Tap That

by Tierfal

Summary

This whole college gig would be hard enough without Winry being the best wingwoman Ed never wanted… and without the blog. Definitely without the blog.

Notes

For those (which I think is most of you!) not acquainted with my fic prior to FMA and AO3, my signature across multiple fandoms used to be long, lighthearted, slightly contrived, banter-stuffed rom-com fics with a side-dish of tropey shenanigans. I tried to replicate that when I first got here, and I made it 20 or 30K into two separate attempts, but neither of them panned out.

And then, in the year of our OTP 2017… this happened. It happened fast, and it was FUN, both of which are sort of bizarre. It is not a literary masterpiece by any stretch of the imagination, but I am holding out hope that it will be consistently entertaining. :')

Huge and very special thank-you to Getti, Ratchet, and Nikki for listening to me ramble about the premise of this fic IRL(!!) at Katsucon right as I was starting it and saying "You have my attention" instead of "You should quit fanfic, like, yesterday." In general, they are three A+-quality humans whose work you should definitely check out if you haven't already.

♥

Shoutout to – of course – Mthaytr, who got to read the delightfully hole-ridden first draft of this and gave me some invaluable suggestions as always. ♥
Logistical stuff:

1. You'll have to forgive the heavy-handed dramatic irony of Ed not knowing who Casanova is – poor kid doesn't have the slightest idea that he's in a fic, so he doesn't suspect a thing. X'D

2. This is just under 200K in total. (Yes. Really. Oh, my God.) I'm going to try to get the whole thing posted in 2017, because I like having my wordcounts tallied in the right years in my stats (:D). And also because I'm going to SacAnime the 5th and the 6th and want to get it done before then!

3. This sucker moves fast, especially for the first three-quarters or so. Depending on how you prefer to read fic, it may be more enjoyable to wait until the whole thing is up and then binge the hell out of it.

4. What I would have really liked to do would have been to post this with the update dates as close as possible to the fic timeline, and add to Casanova's Tumblr in sync with the progress of the fic, but I haven't been organized or non-disaster-y enough to pull of a stunt like that in many years, so I guess we'll all just have to weep for what could have been. X'D

SORRY FOR THE LONG NOTE. The apology is a long fic. Hopefully that works out. :D
Chapter 1

“There’s a really long list,” Ed said, “so I wouldn’t say this lightly, but I’ve done some thinking, and I can tell you, with some confidence, that—”

“This is the worst idea I’ve ever had?” Winry asked cheerfully.


“Too flippin’ bad,” Winry said, even more cheerfully. “You’re stuck with me, and it, for at least another hour.”

At times like this, Ed hated her almost as much as he loved her—there was about an iota of emotional distinction in between. The worst part was that he couldn’t kill her, because he was the one who would suffer the most if she was gone. Quasi-sister-best-friends were about the best and the worst thing ever invented, and even after twenty years of trying to cope with the dichotomy, he was still never sure what to do when she dragged him into shit like…

Well, like frat house Halloween parties they hadn’t even really been invited to, which were overflowing with lousy store-bought costumes and cheap drinks being distributed illegally to underclassmen at such a precipitous rate that you kind of had to admire the efficiency, if nothing else.

Winry was dressed as a witch—but the fancy kind, with a sparkly orange chiffon-or-something band around her hat and a matching sash around the waist of her short black dress; not the kind with warts and jaundiced eyes and a cauldron and a creaky cackle halfway up her throat—and Ed was dressed as a cat, because she’d come up with this brilliant plan less than a day ago, and there hadn’t been time to rummage for a better plan.

He was a black cat, too. As if he didn’t already know what the universe thought about the thing he had that was supposed to pass for luck.

This was going to end in vomit and tears. He didn’t know who would be providing what, but he’d had a premonition. That was what happened when you were a fancy witch’s familiar, after all.

Winry, despite numerous worshipful readings of the entire Harry Potter series cover to cover, had apparently experienced no such divinitory revelation. The long and abbreviated of it was: Ed was fucked, but only metaphorically; never literally. What else was new?

Winry dragged him by his elbow through a small crowd who seemed to think that they were dancing, despite the fact that mostly they appeared to be shouting at each other and trying not to spill their drinks, and onward into the kitchen. An intimidatingly fit frat boy who apparently believed that orange bodypaint counted as a costume was leaning against the counter, upon which an unreasonably large number of bottles had gathered to ruin Ed’s night and possibly his life.

“Yo,” the guy said, looking directly at Winry’s cleavage. “You guys already pay the cover?”

Ed wasn’t sure if it was legal for a campus-sponsored frat to charge for entry, but they’d each given the dude at the door ten bucks anyway.

“So had Ling, who had been with them at the time—but then he’d disappeared before Ed had even finished shoving his wallet back into his pocket. Where the hell had that idiot ended up, anyway?”

“Yup,” Winry said, subtly tilting her body forward to give Jack-Off-O’-Lantern more to look at.
“Do you guys have cider?”

“Sure,” the guy said. “Is that what you want?”

Ed could almost hear Winry gritting her teeth even though she was outwardly flashing a winning smile. “If you’ve got it!” could apparently carry a distinct undertone of *No, I only asked because I think the jack-o’-lantern face you painted lopsided on your chest there is such a feat of artistry, and I wanted to stare at it some more* if you knew someone’s sarcastic tendencies well enough.

“Cool,” the guy said. He rummaged through the amoebatic collection of glass and aluminum and plastic and turned up a brown bottle with a colorful label, which he uncapped with a bottle opener that he’d clipped to the waistband of his green basketball shorts.

Ed didn’t think it would help to try to explain to him that pumpkins didn’t generally have any greenery underneath the part you carved. Even people who thought their Halloween costumes through didn’t tend to appreciate logical critique when it came to this kind of shit.

The guy handed Winry the bottle and then managed to tear his gaze away from Winry’s boobs long enough to look at Ed. “How ’bout you?”

“Oh,” Ed said. “I’m okay; I don’t n—”

“He’ll have cider, too,” Winry said.

“What?” Ed said.

“All right,” the guy said.

There was a cold bottle in Ed’s hand, and Winry was chirping a thank-you and then hauling him onward by his elbow again, and this was, without a doubt, the *worst* idea in the history of well-intentioned human failures.

And then it got even worse—after a few spare minutes of wandering awkwardly and sipping at their ciders, Winry squeaked something about being pretty sure she’d just spotted Catherine and promptly abandoned Ed at the foot of an unsettlingly shadowy staircase, which presumably led upward to bedrooms where people Ed wouldn’t want to know were getting nasty as fast as was possible after guzzling too much crappy beer.

Ed made some headway with his cider, which at least didn’t taste awful, although he couldn’t help looking down into it like it might apologize under scrutiny. Alcohol was insidious, and they were still technically underage, and *surely* there were legions of cops out wandering the streets, just fucking waiting to bust stupid parties like this one and throw kids like him in the local slammer and fuck up his permanent record once and for all, and—

“Fancy meeting you here,” a terribly familiar voice said.

Black cats walking under ladders on Friday the thirteenth had nothing on Edward Elric.

No way around it. He turned.

“Hey,” he said. “How’re you?”

Roy grinned. He was wearing stupid plastic vampire teeth and a stupid cape and a stupid silk vest, with his hair slicked back and a little bit of eyeliner smudged on in a way that *should* have been horrible.
He looked like a million bucks.

Ed hated him.

“Very well, thank you,” Roy said. “You?”

He was smarmy and too-smart and way too pretty, and he was the only person Ed had ever met who could say shit like that and somehow make it work.

“Good,” Ed said.

“You don’t look especially ‘good’,,” Roy said. “You look a bit like you’d rather be anywhere else on the planet.”

“Nah,” Ed said. “This is all right. At least I have a good shot at blending into the wall.”

Fuck. Roy was stepping closer, and then leaning against the wall in question right next to Ed. This was his wall, damn it—and, more importantly, his hiding place. Wasn’t it obvious? What a presumptuous bastard.

“I’m afraid to say,” Roy said, in that particular tone that people employed when they were using *I’m afraid* to mean *I’m delighted*, “that it is going to be very difficult for someone like you to pass unnoticed.”

The world was an amazing place. When you thought lousy shit about yourself, it hurt in a slow way—a low, ongoing, background ache like a bruise turning colors as the blood vessels mended.

But when someone else articulated something you’d been thinking, it *stung*, harsh and hot and immediate, like high-fiving fiberglass.

“Guess so,” Ed said, glaring at the wall opposite, which really needed a romantic night in with a Mr. Clean Magic Eraser or twelve. If Mr. Clean was Ed’s type, he would’ve offered to chaperone. “Not a whole lot of awkward, friendless über-geeks with a limp at these things, are there? Guess we’re not usually the demographic they send the handwritten invites to.”

He hadn’t intended to get quite that honest. He snuck a glance at the label on the cider—it tasted much less like ass than most of the other offerings, so Winry’d been onto something there, but that was dangerous in its own way; if you didn’t hate every sip, you were far more likely to drink a greater volume than you intended.

“What?” Roy was saying, so blankly that it was a little bit hilarious in a stupid sort of way. “No, I meant—”

“It’s fine,” Ed said.

“It’s not fine,” Roy said, and Ed glanced at him, and the little concerned look that Roy was doing was even more stupid-hilarious because of the fangs. “I meant that you’re a stunning blond with a mouth-watering shoulder-to-hip ratio, and no one on the sighted side of macular degeneration is going to be able to ignore you even if you stand in the corner and face the wall.”

Ed’s brain was having trouble with that.

He skipped to the end part, which had mostly made sense.

“Is that an option?” he said. “The standing in the corner thing.”
“Trust me,” Roy said. “If you emphasize your ass any more, they’ll convict you of murder.”

Back to trouble.

“They were the only black jeans I had that weren’t in the wash,” Ed said, recognizing as he did that he was staring at individual puzzle pieces and trying to guess at the picture from a scattering of isolated colors. That was never a good plan. He tried to rewind despite the foaming currents of his cider-brain so that he could pan out to look at the places where the edges fit together. “Wait. Are you—” With Roy loitering next to him like this, he had to half-turn to stare properly. One of his cat ears brushed the wall. “Are you hitting on me?”

“That depends,” Roy said, sipping demurely from a red cup. “Would you be amenable to it if I was?”

“You’re either hitting on me, or you’re not,” Ed said. “There’s no fucking quantum physics if-then statement bullshit about it.”

Roy was grinning like an asshole and trying to use the rim of the cup to hide it. “That’s a very limited worldview, coming from a scientist of your stature.”

“You’re going to have a very limited lifespan if you keep running your fuckin’ mouth,” Ed said.

Roy—
—laughed.

Loud and long with his fucking fake vampire teeth.

Somehow, every time Ed thought that he’d hit rock bottom and broken all the shovels, a power drill materialized in his hands.

His impulse was to say it had started with the first day of chem, but the blog had preceded that. And even then—his shitty relationship to the world and the universe and the concept of love and romance and relationships had started long before any of this. If you didn’t want to go all the way back to the moment that he was conceived in vivo, a more sensible place to start was just about a year ago, when the whole Russell thing had swelled and warmed and brightened—and then imploded, almost in silence, because apparently Ed’s personal life was destined to be a neutron star.

For this particular part of the ongoing disaster, however, the first day of class made the most sense as a point of origin. That was when the game had grown feet, after which its plotty legs had begun to thicken, and now it was following him around and growling at intervals.

He felt like… not a fraud, exactly, but like he was doing something wrong. Like somebody was going to see him, know immediately that he felt isolated and confused, and call him out. Hey, you! Transfer student! Go back to your small-town community college and stay there this time, you hack!

Unfortunately, there was nothing for it but to fake it until he made it. He and Winry didn’t have any classes in common, although they did—blessedly, glory hallelujah and so forth—have a few that they could walk towards together.
The point was, he’d crept into Chem 102, tried not to freeze like a deer in the fucking headlights at
the sheer size of the lecture hall, and sat down three rows up from the front, in the seat on the edge of
the aisle. That way, he’d look attentive and invested and all that shit, but not like he was trying too
hard; and if he had to go to the bathroom or run out screaming on the verge of a nervous breakdown,
his wouldn’t have to climb over anybody else’s knees to get to the stairs. It seemed like the most
practical position for providing solutions to problems that he hadn’t even had yet.

There was a small chance that he was overthinking things a bit. He just didn’t want to look like a
fucking idiot on his first fucking day of class at a real university. They could probably kick you out
for that, and someone else would snap up his scholarship in a second, and—

And two people sat down in front of him, chatting idly about the too-bright sun and then about the
impossibility of guessing how a lecture hall desk was going to unfold from the side of the chair just
by the look of it. The girl was wearing bright pink dangly earrings shaped like stars, and the guy had
a checkered shirt on. Ed didn’t normally notice things like that, but the shirt was black and red, and
Winry would have liked the earrings, and he was trying really hard not to think about the odds of
impending doom.

“Hang on,” the girl was saying as she dug her laptop out of her bag. She flipped it open, banged
heedlessly on the keys at random to wake it up, and then tapped her password in. “I gotta see if he’s
updated.”

“You are obsessed,” the guy said.

“No,” the girl said. “He just brightens my day, okay? I keep telling you; if you start following it,
you’ll totally understand.”

“Oh, come on,” the guy said. “This guy is clearly trying to fill some kind of void in his life by
getting validation from a bunch of horny internet strangers—”

“It’s not dirty,” the girl said. “…most of the time.”

“Even if it wasn’t,” the guy said. “Which it is—he gets off to randomers coming by and squealing
about his probably-made-up sexploits, and all of you weirdos daydream about him night and day to
fill the voids in your lives, and none of you are thinking critically ab—”

“He posted!” the girl cried.

They both leaned in so close and so quickly that they almost knocked heads.

“It is so dirty,” the guy said.

“You totally love it,” the girl said.

“Maybe a little,” the guy said.

The girl leaned back, sighing beatifically. “Don’t spoil it. I’m gonna sit down and read it all the way
through later, when I have time to appreciate it.”

“Gross,” the guy said, but he was sitting back awfully reluctantly for someone who was judging so
hard.

Speaking of judging so hard, Ed doodled a little more fervently in the top margin of his notebook so
that he wouldn’t look like he was just as guilty.
Class was terrifying. The material wasn’t terrifying; the material was pretty consistent with the stuff he’d taught himself outside of AP classes in high school, because he knew there was more to it, and chem was fucking rad. But *people* were terrifying—students, TAs, fancy-pants professors with so many degrees after their names that it looked like somebody had vomited alphabet soup on their credentials. That part scared the fuck out of him. There were just so damn many people ready and waiting to point to him as the odd man out; he didn’t know where anything was; he didn’t know who anyone was; his only friend was a humanities major whose path he’d only cross when she forcibly organized it in advance; he hadn’t even met his roommate yet; he didn’t know if it was cooler to take notes on your laptop than on paper… although at least with that last one, he now had a little bit of data to demonstrate that there were people doing both. He’d read that you remembered it better after the fact, he was striving to keep up.

Al—who had examined his class schedule, made a color-coded chart, photocopied it, and then placed the copy in the clear plastic pocket on the front of Ed’s planner and also programmed it into his phone—texted moments after Ed, dizzy with snippets of gleaned knowledge along with the torrents of terror, started to walk out of the lecture hall.

*Hey, Brother! Hope your first class went great! Please respond so I know you’re alive! I hope you’re having fun! Love, Al*

Fucking nerd couldn’t be talked out of signing his text messages. Ed adored every atom of his dorky being.

Ed had to shift a bunch of stuff around to get his backpack onto his shoulder and his phone into his hand as he headed for the exit. He had ten minutes—well, probably nine and a half now—until his next class, and it was only a couple of buildings down, but he wanted to be able to pick a strategic seat again.

*Hey Al, it was ok, I am alive (obviously). not sure if its fun but maybe it'll be fun later once i get used to it. love you too you nerd*

The instant that he tapped to send it, a pair of hands seized his shoulders on either side, and a voice said “Whoa!”

Ed startled about eighty percent of the way out of his skin and lost at least half a decade of his life, but when his soul snapped back into his corporeal form, he looked up and discovered…

An *obscenely* hot guy with dark hair and dark eyes and an asshole smirk, who looked to be part-Asian and all-Satan.

“That’s a doorframe,” the guy said, releasing his grasp on Ed’s shoulders so that he could gesture to it gracefully.
“No shit,” Ed said, stepping through.

Oh. Oh, God. He had to watch his fucking trashy-ass mouth around here; he kept forgetting that these people weren’t his community college cohorts, who knew him and put up with him talking like a whole row of portajohns.

Except that the guy started laughing like Ed had said something hilarious—which, if you experienced acute schadenfreude at the expense of stupid transfer students, was probably a hundred percent true. The corners of his eyes crinkled up, and they glimmered or whatever, and all of that disgusting shit that happened to good-looking people naturally all the time unfolded right in front of Ed’s face.

“You were about to bash into it,” the guy said, trailing him. There were stairs. Ed had to focus on those, and not on wanting to murder this guy. The world would be safer without this asshole, though; he probably stopped traffic on the regular. “You have a very nice nose; it’d be a pity to break it on the first day of class.”

Ed whirled so fast he almost fell down the aforementioned stairs, which would have been nice and fitting, if nothing else. “I—what?”

“See you Thursday,” the guy said, skipping deftly down past him, messenger bag bouncing blithely against his ass, not that Ed was watching, or anything; and not that it was really, really nice.

Class was terrifying, and people were terrifying, and apparently doorframes were out to get him, and this whole college thing had clearly been a terrible fucking mistake.

---

His next class went a little better: none of the doorframes attacked, and no self-righteous and obnoxiously gorgeous people had to swoop in and save him from himself, at the very least.

He was starting to freak out a little bit, though—only a little bit, so far, but… There was just so fucking much. Sure, it wasn’t like he’d exactly skated through the whole community college gig and phoned it in for shits and giggles—not that anyone had ever accused him of going to his professors and literally asking for extra work, or anything; that would be ridiculous; of course he’d never done that—but this was a whole different ballgame on a brand new field. This was the big leagues. This was serious.

