on the wind, leaving only a sharp, serrated pain, like crushed glass cutting up his insides.
"When I look back at myself at age twenty," he said suddenly; though he had consigned himself to silence, once the words started, he didn't think he'd be able to stop them: "what I remember most is being alone and lonely. I had no girlfriend, no mates I could open up to. No clue what I wanted to do, no vision for the future. For the most part, I remained hidden away, deep within myself. Sometimes, I'd go a week without talking to anybody."

Ross's hands worked across each other like little crabs, crawled around herself to hug her shoulders.

"I 'member doing one of those huge war game exercises back in the Academy," Havoc went on quietly, not really caring if Ross was listening or not, "all of Eastern... some of the Northern forces, too. We were just wandering through this busted-up town, and for some reason, instead of my maneuvers, all I could think about was all the horror that kept our world working. The Eastern Rebellion had just wrapped up, the massacre, and when I heard about all those people dyin', all that death and destruction, and knowing I was doing my part to keep the wheel turnin'... I figured, if I was gonna live with myself, I would have to rip my own heart out and hide it in a box somewhere, along with everything I'd ever learned about justice, compassion, mercy. I just threw myself into the games and tried not to think about it. But the whole time, as everyone was shootin' blanks and yelling, I yearned for something different.

"It made me so sad, and for a while I just crouched in the rubble, hugging my gun like a goddamn safety blanket, people shoutin' at me, telling me to shift my arse. But I couldn't move. I felt like I was caught between two poles of hypocrisy, Ross. That I'd somehow sacrificed my right to think of myself as a good person, my right to think my life as being worth anything. I just hid for a while, wind all hot and gritty, dust everywhere... and, suddenly..." Havoc sighed, the sound dissipating into the desert air, "out of that mess, emerged this beautiful boy with the greenest eyes I'd ever seen, holding his hand out to help me to my feet. It's really hard to recall the day you become friends with special people. But... I 'member meeting Heymans."

Wordlessly, Maria held her arms open in invitation. Jean flung himself into her embrace with a strangled sob. He buried his face into the crook of Ross's shoulder and they stood there like that for a while, Jean wracked with the force of unvoiced cries and Maria holding him, heart aching for her friend, for the magnitude of his loss.

"I miss him, Maria," Jean moaned. "I miss him."

"I know, my dear," she whispered hoarsely. "I miss him, too."

"What do I do, now?"

"You live, Jean Havoc. Just live. Live... and be happy. That's all he wanted. That's all he asked for."

He pulled apart from Ross, his expression chasing after hers. "What if I can't?" he asked desperately, breathlessly.

"You can, Jean."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because he loved you. And he believed we are here to make the world a better place. That though we don't always deserve the cards we're dealt, good or bad, we are nevertheless judged by how we play our hands. Those of us with a bum deal that makes it harder to do good — we just have to work a little more is all." She smiled a small, sad smile. "He was a strategist, Jean, who understood, in the end, that there is no strategy. There's just our muddling through, doing the best we can."
She pitched forward on the balls of her feet, stood on her tip toes, and gave Jean a gentle kiss on the cheek, where the tears fell heavy and fast.

"We should go, Lieutenant," she said quietly. "It's getting chilly out here."

Havoc looked up, into the nighttime sky, where the stars tangled across their own boundaries, until the start of their constellated designs were lost. Laid out above him, mapped island of moments in an ocean of past and future time.


Maria Ross took his hand. They began their climb down the crater slope.

Under a sky of perfect midnight velvet, under stars so brilliant they drew the eyes heavenward, the lyrics of an old soldier shanty lifted softly in Jean Havoc's mind.

As the light twinkled and the unheard music played, his steps fell lightly over the rutted path.

Towards his friends. Towards home.

The End

Chapter End Notes

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