And if he psyched himself out on the first day, he was going to screw himself over before he’d ever gone to bat, wasn’t he?

…it was time to retire that metaphor. At least to the dugout. Before it started doping or anything.

Ed dragged the ongoing existential crisis trapped in his meatsuit into the little coffee shop where Winry had suggested that they meet up, filled a little wax-paper cup with some of the hopefully-free water from the canister on the counter, dragged his meatsuit back outside, set the cup down carefully on the last empty table on the terrace, and dropped into one of the accompanying chairs.

Odds were good that he was going to be fine once he got past this part. He usually was. But change was hard, and Al wasn’t here, and nothing about this place felt even remotely like home yet, and he was surrounded by strangers who were way better at projecting competence than he was. Also, the doorways were sentient and mean-spirited. And he already had homework and shit.
While he swilled the water aimlessly, he checked his phone to see if Winry had texted to explain why her ass was late to a meeting time she’d set. There wasn’t any word yet, which probably meant she’d gotten distracted chatting up a cute guy after class, which left him…

Bored, with at least five minutes to kill—not enough time to start anything important, but just the right amount for a spot of nasty curiosity.

He swiped into his phone, opened a new browser window—private browsing; he wasn’t a total fucking idiot; he was a small-scale loser and a nerd, and that was an important distinction—and Googled the two fateful words he’d seen across the top of that girl’s screen.

There were some weird results, which he’d sort of expected, but just a couple lines down—

He tapped the link, and it opened a version of the same page he’d seen over her shoulder—hacked up and stripped down for mobile viewing, sure, but unmistakable all the same.

There was a little picture of a hand—presumably the writer’s hand, although honestly it could have been anyone’s; the writer could have been fucking Hannibal Lecter, and it could have been a hand he’d borrowed, posed, and then carved up for a gourmet lunch—wrapped around a pale blue cup of gently-steaming tea, held above what looked hazily like a bed with a book open on it. If that wasn’t the most overbearing, contrived, deliberately picturesque-romantic-bullshit thing Ed had ever seen, then… Well, he had a few other options for what was, but it was definitely in the single digits on the list.

Mobile view had kind of squished the browser, by the looks of it; the next thing that settled on his screen as he scrolled was a series of links: the first said About This Blog; the second said About the Author; the third said Categorization and/or Vandalism; the fourth said Tap That, which… okay…; and the last one said Archive. Ed hesitated with his fingertip centimeters from the screen, and then he selected the first one. Might as well know what he was getting into before he was knee-deep in it.

Not that he didn’t already have an idea from the stupid picture, but…

The page loaded, with the aforementioned stupid picture replaced by some text. At least this thing was relatively readable; the purported sex machine running it had opted for a parchment-looking theme, and the font was normal and shit. Ed had grudgingly awarded some points for that right off the bat; unfortunately he remembered an era that had involved a lot of neon on black backgrounds, and flashing hearts, and sparkle text, and…

At least that time was over. If nothing else went right in this century, they’d always have that.

Hopefully, he would be equally over this blog in a matter of minutes, instead of vaguely kind of intrigued.

Names and descriptions have been altered, the page he’d landed on read; and occasionally embellished beyond recognition, in the interests of protecting the innocent. The feelings, however, are all and always real.

If you need me to tag for anything I’m not warning for already, please do just let me know! The only thing I cannot tag for is purple prose, because then anyone who blocked it would be seeing an empty blog.

As your eponymous tour guide of the murky swamp commonly known as sex and relationships, at least as they pertain to my own tragic excuse for an existence, I think it’s worth noting that I identify as pansexual, and the experiences written of within will reflect as much; and that I absolutely and unequivocally believe that there is no such thing as sex without consent.
Also, safe sex is great sex! I have a primer if you need it, and there’s a link on the Tags page.

Kisses, with tongue (but only if you’re into that).

—Casanova

Well, that confirmed two things that Ed had already suspected: first, that the guy in class had been onto something about attention and validation and sexcapades or whatever shit; and second, that the writer of this thing was pretentious as all fucking get-out, but he knew it.

Ed thumbed his way to the next link, which delivered a few more lines of… whatever this was:

The humble author is a humble pursuant of a humble doctorate degree at a humble university. When he’s not diverting himself with dalliances and then narrating them for your edification, he spends an unreasonable amount of time accidentally burning himself with things in the lab that he probably wasn’t supposed to touch. But attractively. They are attractive burns.

Evidently he also considers referring to himself in the third person a worthwhile hobby, which begs the question of why anyone sleeps with him at all.

He is not in the business of revealing his location, but he is always open to specific questions of other natures, so please feel free to fire away.

(That was almost all of his favorite F-words.)

Holy shit, this guy was something else.

Ed tried the next page. There was a big wall of text with bullet points; a quick skim confirmed that it had to do with how the guy was organizing this whole thing so that you could pinpoint what parts of it you wanted to read.

So maybe Ed kind of, sort of, secretly wanted to get to the Tap That page and see what the fuck that was about. He didn’t feel he could be blamed for that—even if the rest of it was garbage, it had to be admitted that the asshole behind this whole production knew how to market, and he understood the concept of clickbait.

At least tapping on Tap That got the first colossal disappointment out of the way: apparently it was just… a little contact form sort of thing. A box where you could type a question without having an account on this site. How damn boring was that? Ed had been—

Uh. Ed had not been anything. Ed had absolutely, definitely, incontrovertibly not been hoping that the rather evocative phrase would lead to something like, you know, for instance, just hypothetically speaking, maybe some saucy pictures or some shit. Just something suggestive—little bit of skin, little bit of leg, some inside of the wrist, maybe inside of the thigh, maybe a meaningful glimpse of a happy trail, or—

“Hey, nerd,” a voice said from way too fucking close, which brought Ed extremely close to the brink of instantaneous cardiac arrest.

He fumbled to shove his phone into his pocket, trying to press the button to kill the screen as he went, just in case.

“Hey, nerd, yourself,” he said. Not exactly his most original comeback—but on the upside, it was embarrassing enough of its own merit to provide plausible cover for the faint flush he felt percolating in his cheeks, his neck, his throat, and probably the tips of his ears. “How was class?”
“Great!” Winry said, which Ed believed, because Winry was one of those people who made her own life better by force. She leaned against the table but didn’t sit down. “You want coffee?”

“Do bears shit in the woods?” Ed asked, rummaging for his wallet. “Here—I think it’s three bucks or something, but leave a tip.”

“You don’t have to tip when it’s just drip coffee,” Winry said, taking the cash.

“Yes, you do,” he said.

“They just pour it out,” she said. “Sometimes they don’t even do that; they just put it in a carafe and make you dispense it yourself.”

“Well, they have to make it first,” he said. “Plus you’re taking time away from orders that they would get tips on, so it’s like—a compensatory tip for the tips they could’ve made.”

Winry stared at him.

He stared back.

“This is why you’re single,” she said.

“Ah, like hell,” he said. “Baristas would throw themselves at me and tear my clothes off if they heard that. I’m single ’cause I’m a socially-backwards loser-freak who’s a million times more focused on physical chemistry than the kind you have with people.”

Winry opened her mouth, wrinkled her nose, and shut her mouth again.

“Jeez,” she said once that small facial feature pageant had concluded. “You’re right. I wanted to add something, but I think you covered all of it.”

“Thanks,” Ed said. “Or something.”

“Sure or something,” Winry said. She waved the dollar bills she’d taken from him. “Well, you definitely earned the Rockbell coffee delivery service.”

“I’ll get it next time,” he said.

“Damn right you will,” Winry said.

She sauntered off towards the doors to the café, and he briefly considered fishing his phone out again. There’d be time to read a post—maybe two—off of that horrifically fascinating blog. Even if there wasn’t a line at the counter, Winry usually ordered lattes, which took a little while to describe, and then even longer to make. She’d almost gotten into a fistfight in a Starbucks over it once—they’d gone to their local branch the first day that the pumpkin spice lattes were being advertised again, and she ordered one with her eyes all bright and her smile all big, and when she went to collect it from the barista and chirped out her gratitude, a dude at the condiments counter snorted and said “Basic bitch” just loud enough for her to hear.

Ed wasn’t quite sure whether the store had actually gone silent, or if that was his memory being melodramatic retroactively. He was pretty sure his heart had almost stopped, although there had been a rushing in his ears that had sounded like his blood; it was just that he was so fucking angry he could barely see.

The world had shuddered back into focus a bit as Winry stepped right up into the guy’s personal
space and looked him directly in the eyes. She smiled. She said, sweetly, “Would you like it in your face or on your crotch first?”

The guy blinked at her, tried for a lascivious smirk, and said, “What, hon?”

Winry raised her cup in one hand and curled the other into the collar of the guy’s shirt, and her smile tilted cold and sharp and absolutely terrifying.

“My drink,” she said. “Do you want it on your face or your crotch first? I’d promise to aim for your dick, but I get the impression it’s a pretty small target.”

The guy’s eyes went huge, and his face contorted, and Ed’s instincts kicked in—belated, yes, but piqued as shit. He grabbed Winry’s elbow and hauled as hard as he dared without using enough force to spill her drink, since that would just make all of this worse. “Hey, c’mon,” he said. “You and I both know ‘The asshat provoked me’ won’t hold up in court, Win.”

Winry shook the guy once—not too hard, although witnesses were unreliable about that sort of thing—and then let go, stepping back.

“You fuck with a girl about what drink makes her happy ever again,” Winry said, “and I will find you, and you will get scalding milk in places you don’t want it to go. Clear?”

Ed didn’t wait for an answer from today’s seaworthy—and sputtering—model of douchecanoe before dragging Winry out of the coffee shop. They had to flee the scene of the almost-crime before one of the city’s numerous harried cops happened by and deigned to get involved. He’d seen it happen. Winry’s puppy eyes and *I’m a good small-town girl* voice had failed in the past—only once or twice in two decades of acquaintance, sure, but Ed wasn’t feeling lucky that day. Or any day. Or ever. To be fair, that was probably a different problem.

When they made it out onto the sidewalk, Winry shrugged his arm off, good-naturedly enough. She sipped her latte.

“That was stupid,” she said, completely calm. “Next time I’ll wear my Uggs, so ‘basic’ can kick him in the face.” She held the latte out to Ed. “You want to taste victory?”

“No, thanks,” Ed said. “Next time get a victory americano.”

She had a point about all of it: for one thing, the pumpkin spice syrup smelled really good and apparently tasted it. Ed would definitely have tried one by now if it wasn’t for all the miserable milk involved.

In any case, the takeaway was... lattes. Lattes, and a latte of trouble. Lattes, and latte-r-day saints like Winry Rockbell fighting the good fight. Lattes, and the canonized gift to humanity in question waiting for one inside the café right at this very minute, which was freeing Ed up to contemplate life, the universe, the temptation of that terrible blog, and the inexhaustible list of reasons for his singleness. Singledom. Singleosity.

Instead of indulging the urge to peruse some vicarious vice, he pointedly took out his new and neatly-folded campus map and took a look at the environs around his current location—eventually he would memorize this damn thing, and then he wouldn’t be capable of getting lost, and no one would know that he was, collegiately speaking, a n00b.

Momentarily, Winry returned bearing gifts of caffeine. Although Ed supposed it wasn’t really a gift, since he’d paid for it, but at least she’d brought back his change this time.
“Thanks,” he said. “Did y—”

“Three sugars and not even a whisper of a dairy product,” Winry said, settling across from him.

“You’re the best,” Ed said.

“I know,” Winry said. “Did you get your work study stuff yet?”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “I start Saturday.” He built the grimace up really slow from a neutral expression. Had more effect that way. “Food service.”

“No,” Winry said. “Really? Sorry.” She adjusted the little paper sleeve on her latte and beamed. “They put me at the reception desk in the little English library.”

“Oh, my God,” Ed said. If there were any other phrases in the language sufficient for that kind of injustice, he hadn’t heard them yet.

“Yeah,” Winry said. “If it’s any consolation, this is probably the last time in my life that a humanities major is going to help me get a good job.”

“Touché,” Ed said.

Winry raised her cup and held it out. “Well, freakin’ cheers to us for making it this far,” she said. “If all else fails, we’re more stubborn than the systems trying to keep us down.”

“Cheers to that,” Ed said, reaching out to toast.

Class made for an extremely effective distraction from one’s personal life, but you could only run for so long, and hiding never quite worked out. Ed managed to keep himself occupied for most of the walk back to the dorms by recapping in his head, but when he saw the remarkably unattractive concrete building rearing up ahead, it occurred to him that his roommate had probably turned up by now.

Ed wasn’t exactly a stranger to the concept of living practically on top of somebody else—he and Al had shared some close quarters over the years—but this was different.

The school had given him a pretty decent stipend to live on: decent enough, at least, to cover the cost of rent in the dorms, which had sounded like he was paying for some penthouse luxury shit right up until the minute he walked in a couple days ago and realized that they were leasing him a cement-walled shoebox and the privilege of sharing it with a stranger. If it had been Al, then—obviously no problem, but he didn’t have the slightest idea who his co-shoeboxer would be; they hadn’t even sent him a name or anything. His guess was that the mystery roommate had done this whole college gig before and didn’t live especially far away, since the guy hadn’t made an appearance last night, so either he was skipping the first day of class entirely—which probably guaranteed that Ed wouldn’t like him—or he was confident in his ability to drop his crap off in the morning, bounce to his classes, and then return to unpack.

There was a distinct possibility that Ed needed to spend substantially less time speculating about the inner lives of others and more of it dealing with his own shit. His own shit was legion. It deserved his undivided attention.
He texted Al as he hit the stairs—he should have taken the elevator; his shoebox was on the eighth floor, but there were strangers waiting for it. Besides, eight floors was just enough miserable cardio to qualify as a skip-the-gym pass, although it was hell on his left hip. It was hell on his left everything. He regretted it instantly, but by the time he’d opened the door to the stairwell, it was too late.

It did help him think about something other than the likelihood that he was standing on the edge of a chasm of roommate rivalry, waiting for a brisk wind to tip him into the abyss.

Survived the first day and Winry did too, he wrote. hoorah or some shit haha. you doing ok? lmk how your day went

Then it was only a couple dozen painful stairs between him and… the door. Which he stood outside for a second regulating his breath so that he wouldn’t come in panting and sweating like some kind of… person who took the stairs.

Then he put his key in the lock, and turned, and—

“Ah!” a voice said, way too brightly for the situation, as far as Ed could tell. “Hello!”

He blinked a couple times and managed to focus on the bed opposite his, which had been empty this morning—it was now occupied by a set of dark yellow linens, as well as an Asian guy sitting cross-legged, and an Asian girl sitting next to him with her knees up and one arm slung across them.

“Um,” Ed said. “Hi.”

“Ed, right?” the guy said.

Ed blinked a little more. Which didn’t help, but it sort of made him feel better. “Yeah, how…”

“I went through all your stuff,” the guy said.

So much for blinking: Ed stared. It didn’t help either.

“Just kidding!” the guy said. “I asked the R.A.” He jumped up and came forward to hold his hand out as Ed tried to decide whether closing the door was a good idea if he was locking himself in here with this… with this. “I’m Ling Yao, and this is Lan Fan.”

Ed shook. At least the guy had a good grip. The handshake was a dying art and all that shit. “Hi,” he said again; and then, to the girl on the bed, “Hey,” for some variety.

“I love your hair!” Ling said before Ed could come up with any more brilliant overtures. Ling didn’t seem to notice Ed’s struggle with language, let alone mind it; he was busy pulling a tie out of his own hair and shaking it free. “Long hair club!” He turned towards the bed and gestured furiously. “Come on!”

“Do I have to be in the club?” Lan Fan asked.

“Of course you do,” Ling said, completely seriously.

“You should at least have to opt into membership,” Lan Fan said. “Or there should be prizes.”

“You have long hair,” Ling said. “That’s the name of the club.”

“Then I’m going to cut it,” Lan Fan said.
Ling gasped. “Just to get out of my club? You’re terrible.”

“No,” Lan Fan said, “I’m Lan Fan.”

Ling clapped a hand over his heart, pulling an even more elaborate face this time. “I can’t believe you would dad-joke me in front of my new roommate.” He pointed with his free hand, turning mournfully to Ed. “There is no mercy in that woman.”

“Don’t worry,” Lan Fan said, getting up. “I’m not gonna sleep here.”

“Um,” Ed said. “Okay.”

There had been a moment where he’d wondered if he was getting two roommates for the price of one—or the un-price of one, since roommates weren’t something he ever wanted unless they were Al. Al was like a combination of a parent, a maid, and a best friend in addition to being a brother, so sharing with him was pretty much like winning the roommate lottery. It wasn’t really Ling’s fault that he was going to have to follow that act.

Ling patted Ed’s shoulder in what he seemed to think was a friendly way. Ed thought it was more of a **hi hello that’s my personal space you just shoved your extremity in** way, but he wasn’t sure if he could say that without starting a feud, so he settled with tensing up and setting his jaw until he could get a better read on this guy. Punching someone partway into your first-ever conversation with them usually didn’t result in long-lasting relationships, as he had learned the hard way a long time ago—even if it was frequently the most efficient way to solve the problem immediately at hand.

“So!” Ling was saying as Ed contemplated whether it would offend anyone if he took a few very subtle steps back. “Tell us about you!”

“Uh,” Ed said. Variations on that theme seemed to fill about forty percent of his vocabulary right now. “I’m… majoring in chem, I think. Maybe biochem.”

“So you’re suicidal,” Ling said.

“What?” Ed said.

“I mean, it’s not EECS,” Lan Fan said. “I think this is just, like… mid-range masochism.”

“What?” Ed said.

“No, no,” Ling said. “I talked to someone in advising about that once, because it took two weeks to get the appointment set up, so I wasted three hours of his time with every inane question I could think of.” Maybe they’d get along better than Ed had thought. “The hard sciences are called ‘hard’ for a reason. That’s where a lot of the burnout is. And the acid burns.”

“They make good battle scars,” Ed said.

“Badass,” Lan Fan said.

“That is a good incentive,” Ling said. “So where are you from?”

Ed gestured with one thumb over his shoulder even though his spatial awareness was going to be at a minimum until he finished memorizing that map. “Oh, uh… little town about two hours south.” The Al Voice in his head was suggesting that the best way to worm his way out of an interrogation was turning the social obligations—in this case, having to pretend to care about conversational balance—into a weapon in their own right. “What about you guys?”
“Business,” Ling and Lan Fan said in unison.

Ed went back to blinking. Not because it had worked before, or anything, but at least it was better than saying ‘what’ for the third time in as many minutes.

“Major, that is,” Ling said cheerfully. “We’re from San Diego! Well, originally we’re from Taiwan.”

“Cool,” Ed said.

Fuck. People were impossible; talking to people was impossible.

“Hey!” Ling said, reaching for him again. Resisting the impulse to flinch drained the dregs of Ed’s willpower after the hell of a day he’d had. “We were just about to go out and grab something to eat—come with us!”

Ed’s immediate desire was to say Holy shit, no; I am peopled out for today and probably this entire week and maybe next month, at this rate. But you couldn’t just… say things like that. He’d landed on a knife’s edge here: he knew, intuitively, that if he went out and spent some of his dwindling supply of hard-earned money on dinner, and tried to be personable and pleasant for a couple hours, he was going to stretch himself to a point where his better judgment wore straight through, and he couldn’t control himself anymore.

On the other hand, he couldn’t just say No to a request phrased like that, in this situation.

But the trick was—the trick that Al had taught him, which had saved his ass again and again over the years—the trick was that if you were fast enough, and clever enough, you could put a positive spin on a No and get away with murder.

Well. Maybe not actual murder. He hadn’t had to try that one. But you could wriggle free of sticky invitations like you had Teflon skin, sometimes.

“That’d be awesome,” Ed said, picking the words carefully, but delivering them quick enough that he was hoping it sounded natural, “but I gotta hit the books, or I’m going to start out already behind. You guys free this weekend sometime? Saturday night, maybe?”

“Perfect!” Ling said, although as far as Ed was concerned, it was decidedly not. Sometimes it was better to procrastinate on the inevitable than to embrace it when you were already exhausted, though. Al had taught him that, too. “We can talk about that later, then. For now, I think I’m lingering on the brink of starvation, so—”

“You are the single most melodramatic person I have ever met,” Lan Fan said, crossing between them—Ed stumbled two awkward steps back to give her space—so that she could open the door.

“Am I?” Ling said, offering her a sweeping bow as he stepped through the door she was holding for him. “How many people do you know? How many people do you really know? Can we really know anyone, in a world of feigned feelings, when everyone’s minds are full of secrets? Can we even know ourselves?”

“You’re really not helping your case,” Lan Fan said. “’Bye, Ed.”

“Have fun,” Ed said helplessly.

“Life is a modern art installation full of funhouse mirrors,” Ling was saying as Lan Fan towed him down the hall. “All we can ever see is distorted reflections of our own misshapen concepts of our
internal lives, and project them onto others who have no choice but to do the same—”

The door shut, heavily, and blocked the sound of the remainder of that sentence.

Thank fucking Christ.

Ed’s willpower held for several hours, which he thought was kind of impressive after a first-day that combined an epic infodump with a pretty significant amount of sensory overload. And emotional overload. And anxiety overload. His heart was beating normally again, though, and a timely text from Al with a not-so-subtle reminder to eat something sent him forging out to the little café on the corner that accepted meal points as payment.

They had some prepackaged shit that looked more or less edible; he knew he wouldn’t really taste it if he was doing homework anyway. Once he got into the zone, the functions required to sustain himself just sort of… faded into insignificance, if not absolute obscurity. Winry had once tried for five full minutes to get his attention, furiously given up, and later ranted to him that he’d probably work through a major earthquake and not notice until a ceiling beam fell on his head, and he died. He’d pointed out that he probably wouldn’t notice that, either, because it would most likely kill him instantly, and she’d screamed.

In the end, he made some really good headway with his readings, reflected that Ling had been gone a long damn time considering the circumstances, realized that he would be an idiot to complain about solitude when it was going to be extremely difficult to come by for the foreseeable future, and then very tentatively forged out to the communal bathroom and its imposing row of shower stalls.

To say that he was less than thrilled at the prospect of showering in his flip-flops in a room that people could walk into at any time—whether or not the stall doors locked securely—would be understating the situation. He really, really, really did not want to have to get into it explaining the whole thing to a bunch of semi-strangers who happened to live on the same floor. He’d probably eventually have to ‘fess up to Ling, and that sounded bad enough; who the fuck knew how that was going to go? It really changed things, with some people. It made a lot of people uncomfortable.

And that made him feel like shit. Angry shit, sure, but the shittiness was the baseline; the anger rode on top, like wildfire on a wooded ridge. It was fucking devastating to have to accept that your simple existence made some people so uncomfortable that they would treat you like crap just to reduce their heebie-jeebies. Hell, it was fucking devastating knowing that you gave people the heebie-jeebies just by being alive. You were supposed to have to be creepy or nasty or weird in order to do that. You were supposed to have to do something wrong.

At least he’d had one stroke of luck today, though: there was nobody else in the damn showers to glance at his feet and freak out. Maybe if he was really, really quick, nobody would walk in; he could stand at the back corner of the stall, provided that the spray reached that far, and no one would be the wiser.

He’d gotten good at fast showers, though, because he’d never wanted to use all the hot water and risk Al having to take a cold shower and getting sick or something. There were also a few unexpected advantages to having slightly less surface area than the average person, although he probably made up for it with all of the damn hair.

He dried off as much as he could inside the stall and managed, with some extremely awkward shuffling and hopping as he tried to avoid the damp walls, to put on his pajama pants. That wasn’t quite safe, because he couldn’t leave them dragging on the floor without the bottoms getting soaked, but it was a hell of an improvement. It was a miracle nobody’d walked in—he’d have to take fucking note of what time it was when he got back to the room and make sure to shower at this exact
minute every goddamn day.

He brushed his teeth as fast as he could without triggering any mental reprimands from the Responsible AI Voice in his head, and then he hightailed it back to his and Ling’s room with his towel over his shoulder. He’d done it. He’d made it. Ling still wasn’t even back yet. He had more than enough time to put on the rest of his pajamas, and then his socks, and hang up his towel semi-nice, and then settle down in bed to warm it up with his ass and his laptop while he waited to get tired.

Had he really just pulled that off? Maybe he was dreaming.

If he was, then… that sort of changed the way consequences worked, didn’t it?

If he was dreaming, no one would care if he opened up another private browsing window—just in case he was dreaming less than he thought—and made his way back to that blog.

Evidently the self-aggrandizing schmuck behind it had been busy, because there was a new post, different from the one Ed had seen on that girl’s screen earlier. There was a little box where someone, under the security of the moniker Anonymous, had apparently sent a note from the disappointingly unprovocative page Ed had seen earlier.

hi i’m in a long term relationship but i keep finding myself looking at other people and just wondering what it would be like. nothing serious but i honestly think it would help me to sample another dish or two wink wink. i think it’d confirm that what i have is good if that makes sense. what do u think casanova?

Speaking of taste, the taste in Ed’s mouth—

He wasn’t going to dignify that shitty metaphor with another second’s thought, but—

But it stung just knowing there were people out there who thought of their significant other like a luncheon that you could take or leave.

Casanova had written… quite a bit, by the looks of it.

Listen: I don’t know a lot of things for sure, but I do know one thing.

You should not cheat. Ever.

It’s not about taking the edge off of your appetite. It’s not about satisfying a craving for something on the side that kind of crops up even though your favorite food is the one you have all of the time. It’s not about the excitement of the danger because there’s a possibility of getting caught.

It’s about you, prioritizing your fleeting little daydream feelings over the feelings of someone who cares about and supports you.

If you will pardon my French, FUCK THAT.

If you can’t continue a healthy relationship without getting something on the side, end the relationship. Do it respectfully. Have the grace and the class and the maturity to start a hard conversation with “I really care about you, and that’s why I think we need to take a break, because I’m having all of these ideas about other people, and the last thing I want to do is hurt you. It isn’t your fault.”

Because that’s what it is. There are no excuses. You can daydream all you want – although if you
don't even try to put a damper on it, I do tend to feel that that’s rather classless – but the act of cheating requires conscious decision after conscious decision after conscious decision, and there are never circumstances under which that is excusable. It doesn’t happen by accident. It happens because you deliberately prioritize your momentary sexual desires ahead of the commitment agreement and emotional investment that you have built one day at a time with another human being.

And if you do that? How dare you. How fucking dare you.

If you must go seek other meals; if you must free your reproductive organs, whatever their configuration, and let them explore in the wild; if you must range far and wide and dally diversely—

End your relationship first.

(Before anybody flips out here, I think perhaps I should specify – I’m not talking about open relationships. If you’re in an open or polyamorous relationship with good communication, have at it! Do your thing! Best wishes! But that’s not the impression I got from this ask. What I’m talking about is cheating. You all know the difference.)

It’s not a small thing. It is never a small thing. If you do that to someone, you are damaging their ability to trust – most likely on a permanent basis. You are leaving scars on a person who has been good to you, and those scars will stay there for the rest of their life, to be kissed or torn open by everyone else they ever try to be close to.

How dare you.

tl;dr don’t cheat, ever. Don’t.

…okay, now back to our normally scheduled programming of amusing anecdotes about my sex life, haha. Just had to get that out.

That was…

…not what Ed had expected at fucking all.

And it mattered, was the thing. It mattered a lot, because he’d been anticipating a roguish, caddish, cavalier approach to the emotional aspect of the whole shebang—pun not exactly intended—if this guy’s game was writing about relationships for entertainment. You’d think that someone whose primary goal was chasing tail and then editorializing about it for petty internet fame would take a pretty blasé stance on the whole fidelity deal, but…

But apparently Casanova had some substance. Or at least some history.

Ed scrolled a little further. The next post was dated from this morning, and it looked a little more like what he’d been figuring on.

My dear readers… I suppose you might be waiting for an update on the passionate pas de deux with Petra.

How shall I put this?

I should, perhaps, have nicknamed her Pompeii. Within the span of a single week, my friends, it smoldered, and ignited, and the volcano blew, and then the whole city smothered underneath the ash. Quite poetic. Arguably I may have deserved it, although I tried to be very upfront. I always do.
But I'm getting ahead of myself.

As you may recall, our prior fateful dinner outing ended after some very involved necking on her doorstep was interrupted by a roommate noticing our handsiness out the window and gasping audibly. Perhaps I should have known it was doomed at that point; rarely does the universe offer such unequivocal portents, no?

But I am very bad at listening to the universe, just as I am very bad at listening to advice.

I took her to an Indian restaurant two blocks down from campus for our second date, although I tried to shoehorn it into the conversation several times that I wasn’t looking for anything especially serious. I also made a point of confirming that she didn’t have any plans later on, and managed to mention that my neighbors on the floor below were off visiting family this weekend. I can, in fact, be subtle when I want to, but I’d been getting the sense from her that maybe we weren’t quite on the same page about the genre of the book, so I attempted to make it as painfully obvious as possible without branding the words ‘SEX WITHOUT STRINGS, PLEASE’ on my forehead.

I have a great forehead. No sense ruining it. Even Sharpie would be a bit of a blight. Have to be careful about that sort of thing if you want to remain eligible and fancy-free.

In any case, allow me to offer you a pro-tip: if you take someone out for Indian, ask them beforehand how well they handle spice.

Or, in Petra’s case, don’t handle it.

AWKWARD.

At the very least, I suppose I helped to keep her hydrated, since she went through her water, and then my water, and then round two of each after we got a waiter’s attention for refills. Another pro-tip: when you realize you’ve fouled up that badly, start apologizing fast and profusely.

Another thing to keep in mind is that a little damage control can go a long way: making the effort really does count for a lot of people. I convinced Petra to order a mango lassi, which – as any of you who have ever had one and are now salivating avidly will know – really can’t go wrong.

…unless your date is lactose intolerant, I suppose. All right, perhaps it can go wrong, but only under extenuating circumstances, and the point is that in this case, nothing more or less than an extra drink salvaged dinner in a hurry.

Another pro-tip, pun intended: don’t go out to eat unless you can leave a generous gratuity. This has nothing to do with your date and everything to do with being a decent human being, and not having servers spit in your food should you come back to the restaurant, no matter how loud or disruptive your date may have been. If you can’t afford to tip, you can’t afford to go out. (I’ve been there. It’s hard.) But you can get takeout! Bring it back and dim the lights or whip out the candles; nothing wrong with that.

In any case: mango lassi. Which snatched dinner from the brink of oh-my-God-too-spicy-my-mouth-is-aflame oblivion, and which also had side benefits that carried on into the rest of the evening. Namely, when we were strolling out, and I caught her arm and swept her around a corner and under the overhang of a bakery to kiss her, it tasted like mango – bright and tangy and sweet and smooth.

Feel free to use that love-life hack. It’s a good one. I’ll be using it again, so no one will be able to tell whether you learned it from me, or whether you actually ARE me. It’s bulletproof.
Slightly less Kevlar-ready was my brilliant plan for a starlit stroll home. For one thing, I’d tried to eat as fast as decorum allowed so that she wouldn’t have to sit there with her nose running into her curry any longer than strictly necessary, which had botched my timeline a bit, so the sun hadn’t even gone down yet. For another, the weather was still conspiring to screw me, but not in the good way, so it was still well over eighty and slightly humid, which is the worst possible combination of climate factors when it comes to trying to instigate the horizontal tango.

…I could go on with the bad euphemisms, but I’ll spare you.

Eventually we straggled home, and I will take credit for one thing: I am a good improviser, and I am difficult to daunt.

What’s better than cold weather for encouraging close contact? Well – nothing. But taking a shower to “freshen up” when you’ve just been trekking through the miserable late summer heat is not a bad consolation prize. Just don’t go too overboard with the cold-water part of it, or you’ll kill your own libido. On the upside, what in the world, I ask you, is better than a beautiful woman smelling like your shampoo?

I mean – I have great shampoo anyway. (You need to. It doesn’t have to be expensive, but it does have to smell excellent, because when you ghost past someone who’s attracted to you, they’ll get a whiff of it and lose a little bit of their mind, and you can take that little bit with you and run.) But there’s something uniquely tantalizing about smelling things familiar to you and your skin on somebody else’s.

There are, I regret to report, significantly sexier things than turning on several area fans in addition to cranking up your faulty air conditioning as high as it will go, but sometimes, my friends, we must make do.

Petra, bless her heart, finally started taking down all the memos I’d been sending in bold red ink, and then she started making the most of them, and I absolutely wish an experience like it for everyone in the course of their lives.

My dear readers, she walked out of the bathroom with one of my towels held up around her chest, sauntered forward, flipped her hair over her shoulder, made eye contact, dropped the towel to the floor, and said, lasciviously, “Oops.”

A lesser man might have passed out.

I was close.

But the most important thing I learned in kindergarten was that if you eat the M&Ms now, you can only have two; but if you wait five minutes, you can have ten. And I really, really love M&Ms, if you get my meaning.

Fortunately, the impulse to gasp makes for a good start to a deep breath, and if you let said breath out gradually and very slowly and deliberately start to smile, you pay your partner a compliment and look like a million bucks at the same time. Trust me here.

I’d been sitting on the bed, which is generally a good place to stretch out and look artful and attractive in just your pajama pants “while you let your hair dry” or whatever flimsy excuse you prefer, so I got up – slowly and deliberately; this is your skeleton key here – and sauntered over to her. I paused, and looked at her eyelashes and her hair and the freckles across the bridge of her nose first – in detail, meaningfully, and meaning it. She’s gorgeous. Most people are, if you really look.
Then I looked down. Slowly and deliberately. And reached out as if I was about to touch her hipbone, and then paused with my fingertips a few centimeters away, and...

Leaned down and reached for her towel.

“Oh, dear,” I said. “You dropped this.”

“Clumsy of me,” she said.

“Here,” I said, picking it up. “Let me get that.”

She raised her eyebrows, and I took one end of the towel in one hand and slung the other end around her back and caught it in my free hand – which already brought us breathtakingly, gut-wrenchingly, heat-sharingly close.

And then I drew it in just until it touched her shoulder blades, and pulled her in a little closer with it.

There was kissing. With tongue. Cover your children’s eyes and think pure thoughts, etcetera.

Props are hot – unless you’re in live theater, in which case props are sentient and trying to kill you – so I kept the towel in the game for another minute and used it to tow her with me as I stepped back towards the bed and sat down on the edge. Having a good bed is always a plus, have I mentioned? GET A GOOD BED.

She climbed up with me and straddled my lap, which was perhaps the most transcendent thing that’s happened to me in... well, at least a week. Maybe two. I get around. But it was incredible. She knew she had the kind of assets you could die of dehydration drooling over, and she wasn’t afraid to settle them just low enough that the graze of her body against my dick, with just the thin fabric of my now-twice-damned pajamas in between, nearly killed me again. I think I may have left the mortal plane momentarily and drawn one long breath in a better place.

Then she planted both hands on my chest and pushed me backwards, and instinctively I let go of the towel and dropped back onto the bed.

“Oops,” she said.

“We’re a very clumsy pair today,” I said.

If this sounds like porno dialogue, you win a prize; and also you need to spend less time watching and more time participating in your own. It’s much more fun. Plus there’s no peanut gallery with one hand in their pants and one in the Kleenex box complaining about the quality of your script, so you can enjoy getting as cheesy as you like.

I digress.

Petra climbed up over me, and her hair was hanging around her face and framing it so beautifully I honestly couldn’t help myself; I had to reach up and start touching it – smoothing it back, running my fingers through and twirling little sections of it. It was still wet from the shower, which was actually delightful, because it was dripping chilly water on my chest at unexpected intervals, and sensational contrast drives me wild faster than almost anything else in the universe. What a joy it is to be alive.

In addition to which – being tender during sex costs you nothing and pays you back tenfold a lot of the time. There is nothing wrong with letting someone know that you’re not just in this for the feelings; you think they’re attractive and are enjoying just looking at them long before anything
overtly physical takes place. People are wonderful! And all of us are scared and shy and insecure about one thing or another, and reassuring someone that you're happy to be here will never, ever be a bad idea. What do you stand to lose?

I digress again.

She had me pinned to the mattress with both hands on my shoulders and was slowly grinding her glorious ass against my extremely obvious and tragically neglected erection, and if you don’t know where this is headed, you must be very new around here, so welcome.

Another piece of advice: run your hands lightly all over the person that you’re with and/or getting some from. Touch them. Feels amazing for you; feels amazing for them; makes them feel worshiped and appreciated and powerful and very hot. They are all of those things in this moment. Don’t be afraid to let them know it, because you are all of those things too.

Before you burn me in effigy, I think it should be said that I don’t just dole out advice like some kind of self-proclaimed and extremely twisted lesser deity; I follow all of this advice. I do! Because it works!

The point is that I was dragging my palms up the absolutely exquisite curve between Petra’s hips and her ribcage on both sides, and then I switched to dapple-light fingertips when I reached her ribs, and then… My dear readers, poet laureates could not generate sufficient words to describe her breasts. They are beautiful and phenomenal and almost enough to coax a career agnostic out of doubt.

That said, it should also be noted, in so many words, that breasts do not make a woman, in either sense of that sentence: they neither define nor entail womanhood; and they are also not a mark of it. Many women without them are nonetheless absolutely, indisputably, beautifully women. Many people who are not, in fact, women at all may have them.

All of which… does not stop Petra’s from being agonizingly gorgeous. They are. Holy mother of God.

On second thought, perhaps we shouldn’t bring Mary into this.

...can I say it?

...I have to say it.

UNLESS SHE’S DOWN FOR A THREESOME, BECAUSE I SURE AM.

All right, I’ll see you all in hell. You’ll know me by the designated seat they labeled for me in neon.

I’m going to pretend that never happened. I know it’s written right there, which rather lights plausible deniability on fire and pitches it out the window and then stomps on it when it lands, but nonetheless… moving right along.

Touch your partner. Kiss everywhere. Trace their collarbones with the tip of your tongue and then breathe, very gently, on the trail and then drag your hands down their sides so you can feel it as they shiver. Laughing softly is optional, although I personally tend to find laughter during sex unreasonably arousing. There may be a small note on my throne in hell about that. A little inscription on the right foot of it, near the floor, perhaps. If you stick your tongue out at me, it lights up with the hellfire perpetually burning inside the structure of the chair.

...sorry, it’s either very late or very early, depending on your point of view, but I wanted to get this
out before the details started to lose their distinction.

She was still leaning over me – knees on either side of my waist and hands on my shoulders, with her hair everywhere, and is there anything in the world more transcendent than running your fingers through thick, long hair in a situation like that? Absolutely beautiful. So damn satisfying. There’s something primal in it, for me – something that ignites a particular flare in the pit of my stomach, which tells my brain, very clearly, You are in the right place.

“There are a couple of ways we could do this,” she said.

And I half sat up at the same second that I drew a little on her hair so that she’d meet me halfway for another kiss – longer, harder, deeper—

And I said “If we pace ourselves, we could do it every one of those ways.”

And she started laughing, so I shifted just enough to get the leverage to flip us over, and her hair bounced all over the bed in this knee-jellying chestnut cascade, and I said, “Where would you like to start?”

Possibly the only thing more satisfying than burying your hands in someone’s hair during sex is when they gasp out loud, regardless of where your hands are.

I set mine on her wonderful hips and held them to the bed while I kissed my way down her chest, which I took my sweet time with. And then I skipped over the obvious target in favor of leaving very long, very wet, very lingering kisses first on the tops of her thighs, and then on the insides of them, moving incrementally upwards, so painstakingly slowly that her breath started to catch, and I flicked my tongue just ever so lightly towards

There was a key in the door.

In the lock on the door, that was.

There was a key in the lock, and the lock was on the door, and that meant Ling was about to walk right the fuck in on Ed blushing like a fucking twelve-year-old Catholic schoolchild over a naughty fucking blog—

His first instinct was to slam his laptop shut.

He realized in the nick of time that said first instinct was a stupid-ass instinct, at which point his second instinct was to shove his left hand in between the lid of his laptop and the base so that it wouldn’t close as he first-instinctively slammed it.

Fucking ow.

He whipped it open again, brain reeling, cheeks aflame, and managed, this time, to smack the hotkey to close just the browser window with the damning evidence; and even though it took two tries with his hands fumbling amidst the panic, apparently the lock was a bitch to open, because it granted him a truly magnanimous three spare seconds to scoot his ass down in bed as far as it would go, so that he was lying with the laptop on his chest where the screen would mostly hide his face.

The door opened just a crack. He made a point of glancing up just enough that his eyes might show over the top of the computer.

“Oh,” Ling said, filling the crack, starting to beam, and widening the crack substantially. “Didn’t want to wake you! That would have been terrible roommate etiquette on our very first day.”
“It’s all good,” Ed said, and he almost sounded normal and calm and convincing and shit. Apparently he was better at this lying-to-people-he-liked thing than he had been the last time he tried to get away with something at the age of six. Al could always tell, so as soon as he’d gotten verbal and self-righteous—which had happened at about the same time—Ed had been fucked. “How, uh—how was dinner?”

It was supremely tempting to add And how was ‘dessert’? with some heavy air-quotes, given that there was no way Ling and Lan Fan had just been dining out for three and a half hours solid. It was remotely possible that they’d found some place that offered thirteen-course meals, but unless college was real different for Ling than for Ed, probably they couldn’t afford that anyway.

“It was great!” Ling said, which naturally didn’t give Ed much of any indication either way. “I’ll regale you with the whole story another time—” Somehow, that didn’t actually clear it up. Ed got the unsettling impression that Ling was the kind of guy who would try to corner you and tell you all the gory details of his sex life. “I think I’ll join you in a minute.”

It took Ed a full three-quarters of a frozen second to realize that Ling meant that he was going to join Ed, conceptually, by also going to sleep, rather than that he thought roommate privileges extended to climbing into a stranger’s bed and snuggling up. Ed wasn’t a snuggler even when he did fucking know people, unless those people were Al, and that didn’t count. That wasn’t even snuggling, per se—it was more like… sharing body heat. They already shared a considerable portion of their DNA; it wasn’t like a little coopted warmth was going to make any difference.

“Okay,” Ed said, because this was the sort of conversation where you had to say something even though there was nothing of substance to say. “Cool.”

Ling beamed.
Then he paused.
“‘You sleep with your hair wet?” he asked.

Ed blinked. His hair was wet, and he was in bed, so he’d sort of assumed it was self-explanatory. Or at least that it followed. “Uh… guess so, yeah.”

“And it doesn’t turn into a nest?” Ling asked.

“Uh,” Ed said, yet again. “Guess… not?”

“Wow,” Ling said in wide-eyed awe. “You want to be the co-VP of the Long Hair Club?”

“Depends,” Ed said. “Are there responsibilities and shit? Do I have to set up meetings?”

“Not sure yet,” Ling said. “I’ll have to decide what the club actually entails.” His eyes lit up. “Or… enpoyntails.”

“Holy shit,” Ed said. “Nice.”

Ling’s shoulders sagged, and he released a deep breath. “Oh, thank God. You don’t hate puns.”

“I hate weak puns,” Ed said. “Good ones are cool. And you get bonus points when they’re on the fly.”

“Are you the president of the Pun Club?” Ling asked. “Damn, your application must’ve been good.”
“Not sure about that,” Ed said. “But I guess it worked.”

“And thank goodness for that!” Ling said, snatching up a bright green leather dop kit that he’d set on one of the shelves on his side of the room. “All right, gotta brush my teeth and pee before I die. Not at the same time. Be right back.”

“Cool,” Ed said again. It seemed like the only appropriate response to updates on the minutiae of the life of someone like Ling. On the downside, it made him sound like a stupid frat boy who knew a grand total of three other words.

Ling slipped out into the hall—as much as one could slip when that door weighed about a metric ton—and Ed settled down.

This wasn’t so bad so far. His roommate was weird, but good-weird; and no one had seen him showering and pointed and screamed; and classes were intense but not completely overwhelming; and even after two chances to get caught, nobody had noticed him demonstrating enough desperate thirst to read a sketchy-ass blog and vicariously experience someone else’s romantic successes. All things considered, he was kind of coming out ahead so far, right?

Right. He had the bull by the horns here; he just had to keep his grip.

“We need to do something drastic,” Winry said—during coffee, on a Thursday, two weeks in.

Ed had been raised properly—by Al, partly, and by Winry’s grandmother, and by himself; cumulatively he’d done okay—so he swallowed his last sip before he asked the requisite question: “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“We’re losers,” Winry said.

“Wow,” Ed said. “Okay, thanks. Appreciate it. Glad we had this talk.”

“No,” Winry said. “Not like we were in high school, when we were losers because we were such big nerds, and Al and I were such teacher’s pets, and you were a weird half-teacher’s-pet, half-troublemaker hybrid. We’re losers now because we don’t do anything.”

“We’re going to college,” Ed said. “We’re always in class. I’m always in lab on top of class. And then we both work on top of it, which—by the way—is stupid and sucks, and I need you to hook me up with somebody at the library so I can grovel for a new job. And then there’s fucking homework. What more do you want us to do?”

“We need to have social lives,” Winry said.

“Jesus,” Ed said. “Tell me your secret.”

“What?” Winry said. It was her turn, after all.

“Tell me how you’ve retroactively genetically modified yourself to eliminate the need for sleep,” Ed said.

“Oh, har, har,” Winry said. “I mean—jeez, I love you, Ed, but I also want to have, like… friends. Friends who aren’t like my nerdy brother.”
“You have such a gift,” Ed said, “for buttering me up when you want something.”

“Don’t you want to have a ton of friends?” Winry asked. “Don’t you want to be popular, and have people blowing up your phone all the time asking you to go get coffee with them?”

“No,” Ed said. “I’ll take the coffee to go, though.”

Winry made a face. “I always forget that you’re such a misanthrope.”

“You should feel privileged,” Ed said. “The list of people I tolerate is, like, ten names long, and you’re on it.”

“Truly,” Winry said, so deadpan that all of the dishware in the nearest dining hall’s kitchen probably shuddered at the morbidity; “I am hashtag-blessed.”

“Hashtag-sarcasm,” Ed said.

“Me?” Winry said. “Unthinkable.”

“Okay,” Ed said. “I’m going to play devil’s advocate here. What do you propose we do to become super-popular awesome people with a million friends who throw free coffee at us?”

“I don’t know,” Winry said. “That’s part of what I need your help with—the methodology. We should go to parties, though. One of us needs to get cozy with a sorority girl or a frat guy or something. They have all the parties over there, but I dunno if they’re invite-only, or what.”

“I make friends everywhere I go,” Ed said, rivaling Winry’s murdered-skillet tone, if he did say so himself. “So that should be a piece of cake.”

“Good point,” Winry said. “Why don’t I handle that phase of the plan?”

“Great idea,” Ed said, which was funny if you looked at it right, since it’d been his idea the entire time. “So what part of this harebrained scheme-thing do you even need me for?”

Winry sipped, very seriously, and then looked at him, even more seriously.

“You need to get a boyfriend,” she said.

It was a damn good thing Ed hadn’t actively been drinking, because he choked on his own breath enough to guarantee he would’ve spat coffee right in Winry’s face. Java had a lot of semi-magical properties, but Ed didn’t think exfoliation was one of them.

“I fucking what?” he said.

“Well,” Winry said, “as a newly-minted gay—”

“I’m not fucking currency,” Ed said.

“Of course not,” Winry said. “Ideally, you’re fucking guys.”

Thank goodness he still hadn’t taken a sip, since he choked on his own spit this time. “Jesus, Win! You know wh—it’s not like it happened yesterday. I just… didn’t…”

“Notice?” Winry asked brightly.

Ed set his jaw. “Say anything,” he said. 
“The point is,” Winry said, loudly—uncomfortably loudly, in fact, if you were the kind of person who had been born with a spare sliver of shame buried somewhere in your being; “you’ve never been out in the community before.”

“You say ‘the community’ like every single non-heterosexual in the geographical region meets up in convention centers periodically to share tips on getting some,” Ed said, to cover the fact that he was irrationally fucking terrified of the thought that other people might be listening. If you couldn’t stop it, own it, right? If duck and cover wasn’t an option, pick up the flag and wave it so vigorously that nobody would realize you’d prefer to be hiding under a table somewhere.

“For all I know,” Winry said, “you do. Although I figure that if that was true, you’d be better at it.”

Ed winced so hard his cheeks hurt. “Ouch, Win. I’m gonna tell Al you said that. He’ll give you the silent treatment for three hours.”

“I’d estimate it at more like two and a half,” Winry said calmly, swirling her cup around. “That wasn’t supposed to be insulting; I just meant—you’re inexperienced, but this is the best time to change that. Right?”

“I guess,” Ed said slowly. It wasn’t like the thought hadn’t crossed his mind—this was most likely the largest population of peers that he would have access to at any point for the rest of his life, and the densest concentration of individuals with an amenable combination of interest and intellect. If he was ever going to find anybody—

Well. That particular if was a different problem. A different problem, if you were of the—

“Plus then we could just work ourselves into his existing group of acquaintances,” Winry said sunnily, “and all of our problems would be solved.”

Ed stared at her.

She sipped her latte, demurely, and raised her eyebrows.

Ed cleared his throat and articulated very distinctly. “Did you just tell me to whore myself out and land some popular guy so that we can steal his friends?”

“Of course it sounds bad when you say it like that,” Winry said. “I happen to think it’s genius.”

Ed drained his cup in desperation. “I think you and I have different definitions of that word, Win.”

On the one hand, it was probably a good thing that he had to cut their coffee date a little short—if it had gone on much longer, he was pretty concerned Winry was going to pick out a dude walking by that she liked the looks of and shove Ed right at him, bruises be damned. On the other hand, he had to do it because was going to office hours for his chem TA.

Probably he shouldn’t have been surprised in the slightest when he’d walked into lab section last week and seen the obnoxious-hot guy from the first day lounging behind the desk at the head of the room. That was just his fucking luck, wasn’t it?

The guy’s eyes had widened just a touch and then crinkled just a little as he smiled.
“Hello again,” he’d said.

Ed had forced out as civil a “Hi” as he was capable of and then beelined towards an open seat.

“Watch the chair,” the guy had said. “They’re almost as tricky as the doors sometimes.”

The worst part of it all was that Ed couldn’t escape—for one thing, he’d signed up for this lab section because it was the only one that actually fit into his schedule, so even if it wouldn’t have been unbearably humiliating to beg the registrar to help him switch, he couldn’t. For another thing, he’d have to forsake his own surname if he ever backed down from a challenge, no matter how stupid and smug-faced and clever-eyed the challenge in question might be.

For a third and even more horrible thing—as if he needed a nice, round trifecta when one lousy discouragement would have been enough—even though the first meeting was a soft-ball, Ed got the unshakeable sense that this guy was actually a really good teacher, so switching TAs probably would have been to his disadvantage overall. He couldn’t afford to bring any disadvantages onto himself—life routinely dealt him enough of those without his help.

In the end, he’d found out, in that inaugural section meeting, that the guy’s name was Roy, and that Edward Elric was apparently just sort of attracted to assholes.

Which was great. It was fantastic. Ed couldn’t think of anything in the universe fucking better than thirsting after likely-hetero guys who ate snotty little virgins like him for breakfast. Scrambled, probably. Or spread on toast. Not that Ed recommended spreading snot on toast, but—

Anyway. It was fine. Everything was fine. He totally had a handle on this whole college thing and would definitely not be letting his stupid brain and even stupider dick get the best of him and ruin all of it.

He was just going to walk into dumbass Roy’s dumbass office hours, ask his questions in a very calm voice like a real adult, pay attention to the answers, and then leave. Easy as pi. Even he couldn’t fuck that up.

He was teetering on the brink of failing step one when he turned up—which was typical, he supposed, but it wasn’t his fault that Roy was one of those pretentious-ass TAs who preferred holding office hours in a coffee shop to having them in a shared office or a classroom or whatever the other options were at this particular school. Probably it was because Roy liked to drape himself artistically over a café chair and sit there looking pensive and intellectual and stupid-gorgeous in his spare time anyway, so it was more convenient to host office hours here and multitask. Which one would think would make him relatively easy to find, but apparently he’d gone off into a dramatically-lit corner somewhere or something, and—

“Ed,” the increasingly-familiar voice said from behind him after Ed had half-swiveled on his right heel trying to scan the premises for the elusive bastard. “How are you?”

Ed spun around, which probably managed to make him look even stupider. “Oh—hey—um—good. You?”

Roy smiled. He was, as predicted, doing a Renaissance-art-worthy half-sprawl in one of the chairs, with a neat little stack of papers next to his laptop on the table.

“I’m very well, thank you,” he said. At least, if nothing else could be said for the bastard, his mama had more or less raised him right. Or someone had. “Are you here for office hours, or for a little caffeine?”
“Does caffeine even come in small quantities?” Ed asked, hovering awkwardly near the table while Roy just… sat there. Smiling at him. Ed took back the previous nice thought he’d had about this asshole and slammed the door behind it. “Nah, I wanted to—I mean, if you’ve got a second, I was hoping maybe you could look through my problem set. Just to make sure I’m on the right track.”

“Of course,” Roy said, quelling what might have been a momentary flash of surprise. He closed his laptop, set it atop the papers, shifted the whole pile aside, and folded his hands on the newly-cleared stretch of table, summoning up another beatific expression from what seemed to be an endless supply. “Forgive my surprise; the office hours attendance tends to be low verging on nonexistent until after the first midterm.”

Ed didn’t believe that for a fucking second—people would probably line up like a midnight movie premiere queue just to get a couple seconds of face-time with this jerk and his genetic lottery spoils—but Ed did the vague acknowledgement nod as he sat down instead of calling it out. There wasn’t really any way to argue that wouldn’t either jeopardize his grade or require him to compliment Roy’s stupid face right here, while making eye contact, which sounded like a fate substantially worse than death.

“I just don’t want to get behind,” he said, attempting to make himself slightly less conspicuous in the chair and to draw his folder of Most Relevant Papers out of his backpack at the same time, which was an adventure in coordination. Sitting was enough fucking fun all by itself; adding in other motor skills at the same time—

Well. He managed. That was the important thing. It could have been a lot worse.

Roy held both hands out for the paper as Ed extracted the relevant page, so he passed it over, despite the way his stomach started squirming at the thought—remote, unreasonable, but excruciatingly compelling—that he might have fucked it up.

“I’m sure you’re doing wonderfully,” Roy said. An ordinary adverb in a fairly simple sentence had never, in Ed’s life, sounded quite so pretentious. There wasn’t time to comment before Roy’s eyes started flicking back and forth as he skimmed Ed’s scribbles.

At least they were less scribbly than usual; he’d re-copied this from the original draft to try to make it easier to read. His writing had been shit ever since he’d been forced to switch over to the left hand, and no amount of practice seemed to help very much.

Roy paused about halfway down the page—or close to it; Ed knew how fast Al read, but other people were a little harder to gauge—and glanced up at him.

“And you were sincere?” he asked.

Fucking asshole. What a fucking vocabulary. Who the hell could generate words like that on the fly?

“Yeah,” Ed said. He wasn’t quite sure what part of their extremely brief excuse for a conversation Roy was referring to, but he hadn’t lied about anything that he could remember, so it was a safe response.

Roy held up the sheet with his scribbles all over it. Was it illegible? Or was it all wrong? Bastard’s face wasn’t giving away a single hint about where he was going with this.

“How long did this take you?” Roy asked.

The sudden intensity of his eyes made Ed’s skin crawl, and his stomach was doing—a thing. Some
kind of thing. A thing a little bit like shame-churning, and a little bit like magmatic heat.

“I dunno,” he said. “An hour, maybe?”

Roy’s face stayed blander than a block of marble, except for the singular sharpness of that unsettling dark-eyed gaze. “Did you look up the answers online?”

“What?” Ed said. “No. You can do that? Why would you? What’s the fucking point of doing homework if you don’t—” His voice stuck abruptly when he realized what he’d said. “Oh, my God—sorry. Sorry. Didn’t mean to—my bad.”

“Swear?” Roy asked, and there was a sliver of a grin for a half of a second before he went all unreadable again. “I’ve got well over ninety-nine problems, and that’s not even close to making the list. You mean to tell me you did all of this in one hour without any help at all?”

Ed was… colossally uncomfortable. That was a phrase for it. Unnerved as hell, and edgy as hell because of it. Why all the questions? What had he done that was weird? He was used to at least recognizing when he did weird shit; this was—what had he done wrong?

“Yeah,” he said, slowly. “Is that… okay? I mean, I kind of thought that was—the whole point.”

Roy offered him the paper back. One eyebrow arched neatly.

“You do not,” Roy said, “need to worry about getting behind.”

Narrowly, Ed resisted the urge to snatch the paper out of Roy’s hand. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If this is any kind of precedent,” Roy said, “you have an extraordinary gift for chemistry. I suspect you’ll do just fine.”

Ed watched closely, but Roy’s face didn’t change—no hint of an incoming Psych! or any satisfaction at having successfully trolled a stupid undergrad.

Was it possible he meant it? Did big-shot, self-important, drop-dead-gorgeous asshole grad students dole out real compliments around here? Was that a thing?

“Okay,” Ed said slowly.

There was a pause. Roy’s eyebrow dropped and then darted up again, which should’ve looked extremely stupid. Why did attractive people make everything look good? Wasn’t it enough for them just to go around being prettier than everybody else all the goddamn time?

“I mean it,” Roy said. “If this is any indication of your affinity and your threshold for effort, you’re going to be setting every curve.”

Ed frowned. “You can’t tell that from one homework assignment.”

Roy shrugged, fluidly. There was an intimation of a shimmy in it, the merciless motherfucker. “Perhaps not. But I’ve spent longer than I’d like to admit making snap judgments of students at this point, and so far my track record is rather exemplary.”

Arrogant asshole. Arrogant, judgey, presumptuous, unfairly easy-on-the-eyes asshole. What the hell did he know, anyway?

Nothing. Not Ed. Not Ed’s so-called potential; not Ed’s brain; not Ed’s dreams; not Ed’s life. And
Ed wasn’t in the business of letting people into those. If you didn’t show somebody the soft stuff, they couldn’t target it when they inevitably got it in their heads to stab you in the back. The less you shared the better, probably. The less you let people you hadn’t grown up trusting anywhere near your heart—

Well, he wasn’t going to make that fucking mistake again.

Maybe he could play another angle, though. Maybe he could wring a little wisdom out of Roy, if that was the right word for it—if he’d been here a while, the guy had to have a lot of experience, even if he was looking at it from a different side.

“Okay,” Ed said again. People tended not even to hear that word; it had magic conciliatory powers. Some people said it as a response to ‘thank you’, and everyone just glossed right past it, which Ed had always found a little bit bizarre. “So—I mean—if you’ve got another minute—”

Roy swept both hands out elegantly—and didn’t smack any passersby in the process, which would have happened to Ed a thousand times out of a thousand if he’d tried to gesture like that—to indicate the café on a whole, presumably. “The hour is yours.”

“Right,” Ed said. “Just—what should I do? While I’m here, I mean. To up my chances of getting a job or getting into grad school or… I guess those are my only two choices, aren’t they?”

“Strictly speaking,” Roy said, “you could be unemployed, or you land an unpaid internship, neither of which quite counts—”

Ed hated his guts, and also his face. Especially the face. Condescending and beautiful was the personality-appearance combination from hell.

“—but that’s a bit beside the point.” Roy sat back and folded his arms, which also made him look like a magazine cover that someone had carefully cut out and imbued with life. Evidently every single possible human position did. “It depends somewhat on what you’re eventually looking for—and I know that’s a very difficult question to answer this early on. My best recommendation is to try for a research opportunity of one sort or another. A PhD is essentially several years of research at a stretch, interspersed with a few tests, more teaching than you ever imagined they’d ask for, and a bit of weeping into your tea.” He flashed a hundred-watt grin, and Ed’s guts did the single stupidest twist-up-and-tremble thing ever recorded. “And some impromptu undergraduate advising, apparently.” Roy settled again, and the world stopped careening in such dizzying circles that it felt liable to bobble right off of its access and hurl them all into the void. “I’m not quite sure what industry is like, which is why I locked myself up in the ivory tower here so that I wouldn’t have to find out.” He leaned forward, setting his folded arm on the table, and met Ed’s eyes, which… burned. Just a little. Like a candle flame dancing ever so slightly too close to the skin. “But none of it’s set in stone. That’s the most important thing—nothing that you choose in life can’t be made into the foundation for something else. There is always another door to open, and just because it looks nothing like the ones you’ve seen before won’t ever mean it’s locked to you.”

That was… staggeringly touchy-feely, to say the least.

“Okay,” Ed said yet again, warring with the impulse to lean back and put some distance in between them again. He was always a little—paranoid, was probably what Winry would say. He was careful, these days, was all. He was careful when he was with a guy he knew he was attracted to—careful not to get too close. He had stupid instincts, and straight guys freaked out if they thought another dude was hitting on them, whether or not it was rooted in a largely harmless impulse to move in just centimeters nearer than platonic interest would permit.
It wasn’t like he was some kind of creeper or something, but he just didn’t want to seem like he was… taking advantage. That was all. It would’ve been the same way if he was into girls, right? He would’ve tried to make sure he was never pushing any kind of an agenda on accident, no matter how hot they were.

It wasn’t exactly that he wanted to push an agenda on Roy—although he would not have been fool enough to reject any opportunity to push Roy. Down onto a bed, for instance. Or a couch. Or the backseat of a car. Or a decently cushy bit of carpet. Or a relatively bugless stretch of grass. Anywhere moderately horizontal sounded pretty appetizing right about now.

But Roy was probably into women, like the vast statistical majority of the male population, and any and all desires to reach out across this stupid little table and find out whether his hair was as soft as it looked from here would have to stay safely buried in the depths of Ed’s collection of idiotic fantasies.

That was fine. There were a shit-ton of stifled thoughts and smothered hopes percolating down there. They could all keep each other warm.

“Thanks,” Ed said, trying to keep his voice as unassumingly level as possible with his insides writhing like a pit of snakes. “I figured you probably had a good perspective, since you’ve been in these shoes before.”

Roy was still smiling in what looked to be a neutral kind of way, so maybe a shred of luck had been on Ed’s side, and he’d swallowed all the smoke from that firestorm.

“If you’re open to one more piece of advice,” Roy said, which instantly made Ed skeptical, because Ed was by and large a crap excuse for a human being, “I’d recommend keeping some time for yourself. It’s easy to over-schedule. And it’s easy to burn out. Check the boxes that make you happy. Don’t try to get them all.”

That was some bullshit if Ed had ever heard it. He had stuff he had to do—period, end of story, end of book. He had to pack a lot of it into every last day if he wanted to be able to accomplish anything, and he had to prioritize based on what was best for everybody he was accountable to. Sometimes life left you with a lot of debts to pay, and Edward fucking Elric did not default.

He should’ve just let it go. He should’ve said Okay for the umpteenth time in this weirdo conversation, let it end, taken his homework, and made his merry way on to his next class to cram some study time in while he waited for it to start.

Instead he said, “Checking all the boxes does make me happy.”

To be fair, one of the hallmarks of the noble Elric name was being a contrary little shit for its own sake at the best of times.

“Besides,” he said, maybe a touch hastily, when Roy’s eyes went a bit wide, “I mean—most of it’s stuff I have to do. I can’t skip classes—I’m paying for those. I can’t skip lab, obviously. I can’t skip work. I can’t ditch my friend; she’s, like, the only one I’ve got. Doesn’t leave me a whole hell of a lot of time for… whatever.”

Roy knitted his fingers together, propped his elbows on the table, and set his chin on his folded hands. Ed hadn’t realized that people actually did that. Maybe Roy’s life was, in fact, a very long and excruciatingly boring movie or some shit. That would explain a lot.

“You should find some way to unwind,” he said, and if that wasn’t supposed to sound ever-so-slightly sexual, Ed would be damned, but—
But Roy’s expression didn’t shift a whit from that same enigmatic little vaguely-invested smile.

“Funny word,” Ed said, “‘should’.”

“Conceded,” Roy said, which was funny, because it sounded like *conceited*, which…

Well, maybe he wasn’t—so bad.

Which, in its own way, made him worse—because if he acted like an asshole all the time, Ed would be perfectly content admiring him from a safe distance, appreciating the aesthetics while keeping him quarantined on the off-limits list.

But if he seemed *nice*—

Shit. That was where the trouble gained a toothhold, and the blood started to run.

“How’s expression didn’t shift a whit from that same enigmatic little vaguely-invested smile.

“Anyway,” Ed said, which almost made sense in the context of the conversation at this point, “I should… get out of your hair.” *Your gorgeous, shiny, silky-looking hair, and how the hell you get it to fall in your eyes like that without actually blocking your vision is a marvel and a mystery for the ages.* He gestured to the shunned papers and laptop. “I know you’ve got other shit to do.”

“It’s really all right,” Roy said, parting his hands and then extending one towards the front counter. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

Ed couldn’t tell if that was a suggestion, or an offer. And if it was the latter, then—could Roy do that? Was he even allowed to buy stuff for students that he had to teach? It definitely had to be in the contract somewhere that you couldn’t accept gifts, but…

Didn’t matter anyway, though.

“No, thanks,” Ed said, because *he’d* been raised more or less right, too. “I’m not a big tea fan. Works too slow.”

For the first time since Ed had sat down, Roy’s face was extraordinarily effusive: he’d suddenly equipped it with all the requisite trademarks of overstated surprise.

*Blasphemy*,” he said. “Tea is the elixir of—”

Despite the hazards, Ed stood up—partly because he actually needed to get out of there before this spiraled any further out of the realm of things he understood… and partly because it was a nice and dramatic way to make the point. “No, that’s coffee.”

“Heretic,” Roy said.

“Nerd,” Ed said.

“Takes one to know one,” Roy said.

“Boy,” Ed said. “Thanks for the throwback—I haven’t heard that since I was in the second grade.”

Roy grinned. “It’s called ‘a classic’.”

“It’s called ‘lame’,“ Ed said.

Roy was still grinning. And Ed’s heart was climbing up his throat, swelling all the while.
This was not good. This was not good, and this was not safe, and it felt too—

Too everything. Too bright and too terrifying and too easy. Far too comfortable and far too dangerous at once.

“I gotta go,” Ed said.

“All right,” Roy said, all mild neutrality again.

“Thanks for looking at…” Ed gestured uselessly towards his backpack—or, really, to the homework shoved into it. “Really appreciate the help.”

“Not at all,” Roy said.

Ed shifted the bag against his side. Was there simply no graceful way to exit a conversation, or was this one of those problems that he was the only person who had?

“Have a good day,” he said. “See you in class.”

“You, too,” Roy said, and it was Ed’s own fault that he couldn’t tell which part it applied to—maybe both?

Nothing for it except to turn on his heel and walk out like he wasn’t some kind of social landmine waiting to ruin every conversation another person let him into.

He ran through that experience a little in his head as he hiked up towards the building his next class was in. Precisely what the hell had just happened?

And—well, shit. Were there check-boxes somewhere that would make a difference? Was there something out there you could reel in and check off that finally made it all feel settled, and solid, and right?

Yeah. Of course there were. Obviously it was all that simple. You could just snag one specific part of a life, and the rest of it totally fell into place. No problem. Easy-peasy lemon juice, as Al liked to say when he was loopy on a few too many meds. That was why so many people were so normal and contented and well-adjusted and all that shit. That was why everywhere you went, people who knew the trick were shining like beacons in the night, and all you had to do was find your box, and you were golden for the rest of time.

Cute lie, though. Probably helped, sometimes. Probably sounded like siren song on the bad nights. Probably made the world look a little more Technicolor and a little less bleak.

Not that somebody like Roy would’ve needed any of those consolations, if the outward aspect of unshakeable confidence was any indication of what he was like underneath.

Better to leave it. Better to walk away and let it be and try not to let the way that other people’s lives went hurt any more than it had to. Better not to give himself a chance to be so bone-deep, gut-twistingly jealous that choking it down felt like chugging poison half the time.

He was fine. He was always fine. He had a class to go to and work tonight, and he wanted to call Al after that, and it was all—fine. It was fine.
Ling had a billion friends, so he went out to dinner with someone different basically every single night, rotating through the list trying to spend a little time with everyone. Ed wasn’t sure whether Lan Fan usually tagged along—she seemed independent enough to have her own friends, and to have strong feelings about some of Ling’s.

It wasn’t that Ed didn’t want to meet them, or anything; they just didn’t sound like the kind of people he would have picked. Then again, he supposed you never really picked your friends: acquaintances sort of happened, and you either clicked or you didn’t, and you either held it together or you didn’t. He hadn’t picked Winry—although after all these years, he’d pick her over just about anybody else on Earth. He probably wouldn’t have pinned the two of them as a pair of terrors if they hadn’t met then, and someone had asked him now. It wasn’t like science; there were no physical laws when it came to people; you couldn’t rely on rules. Sometimes it was impossible to know what kinds of opposites were going to attract.

In any case—Ling was out, and Ed had been invited but pleaded exhaustion, which was true, valid, and convenient all at once. He suspected Ling had seen it written in the circles under his eyes; there had been a faint note of a wince behind the excessively cordial invitation. The à la carte café around the corner that took Ed’s meal plan was making a killing off of him already this term.

When he’d looked through his emails and re-checked all of the assignments posted online against the ones he’d written down—Al had taught him that; forcible organization had become something of a coping mechanism for self-doubt, and whatever frigging Roy said, Ed was pretty sure that he was out of his depth around here—he settled down with a mediocre packaged sandwich and the open internet. There were better combinations, sure—especially ones that involved food that was good, rather than just edible—but not a whole ton of ’em.

This was nice—ignoring the expectations, even for a minute. It was nice. Browsing clickbait was innocuous, and it required just enough brainpower that it distracted him from any other thoughts.

But it was also sort of… dull. After a while, anyway. You could only muster excitement about twenty major Hollywood films with behind-the-scenes feuds you wouldn’t believe so many times before you started to wonder how long you would have to play Snake on your phone in order to melt your own brain into putty.

He knew he shouldn’t, but he just—

He couldn’t help it.

He had the room to himself; he had a real breather for the first time in the better part of this week—

He just—

What harm could it possibly do? If it was anybody else telling him they were invested in this blog—
if it was Win, or… well, it wouldn’t be Al, but if it was—there was no damn way he’d shame them about enjoying it for what it was. Why the hell was he doing it to himself? It was just a little bit of entertainment. Hell, it was cheaper than Netflix, right?

Right.

He still pulled it up in a private browser window—not, he reminded himself, because it was anything to hide, but because he didn’t want Google’s algorithms to zero in on a few choice words and start giving him seriously questionable ads.

Casanova had updated a couple times, by the looks of it. A lot of it was messages he’d answered, including one—again from a visitor who had chosen to remain anonymous, presumably because they’d dived into the same cognitive dissonance rabbit hole that Ed had just paid a visit to—that just said *what makes a good boob tho*

Not even a question mark. Some people took no pride in their crudity.

Casanova had responded only: *The best breast is any one that you have permission to appreciate.*

Someone else had asked if he recommended any particular cologne for knocking women’s socks off, and he’d answered that he had to keep some of his secrets to himself, and that he’d met a very great number of women with cold feet, so it might be better for everyone if they retained their socks anyway.

Then he’d written another giant wall of text.

> My dear friends: A few of you have asked me whether I’m going to kiss (“wink, wink” was included in several of these) and make up with Petra. She’s a wonderful person, and I know she will make someone with a slightly different attitude extremely happy one day, but I also know it won’t be me.

> If you have never experienced someone saying to you, in so many words, “I only want you if you change a fundamental aspect of your being that I knew about from the very start,” allow me to assure you that it doesn’t feel any better than you’ve probably guessed.

> It’s also something of a matter of principle for me, at this point. I’ve had a lot of people ask that of me over the years, and I have tried many, MANY times to be, and to become, the person that they wanted.

> But it doesn’t work like that. People change, certainly. But not at will. Not at the drop of a hat. And not on someone else’s terms. It eats you from the inside, and everything starts to rot, and in the end you’re worse off than when you started, and after one too many of those – I put my foot down. I said “Never again”, and I’ve kept to it.

> And that is what I told Petra on that occasion, as calmly as possible, in fairly similar words. I’m not in the business of letting people down. I set an expectation, and I stick to it. If someone tries to change the rules of the game in the middle and ends up unhappy with the outcome, I don’t believe that I’m to blame.

> But that’s enough gloom and doom and philosophy! That’s not what any of you are here for, after all, is it?

Nothing defines a breakup – whatever it’s breaking, precisely; in this case, not exactly the coupling of the century, and not precisely an unshakeable bond many years in the making – quite like the impulse to rebound. And if you’ve learned nothing else here, I hope you’ve determined that sometimes superego is overrated, and you should let your id spend a moment behind the wheel. We
live confined little lives, my friends. We follow laws and pay taxes and ask how strangers are in the elevator even though we don’t want the answer, and all of those things are good – all of those things help to maintain a society worth living in – but they teach us to crush down those little flickers of desire for anything that falls outside the boundaries of what we think that we’re allowed to want.

But we need outlets, as human beings. We need fulfillment of a kind that a very cleanly-finished tax form usually does not provide.

Every now and then, you need to throw the rulebook out the window. Feel free to light it on fire first if you so wish; you get bonus points for defenestrating it from a higher floor.

This is all a rather roundabout way of saying that I think some of the zealous judgment of hookups and one-time encounters is really rather unfair. There’s quite a lot to be said for, and gained from, the simplicity of them: you go in wanting one good night with someone who was a stranger before and will be again afterwards. And, generally, that’s what you get. If there aren’t any lies or promises, and everything stays aboveboard and kosher, what in the world is so wrong with that?

As a culture I think we have something up our ass about no-strings sex, and that’s absurd. Yes, you must, you MUST, be careful and considered and take every precaution that you can. But what’s so wrong with being satisfied?

The point is, I had a craving, so I went to one of the clubs a full mile away from campus and sated it. Excellent all around; one and done. It took the edge off of the whole sordid finish with Petra, and there wasn’t even a cover charge, so all it cost me was a couple of drinks.

And God – God, he was beautiful.

I was starving for something a little… harder. Men are so much less-soft, physiologically, in my experience. And many of them, if you catch them in the back of a dive when they’re a little drunk, will kiss you like they want it to hurt.

But I’m good with that sort of thing, as you might have guessed. I’m good with a lot of sorts of things, and pushing a gorgeous blond boy up against the wall in a staff-only hallway and trying to put my tongue through the roof of his mouth is absolutely one of them. Well – I assume so. I’ve certainly never had a single complaint.

My dear readers, I regret to report that my descriptive powers are insufficient to describe the sounds he made. Or, I suppose, to be more truthful, I half regret it, and half recall it with such hotly brimming delight that I forget the meaning of the word “regret”. What can I say? I contain multitudes.

He was so delicious it defies prose, though I suppose, as always, that I’ll try. Some men have such unforgiving mouths, such desperate and greedy hands – and some nights I’d have to count myself among them. Neither of us was in the mood for wasting time, and neither of us was in the mood for asking before taking. I buried both hands in his hair and forced his head back so that each kiss would clash at a slightly sharper angle, and he fistled both hands in the front of my shirt and pulled me in so that I could not possibly mistake his intention when his hips met mine. Blond hair just past his ears; one earring – little silver hoop, sparking in the low light from the buzzing fluorescents overhead; we were just far enough from the rest of the club back there that the walls dulled everything but the throb of the bass beat and an indistinct impression of the noises of the crowd. I kissed down the side of his neck and then back up to get that earring in between my teeth, to try its mooring with my tongue – he choked down most of a moan, but the last little bit of it slipped free, low and hoarse and trembling—
I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t even remember what it meant to think; and I can’t imagine that if I had, I
would have given a single fraction of a damn. All I knew was that I wanted, and I wanted now.

I curled my left hand a little tighter in his hair and walked the fingers of the right around the back of
his waist, which was a perfect place to pause for a few seconds, attempting to breathe in time with
the rhythm of the kiss, before I slid it down and employed it for the absolutely sublime activity of
squeezing his ass.

Excellent ass, it should be noted. Seven and a half out of ten. Very nicely shaped, just wished there
was a tiny bit more to grab onto. Meat. Meat is so tragically underrated; it’s all we are, when you
really dig down to it, and why shouldn’t we salivate over one another?

…that extended metaphor was much sexier and more graceful in my head. Now I sound like a
cannibal. Well, hell. Take it or leave it. Moving right along:

I drew back enough for a little bit of conversation, though I kept that hand in his hair – hair an eight
out of ten; beautiful and thick and a lovely dirty-blond that kept offering up these flashes of pure gold
when the light hit right. Would’ve had it just a touch longer, if it was up to me. Well – quite a lot
longer. God, I love long hair; there is nothing like having room to grab fistful after fistful and drag
your hands all through the length of it and twirl it around your fingers as you go...

But that’s beside the point, which is that I said “How’s here, now, immediately?”

And he managed this breathless little laugh that made my toes tingle and my stomach contract, and
if I’d been dizzy before, I was dying now. He said “They tried to pick me up for indecent exposure
last time I tried that.” I must have looked as devastated as I felt, because he started smoothing my
shirt down and then tugged on the collar to pull me down to kiss again, and then he stopped
favoring my mouth with indescribably gorgeous torture for long enough to add, “But my place’s just
three blocks that way.”

Touched my withered soul.

“You don’t say,” I said, which is one of my favorite phrases because it is inherently ironic, and also
a bit archaic, which is really how I operate in case you somehow hadn’t noticed that by now.

And then, because I am very good at what I do despite being the kind of person who says ‘You don’t
say’ in all seriousness, I leaned in against him until we were about to merge at a cellular level, and
then I ground my hips against his – real hard, real slow.

And then I said “You sure you can make it three blocks?”

That noise I wish I had recorded and saved so that I could set it as my ringtone and make people
enormously uncomfortable for the rest of my natural life. There are no words. Not a sigh, not a
groan, not a gasp, not a whimper – a little bit of each; an entirely new amalgamation of utter wicked
want.

Perfection.

“I think I like you,” he said, and then he fumbled around – numb-fingered is a good sign; it’s a very
good sign – until he found my wrist, grasped it tight enough to impede my circulation a bit, and
started dragging me off down the hallway. We found a door marked FIRE EXIT: ALARM WILL
SOUND, at which the part of me that is and always will be a rule-abiding goody-two-shoes very
much felt the need to hesitate, but the evening’s Adonis had other ideas and barreled straight
through. Apparently the two of us were not quite hot enough to set off any smoke detectors, because it let us out into a back-alley without incident, and then…

And then we scuttle-ran an excruciating three-block stretch, both of us laughing rather breathlessly all the while. It was a nice night, brisk and clear-skied so you could see the stars – or would be able to, if you could tear your eyes away from how delightfully the streetlamps lit your companion – but I don’t think that it was cold enough for either of us to be able to get our dicks under control.

In a situation like that, it’s rather overrated anyway.

Somehow, we made it all the way to his apartment complex without either of us keeling over and having to lie on the sidewalk rutting helplessly for a while, and he hauled me up the front steps and into the lobby and then into the elevator. Blessedly, we were alone; although I had had just enough to drink that I might very well have shoved him up against that wall and recommenced exploring all the contours of his mouth even if we’d had company. Beauty makes me so weak, and so stupid. I suppose we’re all like that – for the right addiction, for the right poison that tastes so irresistible right up until we’ve had too much.

I wonder sometimes if I’m going to get there.

And then I remember that I don’t care.

In any case, Gorgeous Blond towed me out of the elevator and down a walkway open on one side to a rather unpromising parking lot, and then he made a noise of terrible distress as he realized that he had to clear his head and steady his hands enough to use his keys to let us in. Poor dear.

Before I could move to help him – not that I had any ulterior motives such as maneuvering my hands into his pockets, which would be a prime position for… other things – he sorted the keys out, and/or got the door open by force. I can’t quite recall; my memory’s a touch fuzzy just there. Probably because I was thinking in detail about what I’d do if I had my hands in his pockets.

Anyway, in we went, and his roommate – lovely girl – looked up, and made a face, and said “Hi” when Adonis said “Hey”, and then waited until we were nearly out of the living room before sighing softly and putting her earbuds securely in. I likely would have missed it had I not glanced over my shoulder as Adonis towed me through, but I like to be aware of my surroundings. And my escape routes. These are important details, mind.

We made it into a bedroom that had not exactly been what I would call “cleaned” in a while, although there was a chance I was mistaken, and it had in fact seen a vacuum between the Dark Ages and today. But again: not the point. And anyone who walks into the inner sanctum of someone they’re angling to have sex with and starts complaining about the décor or the upkeep deserves the most pointed and painful blueballs ever experienced by a human being.

So I kept my mouth shut for once in my sad little life, and I let him tow me into the den, and then when he made the mistake of hesitating for a split-second near the bed, I caught his shoulders and pushed him down to sit on the edge and then pushed his chest to knock him backwards.

Gently.

Just ungently enough to make his hair do that fwippy thing (technical term) that disrupts my cardiac and pulmonary functions simultaneously every single time.

He looked up at me with this expression of half submerged regret, and that worsened the problem in a much less pleasant way.
“I haven’t, um,” he said. “You know, I haven’t... I didn’t think I was gonna get any. Usually that place is full of assholes.”

I put one knee on either side of his waist and climbed up over him and then swooped in close to breathe against his throat when I saw the way that he started swallowing hard. “What makes you think I’m not an asshole?”


“I can be,” I said in the Sex-Voice, and then I put the Sex-Voice on pause for a second and drew back enough to meet his eyes, and in the Real-Voice I said, “That’s perfectly all right, by the way. We have plenty of other...” Sex-Voice; exhaling hot and wet against his throat again. “…options.”

“Fuck,” he said.

“That is one of them,” I said.

I have no idea why he didn’t identify me as an asshole from the very beginning, to be honest with you. It’s only the truth. Possibly his Asshole Radar was acting up.

Even so, I dragged my hands down his sides and fisted both of them in the bottom of his T-shirt and started sliding it up slowly, revealing his skin one inch at a time and favoring every centimeter of it with kisses and caresses and flicks of the tongue and grazes of my teeth, and when he started to roll his hips I braced my right forearm on top of them and pinned them to the bed. He made a sound like he’d tasted heaven, and it burned like whiskey, and he wanted more.

And then…

Well, goodness. Do you all really want to hear the gory details of an hour of glorious non-penetrative sex?

Why don’t you let me know?

xx Casanova

Ed sat back from his computer, staring blankly and stupidly and disbelievingly at the screen. His groin was aching like he’d pulled a fucking muscle; the heat throbbed so bad it hurt, and—

And what if fucking Ling walked in right about now? Jesus Christ; Ed needed a deluge of cold shower thoughts or a bullet in the brain; whatever was faster sounded all right—

It was like that post had been written specifically for him. It was almost like he’d been in it—if he’d cut his hair short, anyway; that dialogue could have been his own damn voice, every last syllable and intonation just fucking fit—

And he hadn’t even realized Casanova was into guys.

Sure, the about page had said something about that, but how many people who mentioned it actually followed through, let alone wrote about it in exhaustive and excruciatingly arousing detail?

Ed fumbled through the recent-homework chaos of his desk to snatch up the reusable steel water bottle that Winry’s grandmother had made him pack to take with him—which was sort of paying off, since it was a lot more practical to refill the thing from drinking fountains than to buy new plastic ones all the time, undeniable environmental benefits notwithstanding. It took him two tries to unscrew the cap; and in gulping some water down, he managed to pour at least a whole mouthful
down his front, but at least a wet shirt helped to take the edge off. Jesus. Jesus.

The worst part of it wasn’t even the sex. The worst part of it wasn’t even the ache of a need he didn’t even entirely understand, had never tested, had never learned the insides of, not really—

The worst part of it was that all he really wanted was for someone to give half as much of a fuck about him as Casanova gave about some random one-night stand.

Was that so much to ask?

“Hey,” Ling said, late one night, while he was lying on his bed staring at the ceiling, and Ed was digging his way out of a pile of homework six miles deep. He’d been at work for-fucking-ever, and now he had this backlog, and… fuck. “Are you good with random statistics?”

“Good at knowing them?” Ed asked. “Or good at making them up? It’s one of the two, but it depends on who you ask.”

Ling half-laughed, which was a pretty clear sign that there was something serious weighing on his mind. Nobody loved to laugh too much quite as much as Ling, so if he ever forewent an opportunity, you knew you were in the heart of Red Flag City, population Oh, shit.

“All right,” Ling said. “I’ll bite. Do you know what the stats are for people marrying their college girlfriends?”

Ed opened his mouth to say Dude, I am the last person on Earth that you want to ask about any girlfriend-related trivia whatsofuckingever.

Then he remembered that he was still semi-incognito around here. And everywhere. Everywhere except his head, and home, and Winry’s coffee dates, at any rate.

“Oh,” he said, which was a little more tactful. Or something. Sort of. It was better than Ling, just for your edification, I am so gay rainbows ask me for advice on how not to be straight. Which is great, because if it was relationship advice they wanted, I’d be shit out of luck. “Not… sure. I think the odds are pretty high. A lot of people bond over the stress and lack of sleep and discovery of self and whatever other shit, I guess.”

“Whatever other shit’ sounds like an especially good summary of college,” Ling said. He pushed his hair back from his face and then pulled it down again, arranging it over his forehead until he had almost entirely obscured one eyebrow—not that Ed, as the involuntarily appointed co-VP of the Long Hair Club, could really talk. “I just… can’t imagine being without her. You know? She’s the tea-light of my life-lantern. The gravitational center of my entire orbiting universe, and even though sometimes she wants to incinerate me, mostly it’s just so warm in this solar system that I never want to leave. She’s the potatoes to my steak. The cup of tea to my madeleine. She’s the bacon in my BLT—all droopy vegetables when she’s not around. She’s the marshmallows in my Lucky Charms. The cheese to my ham; the honey to my peanut butter; the… Hey, are you hungry? The frozen yogurt place is still open. I could go for s—”

“You should’ve majored in literature,” Ed said, instead of Sorry, man, I don’t know how to be anything but lonely. “Or maybe gone to culinary school.”
“People tell me that,” Ling said bemusedly. “Wonder why. Anyway—I mean—what do you think? It’d be weird to… It’d be weird to ask her to… marry me, or… something. Wouldn’t it? We’re too young. And her parents think I’m a moron, which I was intending to refute by getting an extremely impressive job after graduation, so that still needs some work. And—and it’s just too early, isn’t it? You don’t get married in college; you just… find yourself, and find the person who is the ketchup to your French fries, and then hang on to them as tight as you can. Right?”

“Uh,” Ed said. “I… guess?”

“Thanks, Ed,” Ling said, sounding borderline gushingly sincere. “You’re—a real friend, you know that? I’m glad we talked this out. Thank you.”

Ed felt like he could see the little blinking cursor on the inside of his own head. It wasn’t typing out any thoughts.

“Sure thing,” he managed. “Glad I could… help.”

“You’re a great sounding board,” Ling said—which was actually a relief; it meant he knew that Ed hadn’t actually done jackshit, which meant that Ed hopefully wouldn’t be expected to do anything more than jackshit in the future. “Some people really aren’t, and it makes a big difference.”

“Cool,” Ed said. Seemed like an appropriate enough adjective-slash-reaction not to derail the conversation completely, at least. “It’s really… I really admire that you guys are that close. It’s really cool. I don’t think most people are mature enough to be thinking about that sort of thing yet.”

Admittedly, he didn’t know Lan Fan especially well—he’d only really hung out alone with her for a grand total of probably forty-five minutes spread over a couple of occasions where Ling left her chilling in their room while he went to take a shower. She was pretty awesome, though, once you got past the fact that she always looked a tiny bit angry just because she was a super-intense person who invested super-intensely into every conversation. Usually she relaxed a little bit a few minutes in, and she could decimate a plate of food faster than anybody Ed had ever seen except for Ling—which, given his standards for bolting down grub before anyone could take it away from him, was impressive—and in general he really liked her.

But the idea of liking anyone enough to commit in a legal way to spending the rest of your life with them was on a different level, and it wasn’t one that Ed was sure he could compute.

Ling just waved a hand idly, though. “It’s not really maturity. We’ve been best friends for longer than I can remember, and we’re lucky enough to have more than that, too. It’s pretty simple when you look at it that way. Why not take the next step and make it official?” He paused. “See? You’re a perfect sounding board.”

“I have been told before,” Ed said, “that I’ve board people out of their wits.”

This time, Ling did laugh uproariously, so apparently Ed had fixed something one way or another.

Winry called at seven thirty that Friday. Ling was out to dinner, and Ed was once again excavating himself from the bottom of the problem set pile, so he hit the button to put his phone on speaker, the better to keep writing as they talked.
“What’s up?” he said.

“I’m a genius,” Winry said.

“Duh,” Ed said. It was true.

Winry could have obliterated the competition in any engineering field she wanted, but she’d decided
to go for an art history major ‘just to try something different’, because apparently spending hours
staring at artwork done by dead people sounded ‘pretty fun’. Whatever degree she did or didn’t get,
she had an amazing fallback job working for her grandmother anyway; everyone in three states who
was serious about nerve-sensing prosthetics already knew her name.

“Thank you,” Winry said, sounding ever so slightly touched. “But I meant a social genius this time.
I started chatting with this girl at the library, and then we got kicked out for laughing too loud, so we
bonded over that, and turns out she’s in a sorority, and they’re rushing right now. You want to go to
a party tomorrow night?”

There was a pause.

“Wait,” Winry said. “Let me rephrase that: if I buy your coffee for the next week, \textit{would} you go to a
party tomorrow night?”

Ed would walk through fire for Winry Rockbell—which sounded substantially more enjoyable than
a Greek rush party, come to think of it—but there was one problem:

“I can’t,” Ed said. “I’m working until close at, like, six thirty, and then I have a ton of homework.”

Winry groaned like she’d been physically injured. “Oh, my God, Ed; you are the lamest person
\textit{ever}.”

“Maybe in the last century,” Ed said. “Not \textit{ever}. Christ. Sorry I’m trying to make the most of my
higher education experience here.”

“When she sees my grades improved by dint of the sheer boredom,” Winry said, “Granny is going to
be so glad you’re my only friend.”


“I think we have to share responsibility,” Winry said. “We’re both losers with one friend.”

“Speak for yourself,” Ed said. “I think Ling is my friend now.”

“\textit{Damn} it,” Winry said. “No fair. My roommate’s never here, and when she is, I can’t get her to
hold up the other side of a conversation to save my life. You think Ling’ll be my friend, too?”

“Yes,” Ed said. “He’s into that.”

“Sweet,” Winry said. “Okay. If you have to stay home Saturday night and be a good student and
care about your GPA and all of that boring stuff, can we all go to dinner that night or something? Or
maybe brunch on Sunday. Or both.”

“Done,” Ed said. A sliver of cold concern—the larval form of panic—slithered through the back of
his mind and started down his throat. “Oh, uh… one… thing.”

“Yeah?” Winry asked, brightly, either because she hated him, or because she was oblivious, or
maybe both.
“He doesn’t know,” Ed said.

He could almost hear her blinking. “Know what?”

“That I’m… y’know.”

“I’m pretty sure he knows you’re a nerd, Ed.”

“No, that I’m—” Motherfucker. “Into—guys.”

“Oh,” Winry said. “Eh. Whatever. How much is *that* going to come up in conversation?”

“So!” Ling said the instant the four of them snagged a table at the Mexican place the following night.

“Are you two dating?”

Unsurprisingly, he’d picked the precise moment that Ed’s mouth had filled with the water that his salivary glands were pouring out like a fractured dam, which caused Ed to choke, very tactfully, on his own spit.

“Oh,” Ling said before he’d even hacked his way through the first bubble of it. “Oh, dear. Based on Winry’s face alone, I’m going to guess that that’s a resounding ‘no’.” He beamed anyway, since apparently resounding ‘no’ had a different connotation to Ling than it did to normal people, who usually understood that as a fancy way of saying *stop fucking talking about it right now*. “Well, why not?”

Despite the fact that Ed was still being asphyxiated by his own saliva, he managed to turn enough to share a look with Winry.

She stared at him for a long, long second—long enough, and ambiguously enough, that his heart tried to up and quit, which was even *more* of a pain when he currently wasn’t breathing.

Then she turned to Ling and made a face.

“We’re basically siblings,” she said. “Plus we’d probably kill each other.”

The lingering effects of Ed’s near-death-by-spit experience were gradually dissipating, which allowed him to breathe a small sigh of relief. He’d always harbored just a smidge of irrational fear that Winry might have a few little feelings for him that he could never return. He wanted to give her everything in the entire world that she could ever ask for; the idea of not being *able* to eat him up inside.

“She’s totally out of my league anyway,” Ed said—because it was true, or would have been if they’d been playing the same sport, so to speak; and because he thought it might be a nice thing for her to hear either way.

Winry elbowed him, not very gently. At least that sort of proved what she’d said. “You are so full of crap.”

Ed elbowed her back. Tragically, he’d gotten into the habit of doing that sort of thing very carefully so that he wouldn’t bruise poor Al, whose blood vessels were walled with fucking tissue paper. “Joke’s on you, since you’re stuck with me anyway.”
“Joke’s on you,” Winry said, reaching out to muss his hair, which he dodged swiftly away from. “You signed a contract when we were six saying you’d be my best friend forever.”

“You blackmailed me,” Ed said.

“Still valid,” Winry said.

“But it’s coercion,” Ed said. “It wouldn’t hold up in court.”

Winry made an entirely different kind of face this time—less wrinkle-nosed Eh, that’s weird; more twisted-mouthed What the hell? “Did you look it up? Ed, we were six.”

Ed scowled right back. “Is it a crime to like knowing stuff?”

Winry turned to Ling and Lan Fan—the former was watching this raptly, with evident delight; the latter appeared to be biting her lip on a smirk that was escaping despite her valiant efforts.

“This is why we can’t date,” Winry said. “He’s too big a nerd even for me.”

“You’re damn right I’m big,” Ed said.

“It’s figurative in that context,” Winry said.

“You’re mean,” Ed said.

“You’re short,” Winry said.

Ed reached for the snarkiest reply in his vast arsenal of indestructible wit, rummaged, scrabbled, curled his fingers, and—

Came up empty-handed.

“Fuck,” he said, feeling winded. He put his head down on the table. “I’m too hungry for this shit.”

Winry, to her credit, patted his back. “You’ve been working really hard this week.”

“This is fascinating,” Lan Fan said. “It’s like you’re somewhere in between brother-and-sister and long-term married-couple.”

What was fascinating was the way Ling shifted, barely perceptibly, in his seat when she said that.

“Which is weird and borderline-incestuous,” Lan Fan went on, “but kind of funny, too.”

“Thanks, mostly!” Winry said brightly.

The smirk Lan Fan had been fighting all this time was definitely winning the war. “You’re mostly welcome.”

Ling was looking at her like she’d lit the stars of every constellation individually. It was cute, and sort of sweet, and sort of… discomfiting.

This must’ve looked like a double date. And Ling had assumed that Ed and Winry were, if not both staunchly heterosexual, at least inclined enough that way to be together.

Why did it always have to be like that? Why did people always have to define you based off of perceived relationships with other people? Why couldn’t you just be you—distinctly, determinedly,
unforgiven and unrepentant—and let that be enough?

Why couldn’t that be enough for anyone? Why had no one ever looked at Ed and said, Hey, that’s good; I like that—I’ll take it?

Not that he wanted to be treated like somebody’s fucking possession or whatever; that wasn’t the point. Just that—

Just that he wanted to be wanted.

And apparently when people looked, they saw Winry’s incest-boyfriend and a little too much of a nerd.

Maybe that was the best he was going to get.

Ling and Winry were talking animatedly about tacos, but Lan Fan made eye contact with him across the table, tilted her head, and raised an eyebrow in a pretty unmistakable silent version of Dude, you okay?

He shrugged and tried to smile. It was true enough. Then he mouthed So hungry, which was… well. Also true.

“Hey,” Ling said as dinner was winding down, and he and Lan Fan and Ed were all silently eyeing the last unbroken chip in the communal basket. “My friend texted me earlier—he’s in a band, and they’re doing a show at one of those little dives way down Telegraph. He said he can get us in for free if we get there within the next hour. You guys want to go?”

“Yes,” Winry said, followed by: “Oh, crap, I’m not dressed for a concert.”

“I don’t think I’d call it a ‘concert,’” Lan Fan said, doing the finger quotes nice and pointedly slow. “Given the ‘quality’ of Reid’s ‘band’, I think the word ‘gig’ would probably be generous.”

“C’mon,” Ling said. “They rock really hard.”

“They party really hard,” Lan Fan said. “They rock sort of moderately, without much of a recognizable tune.”

“Brutal,” Ling said. He paused, gazed into the middle distance and pursed his lips. “But, now that you mention it… pretty fair.”

“I think he’s in it for the aesthetic,” Lan Fan said, “rather than the music. And the theoretical prospect of groupies. He talks about groupies an awful lot for someone who hadn’t picked up a guitar until about a year ago.”

“Wow,” Winry said.

“She’s just salty because she’s a classically-trained pianist,” Ling said, voice nearly overflowing with fondness as he reached out and rubbed at her shoulder with one hand. “Mediocre music is her pet peeve.”

Lan Fan shrugged.

Then she reached out, snagged the last chip, shoved it into her mouth, and started crunching.

“I can’t help it if I’m sophisticated,” she said through it.
“And I wouldn’t have you any other way,” Ling said adoringly. He turned a blinding smile on Ed and Winry. “So you’ll come?”

“Hell, yeah,” Winry said. “Especially if there’s time for me to change.”

“You look great,” Ed said, because it was true. She was wearing a pink T-shirt and jeans, with the brown fake-leather bomber jacket he’d gotten her for her birthday last year. “And I can’t. I’ve got—”

“Homework,” everyone said in unison.

He looked around the table, vaguely shaken, trying to figure out exactly what demon had possessed them all at once. “Well—yeah. And I gotta call Al.”

“We should move to Soviet Russia,” Winry said. “So fun can have you.”

“What?” Ed said.

“Give Al my best,” Winry said.

“What?” Ed said. “I mean… sure, but—what?”

Winry put an arm around his shoulders and leaned her head against his for a second.

“Never mind,” she said. “I always forget how busy you were in high school.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” he asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said.

“You just guaranteed I will,” he said.

“Gosh,” Ling said. “Perhaps a marriage of convenience is in order here.”

“Eew,” Ed and Winry said in perfect unison.

So at least that was good.

“Are you trying to light yourself on fire?” Roy asked.

There was something about that question that felt… bigger… than it was.

But Ed didn’t have time to think about it, because sass was, as always, his number one priority as a human being.

“Nah,” he said as Roy hovered obnoxiously close to his shoulder, elbowing away the hand that the miserable meddler in question was reaching out towards his bunsen burner. “I was counting on you coming over and sticking your damn nose in.”

…oh, shit. Were you even allowed to talk like that to TAs around here? Did they have to auto-fail you if you gave them lip? *Fuck.* Ed couldn’t afford to fail, and it was probably too late to transfer, and—
And Roy…

…laughed.

His eyes did the little crinkly thing.

Ed hated everyone and everything in the entire universe.

“Amazing,” Roy said while Ed tried to tamp down the existential crisis. Why couldn’t obnoxious people look obnoxious, so that you knew right off the bat to stay away from them? And so that you didn’t kind of want to touch their hair all the goddamn time? “I don’t think I’d ever met the real-life personification of a firecracker before.”

“Give me some credit,” Ed said, although he had to admit that he was finally leaning away from the potential source of incineration. “I’m C4.”

Roy smirked—unreal, unkind, unfair—and tugged on the lapels of Ed’s lab coat to straighten it.

Ed’s heart—

About stopped.

Could he do that? Could he even—could he—could—what the fuck had just happened?

Roy was stepping back, and Ed wasn’t even sure that his nerves weren’t just lying to him, and—

“Watch your hair next time,” Roy said. “It’d be a terrible shame to lose any of it.”

“You’re going to lose a lot more than that if you keep shoving your hands in my experiments,” Ed called after him—not weakly at all. Strongly. Robustly. With gusto. Lots of gusto. Gusto everywhere. It was the gustopocalypse, just about.

“Silly me,” Roy said, fucking breezily, as he waltzed away. “I thought that was what I was being paid for.”

Ed opened his mouth to stop the bastard in his tracks with something so cuttingly brilliant that they’d instantly transcribe it in *The Sickest Burns in History*, and probably give it its own chapter heading, and…

Nothing came out, because Roy glanced back over his shoulder, and the little smirk he was wearing obliterated any hope Ed had ever had at a scathing comeback.

There had to be something in the TA rulebook that outlawed teasing the everloving shit out of your incognito gay students by taunting them with your mind-bending attractiveness at every opportunity. That qualified as a form of torture, didn’t it? Torture was illegal everywhere. Was Ed going to have to file a violation of the Geneva Conventions here, at the rate this was going? Christ.

“Are you okay?” Rosé whispered.

First Lan Fan; now his lab partner. Seemed like a hell of a lot of people were asking him that lately. He needed to work on keeping his face under control, so that he could slowly perish on the inside without anybody taking much note. It would be much more convenient for everyone if he imploded and disintegrated quietly without bothering people about it.

“Yeah,” he managed. “Just—choked on—something.”
Elegant, as always.

Rosé just smiled. “Want some water? I have a bottle in my bag, if you need it.”

“Nah,” he said. “Thanks.” Why did people have to be nice when he was being stupid? That made him feel even more stupid, and also embarrassed as all get-out. “Think I’m past it.”

“Okay,” she said, beaming.

Happy people always scared him a bit. Either they knew something he didn’t, or they just had a better handle on the reins of the universe, and either way that meant he was missing something, and they could probably tell exactly what. Vulnerability was a bitch.

“Appreciate it,” he said, which was true, and also much more polite than Please, for the love of God, tell me all your secrets so I don’t just die miserable and bitter and bewildered and alone.

Ed had no idea what was going on with Lan Fan’s roommates—maybe they were super annoying, or a bunch of borderline-psychopaths who spent a lot of time discussing how they would, theoretically, go about dismembering a girl in her sleep if she made too much noise.

Or maybe Lan Fan was just one of those poor unfortunate souls who’d gotten shoved into a quad room, and having a quarter-dozen semi-strangers within two-hundred square feet of her made her so antsy that she had to get out before she cracked. Ed considered himself obscenely lucky when you looked at it like that—Ling could get a little bit too friendly, and he didn’t seem to understand the concept of a personal bubble in the traditional sense, but that was vastly preferable to having multiple different people ghosting in and out without warning all the time. Plus Ed had had his fucking fill of people letting awkward silences fill in the relationship blanks; that shit made him so anxious he couldn’t speak, and that meant he couldn’t break the quiet right down the middle just to make it stop, and that...

Well. The point was, Lan Fan hung out in their room a hell of a lot more than he’d ever expected, but it really wasn’t too bad. Ed liked her, and the feeling seemed to be mutual, as much as Ed could tell past the cactus-y default settings.

In any case, she and Ling were hanging out studying the next week, and Ed had an IM date schedule Al while he multitasked on two problem sets at once, which he figured was definitive, concrete proof that he was doing this College Thing properly. He had one earbud in so that he could hear his message system beep at him whenever Al sent him something. He was totally going to get all of this stuff done and have plenty of time to show the chem set to Roy before he turned it in; he was a master at this sh—

Ping.

He flung himself around his chair to look at the laptop screen.

Hey, Brother!! Al had written. How are you doing? Did you get some dinner already?

Winry absolutely did not have anything even remotely resembling a point every time she implied that Ed would have starved by now without Al’s help.
Yeah i’m all good, he sent back. but who cares how are you???? everything ok??

I care, Al wrote, because Al was like that. Yes, everything is okay! Just… hanging out with my favorite nurses, as usual, you know me. :P

nerd, Ed wrote, which was probably ironic or something. any cute ones this time?

All of them are lovely people, Al wrote, with great personalities. Except the one who put the tube in my nose. She enjoyed it a little. But it’s okay because I threw up on her. :x

AL Ed wrote. YOU SAID YOU WERE OK

I am!!!!! Al sent back, more or less instantaneously. I just wasn’t when she started shoving plastic up my nostril. I guess I was having a little trouble breathing too which didn’t help matters at all and my body was unhappy with the whole thing, so it expressed its displeasure in the only way it knew how. But I’m fine! One of the nice nurses whose name is Cynthia who was my nurse one time before brought me a milkshake. I don’t know where she got it from because they don’t have a milkshake machine in the cafeteria. Maybe she bought it for me on her way into work? But that would be so excessive!! It was strawberry.

Ed loved him so much there weren’t, and never had been, and never would be words to encapsulate it.

He had loved him a little bit less about an hour ago, when Al had texted Are you out of class?, and, at the positive response, Are you out of work?, and then, at the second confirmation, Hello from the other side… of the south wing at the hospital. Never stayed here before. It’s not too bad, I promise! Both me and the room.

Narrowly, Ed resisted the urge to slam his head down on the desktop in front of his roommate’s girlfriend.

do you realize how terrifying the things you say are Al oh my god

He could almost see the pout in the little ellipsis icon while Al typed.

I’m not terrifying!! I told you I was okay!! Maybe you need to take some English classes so you can learn to read a little better, BROTHER.

i read fine, Ed wrote instantly, because he couldn’t not. you’re not in the icu are you, please tell me you’re not in the icu

He was probably making a stupid face while he waited for the ellipsis this time. Ling said something about taking a shower and grabbed up his shit; Ed waved in the vague direction of the door.

No they stuck me in a regular room. I might have to SHARE. But I guess that’s good because it must not be too bad or they wouldn’t risk exposing me to other people’s pathogens, right?

they better not let you get anybody else’s nasty pathogens, Ed wrote, which was a lot less scary than all of the other things he could’ve said. if they try let me know and i’ll get in there and start kicking asses

I would like to see you fight a virus, Al wrote.

There was a pointed lull.
thank you for not commenting, Ed wrote, about finally picking on someone my size.

It took all of my remaining willpower, Al wrote. Maybe I’l get another milkshake tomorrow for good karma!

Tomorrow, Ed was going to call the hospital and give them his credit card number and start begging.

Oh no hang on I think they’re coming to Talk To Me again, Al wrote. I’ll check back in later, love you Brother <3

Frantically Ed typed out a take care love you nerd <3 in response—if Al didn’t see it now, he would later. They could tell him to sleep, but they legally couldn’t take away his phone.

Could they?

Shit. Well, they hadn’t yet, at any rate.

Ed sat back from the computer, let out a deep breath, and shoved his hand back through his hair. No adrenaline rush quite like that one.

“Hey,” Lan Fan said as he turned back to his books, trying to drag his head down out of the stratosphere. “Question for you.”

Ed’s pencil was dull. Did he have another one, or was he about to start doing math in pen again? It made you look like an idiot, but kind of a badass idiot. “Sure,” he said.

“Are you gay?” Lan Fan asked.

He was staring at the lowest ionic bond on the diagram on page thirty-seven. He seemed to be blinking. He might have been breathing, too, but the jury was undecided on that one.

Shit. Shitfuck. Shitfuckdamn—damn. He’d totally just—if he didn’t say something, it was obvious that—

“I—” he croaked out. “I mean—Ling’s not—my type. I mean—not that he’s not—attractive, I guess; he is, but just—not my—”

“Whoa,” she said, holding both hands up with her palms out like she was baiting an animal. His pencil hadn’t snapped yet, although his knuckles were aching where he’d clenched it in his fingers; one or the other of those things had to be a good sign. “Chill. It’s no big deal. I was just wondering.”

It wasn’t a big deal. Right? It wasn’t a big deal at all; if someone else had said it to him—

He’d been meaning to hash this out with Al for ages, but he hadn’t worked up the nerve, and every time he’d gotten close, something more important had happened, and he’d shoved it onto the backburner and clapped the lid on again.

Why did he feel so desperately compelled to hide it? The people who mattered had already told him, in so many words, that they didn’t care. Sure, he’d had it thrown back in his face like some kind of personal failure; sure, the whole gamut of words he could’ve used to pin down some kind of identity had been hurled at him, hammered into bullets and knives; sure, he’d offered it up in sincerity and terror, like it was something infinitely precious, and had it smacked out of his hands to the pavement and then ground underfoot—
But it wasn’t like Edward Elric hadn’t taken his fucking licks before. It wasn’t like it was the first or the only or even the worst time he’d been knocked down; it wasn’t like it had been his first rejection rodeo.

So why the hell did this one hurt so bad that he’d spent the intervening time smothering every trace of it he could?

He didn’t think being gay—or bi, or more-than-bi, or asexual, or trans, or anything else on the vast spectrum of possibilities—was shameful. He didn’t think there was anything weird or bad about anybody who was any of those things. When he considered any of the endless potential identities another person could proclaim, there were a grand total of zero revulsed or judgmental or unpleasant thoughts in any quadrant of his brain.

Why the fuck did it feel wrong when it was him?

He knew he probably needed Al’s amateur psychoanalytical help to disentangle that one. And he’d been intending to ask. He just… hadn’t. Just hadn’t had the time. Hadn’t made the time, because it wasn’t hurting anybody else, so it didn’t matter, did it?

“Oh—cool. I mean—you don’t… have to worry about…” He gestured to the room at large, avoiding her eyes; was it stupider to say it and force her to think about it, or to pretend that the elephant in the room blended in with the concrete walls? “…anything… y’know.”

“I know,” Lan Fan said. He couldn’t tell if she really didn’t give much of a crap, or if she was keeping her voice light on purpose to try to calm him down. People with natural poker faces were such a pain in the ass that way.

“And Ling’s not even into guys,” Ed said, gesturing a little more for good measure—or bad measure, probably, at this point. Everything was starting to feel completely disproportionate.

“Well,” Lan Fan said, and Ed’s blood froze up a little, “sometimes he is.” Chunks of ice in one’s capillaries most likely qualified as a medical emergency, but it was going to have to wait. “But he always tells me about it when he’s attracted to people, which is part of why I trust him not to ever actually do anything. It’s secrets that fuck shit up.”

Several of the little ice floes in Ed’s veins collected in his heart and started sealing together to turn it into a glacier. “Uh… yeah.”

“But whatever,” Lan Fan said, stretching her legs out from the edge of Ling’s bed and reaching for her toes. “I was just curious. You never look at girls’ boobs, so I figured that might be why.”

There was also a ring freezing into place around the base of Ed’s throat. “Oh.” He tried to cough. “Um. I guess so.”

“Yeah,” Lan Fan said thoughtfully. She paused in staring at her extended arms long enough to blink up at him. “So you got a boyfriend?”

Ed choked on so much ice it was a wonder he wasn’t spitting sleet. “Uh—no.”

“You want one?” Lan Fan asked. “I know a couple of—oh.” He must have been doing a thing with his face. Shit. What was it? What had he just— “That’s cool. No worries.”

“Okay,” Ed said, because he had no fucking clue what else to come out with—ha; fuck—at this point. “Thanks for…”
“Sure,” she said. “Do you want me to not tell anyone?”

The tough thing about usually being the most upfront person in the room was that when you met somebody even blunter, you were completely unprepared for it, and it felt like receiving a battering ram to the face. “Uh—I mean—it’s not, like… confidential, or anything, but I haven’t…”

“Advertised?” Lan Fan asked.

“Yeah,” Ed managed.

“Gotcha,” she said. “No problem.”

Ed was pretty sure there was a problem. Ed was pretty sure there were a lot of problems. To be fair, none of them belonged to her.

Before he could even begin to try to articulate anything more advanced than a somewhat pathetic noise of general concession, he heard keys in the door, and then Ling banged in with his hair down and dripping and a towel wrapped around his waist.

…maybe he was a little bit Ed’s type.

“Hot water’s out!” he said brightly. “Our RA was in the middle of a shower too and is about to, and I quote, ‘cut a bitch with a rusty scalpel, and don’t worry, I have a few’. I’m really excited; we should go watch.”

“You should put some pants on first,” Lan Fan said.

“Overrated,” Ling said.

“The only thing worse than a cold shower is one at the county jail,” Lan Fan said, “after a public nudity charge.”

Ling turned on his heel and shook his ass in her direction. “You just don’t want to share me.”

Lan Fan shrugged. “That, and I can’t afford to bail you out, but, y’know, it’s up to you…”

Ed saw the flash of a grin right as Ling started whining, though.

“Hi, best friend,” Ed said, dropping into the chair across from her. “I’m so glad to see you, too. You sure do make my life better and more fun. I’m so lucky to have you.”

Winry rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, all that crap. Everything okay?”

Ed scrubbed a hand up his face, which smooshed all of his clammy, puffy skin around in a way that was exquisitely disgusting. “They had to keep Al in the hospital overnight again. He said they’re gonna let him out today, but…”

“But you never get any sleep when he’s sick,” Winry said, cringing a little.
Ed gave her a single weary finger gun. “Bingo.”

“Jeez,” Winry said. “But they’re letting him out soon? So it’s not too bad?”

“Middling-bad,” Ed said. “Or he’s gotten better at lying over IM. One or the other.”

“Al’s always been a great liar when it’s really important,” Winry said, “and an embarrassingly lousy one the rest of the time.” She stood up, smacking the tabletop with her palms for emphasis, which was more startling to Ed’s exhaustion-fried brain than it should have been. “That settles it; I’m getting you something with espresso in it.”

“I hate lattes,” Ed said.

“I wasn’t born yesterday,” Winry said. “Espressos have espresso in them.”

It was only natural to let his head fall into one hand. “Wh… y… yes?”

Winry patted his shoulder. “Just sit.”

“Okay,” Ed said.

He sat.

Either time was warping even more than it usually did when he was sleep-deprived, or he hadn’t been sitting for very long at all when she came back scowling.

“Figures,” she said. “When it rains, it pours, with you.”

“What the hell did I do?” he asked.

“You started having a crappy day,” Winry said. “Their machine’s busted.”

“How is that my fault?” Ed asked.

“It’s not,” Winry said. “The universe just hates you.”

Ed stared at her.

“Sorry,” she said. “It’s true.”

“Fuck,” Ed said. Considering the circumstances, he could’ve said a lot worse. He levered himself back up to his feet, slung his backpack over his shoulder, and shoved his hands into his pockets. “You tried Bean There Done That yet? It’s, like, halfway to the main library. I haven’t had any of their stuff, but my chem TA has his office hours there, and he seems to think it’s the shit.”

“Can’t be any worse than a coffee shop that can’t make coffee,” Winry said.

Winry was wrong, although not in the way that she’d anticipated.

Even though it was definitely not office hours right now—Ed would never have suggested this place if it had been; he knew his own damn luck well enough to be wise to that trick—Roy had spread himself elegantly over one of the chairs at a table just inside the café, donning a look of enticingly
intense concentration for good measure.

Ed hated attractive people. Hated them.

“Shit,” he said.

Somehow, bizarrely, the expletive roused Roy from his study-trance, and he blinked and looked up. Somehow, even more bizarrely, he… smiled.

“Fancy meeting you here,” he said.

“Hi,” Ed said, trying not to listen to the agonizing throb of his heartbeat in his head. “Uh. This is my friend Winry.”

Since getting up was for ordinary people, Roy necessitated an entirely different turn of phrase. Like unfurling, maybe. He fucking unfurled from the chair, stood up, tossed his hair, and extended a hand to Win.

Ed was pretty sure he’d never shaken as many hands in his life as he had the first week here. It was staggeringly bizarre—like none of them had any idea how to make acquaintances with such a vast volume of people, so they defaulted to a form of greeting usually reserved for businesspeople on TV.

“Lovely to meet you,” Roy was saying. At least he was shaking Winry’s hand instead of kissing it; Ed wouldn’t’ve put it past him. “Roy Mustang—I’m Ed’s—”

“Chem TA,” Ed said.

The corner of Roy’s mouth curled up, and his eyebrow rose with it, like they were both on a string. “If you say it like that, it sounds like you’ve got something to hide.” He planted one hand on the tabletop and leaned back, tilting his hips in a way that… Well. In a way. “Nice to meet you,” he said, lower and smoother this time, giving Winry a shameless wink. “I’m Ed’s massage therapist. I mean… chemistry TA. Yes. TA. Definitely a TA.”

Ed had another cataclysmically brilliant riposte waiting. He really, really did this time. Any second now, he would stop staring at Roy’s hands and thinking, with a remarkably stupid kind of deliberateness, about how the knuckles might feel against the knots in his back.

There was something about Roy’s hands. Something that…

“If he had a massage therapist,” Winry said, “I like to think he’d be marginally less stressed.”

“Fuck that,” Ed said. “Go big or go home.”

“Why does that sound familiar?” Winry asked, going so far with the feigned pensiveness as to cup her chin between her thumb and her index finger and stare into space. “Is it because that’s what you said right before you electrocuted yourself on your improvised toaster-oven?”

“Well, it worked,” Ed said. “The oven. And the electricity.”

“I tend to believe that a safety mishap or five is one of the marks of a devoted scientist,” Roy said. “Or at least that’s what I told everyone who asked what happened to my eyebrows my freshman year.”

Ed held both hands out towards him and turned on Winry. “Look at this. Remember this moment. Today is the day you finally met a rational human being.”
Winry rolled her eyes hard enough that Ed could almost hear the world’s optometrists weeping from here. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll make a note in my diary. Sit tight with your rational human being while I get us the darn coffee.”

She didn’t wait for him to sputter about the fact that Roy was definitively not his human being, rational or otherwise, before she started off to join the line at the counter.

“Coffee,” Roy said—more ruefully than disdainfully, so far, but it was a fine line, and Ed fully expected him to faceplant across it any second now. “I suppose it figures.”

“How?” Ed said.

It wasn’t his fault he wasn’t doing so hot on the cleverness front today: as everyone involved in this scenario was painfully aware, he hadn’t had enough damn coffee yet.

“Make yourself at home,” Roy said, indicating the free chair with another of those should-have-been-stupid sweeping gestures before reprising his position in the one he’d vacated. “Theoretically I have some colleagues coming to talk about the midterm in…” He wore an actual watch. The fucker wore an actual watch. Ed was willing to bet he was also extremely careful about how and when and where he wore it to avoid getting a nerdy watch tan, because that was the sort of thing that vain—Winry would have said ‘put-together’, but Ed stood by his analysis—people did. “…twenty minutes, but if you’d like to stick around and eavesdrop, my lips are sealed.”

Ed tried not to let that choice of words resonate. He tried not to look at Roy’s mouth. He tried not to think about what Roy’s voice would sound like, reduced to a whisper across a pillowcase.

He failed.

But at least he probably wouldn’t fail chemistry, whether he cheated or not.

“Pretty sure the ethics committee would have your head for that,” he said, gingerly taking the open chair. “Or your hands.”

“Do I get to pick which?” Roy asked.

“Probably depends on how bad the violation is,” Ed said.

Roy grinned outward into the ether, which was jockeying for a perpetually higher position on Ed’s personal list of things that were not okay. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He set an elbow on the table, propped his chin on his hand, and smiled directly at Ed, which was even worse. “How are you holding up?”

“How?” Ed said again. Fucking caffeine-deprivation was worse than the Plague. Roy must have meant in class. “Oh. Okay, I guess. I would’ve brought my problem set if I’d known you were gonna be here.”

“And make me work for my pay?” Roy said. “Maybe I can escape out the back door.”

“Good luck,” Ed said. “I’m a pro at tripping people on their way to something important. I practice all the time on myself.”

Roy grinned again, the absolute motherfucker, and then he…

Paused. Thoughtfully. And it faded out slow, like he was in a movie, and the director had specifically requested slow creep of melancholy as your mind drifts or some shit.
God. Roy would sell movie tickets like honey hotcakes. Ed would probably buy one—or several, at successive showings—and sit there and stew in shame and gaze up at his stupid face on the stupid screen and count out his eyelashes and love it.

Damn it.

“That is an unusual talent,” Roy said. “Bordering, I think, on unprecedented.”

“I’ve been told that I’m mysterious,” Ed said.

Both eyebrows arched this time. “Have you?”

“No,” Ed said. “Unless ‘How the hell do you find the energy to do that?’ counts.”

Roy folded his hands, which was another thing Ed hadn’t realized that real people did during conversations. It made Roy look a little bit like a supervillain. A really hot supervillain. Why were the bad guys, in fiction—and the guys that were bad for him, in real life—always so much more attractive?

“I think that would qualify as more ‘bewildering’ than ‘mysterious’,” Roy said, because of course he did. Ed had to wonder whether a word had ever dared to pose a problem for Roy in his entire life. Probably not. Glib piece of shit. “You… Have you considered perhaps that you should pace yourself? It’s only a few weeks into the quarter, and you have your whole—”

“I only get two years here,” Ed said. “I have to get all the classes in; and work-study’s not negotiable, since I couldn’t afford to be here without it. Only reason I don’t have more loans is that I was working before, too. It’s fine. I’m making it happen. I always do.”

Roy looked at Ed for a long moment, tapping the tips of his index fingers against each other at the top of his supervillain steeple-hand thing. “Surely you have friends who want to catch a glimpse of you sometimes.”

“Yeah,” Ed said. He jerked his head towards the line, where Winry had just reached the front. “You’re lookin’ at her.”

“You must have lots of friends,” Roy said. “People must start conversations with you everywhere you go.”

Ed stared at him. He was having to retract all those things he’d said in his head about Roy being smart. “Have you met me?”

Roy’s eyes went big, and then his smile went bigger—and dopey. He leaned earnestly forward and extended a hand. “Why, no—good afternoon, sir. My name is Roy Mustang, and may I just say that it’s a tremendous pleasure to make your acquaintance?”

Ed couldn’t help it: he laughed. He fucking laughed, and then Roy laughed, too, and this was so—

It was a lot of things. And he needed to dial his brain back before his dumbass heart convinced it that they were allowed to get invested. Roy was his fucking teacher, and way out of his league, and probably straight regardless, and you couldn’t just throw yourself at somebody after a couple of brief conversations that were primarily about balancing chemical equations—even if you were the kind of person who didn’t regularly trip over your own feelings and fall into a swamp and find yourself neck-deep in quicksand with the sun going down.

The upshot—literally shot, in this case; hopefully multiple; hopefully pushing the limits of what was
legal to serve without a signed waiver—was that Winry came back with coffee before Ed could savor the remembered taste of quagmire in the back of his mouth.

“Don’t touch it yet,” Winry said, handing over the goods. “Let me try mine first.”

“Thanks,” he said; and then “Okay,” though it wasn’t like she was still listening anyway.

“What’s going on?” Roy asked as Winry snagged an empty chair, dragged it up next to Ed’s, and sat down in it.

“I’m a bad luck charm,” Ed said. “Odds are pretty good their espresso machine’s acting up, or their milk is off, or—”

Winry held a hand up, closed her eyes, and carefully sipped her latte.

Ed waited until she’d lowered the cup, opened her eyes, and blinked a few times. “How is it?”


Ed turned to Roy and raised an eyebrow, which was—

Way, way too friendly. Fuck. He wasn’t making this any goddamn easier on himself, was he? Typical.

“I’m willing to bet that this is a correlation problem,” Roy said, “rather than causation. Compounded by confirmation bias, perhaps.”

Oh, fuck, Ed wanted him so bad. Where could you get a good, sharp sword to hurl yourself on at a time like this?

“I used to think that,” Winry said, “but then… well. God gave him brilliance to make up for it, but it’s still a pain in the butt sometimes.”

“I like to think I keep your life exciting,” Ed said.

“That’s one word for it,” Winry said. “One crisis to the next.”

Ed sniffed his coffee to make sure they hadn’t polluted it with any dairy products before Winry could stop them. It smelled safe. “I know you. You say you’d rather have a normal life, but that’s bullshit. You secretly kinda love it.”

Winry flipped her hair over her shoulder, but not before Ed saw her grinning. “Keep telling yourself that, Elric.”

Ed realized, way too late, that they were probably boring the crap out of Roy. With no small amount of trepidation—they couldn’t dock your participation grade for being a fucking nuisance outside of class, could they? Surely not; surely the fabled ethics committee would riot—he chanced a glance over.

And Roy was—

Looking at them like they were some kind of Renaissance art. Or maybe decent theater. Or maybe a puppy with a flower in its mouth.

Ed’s stomach flipped. There was some kind of a panic impulse fluttering right above the surface of his roiling stomach acid, and he just—didn’t like this. Didn’t like it at all. He wasn’t even sure
which part he liked the least. Yeah, they were wasting Roy’s time, and he felt guilty about it, but that wasn’t what had made his whole body freak out all of a sudden. What the hell was wrong with him, anyway?

“You’re evil,” he said to Winry, but with as much fondness as he could muster. He turned to Roy again and tried to swallow the worst of the staged rebellion taking place throughout him. “Um—nice bothering you. We’ll get out of your hair and shit.”

Fuck. Roy’s hair.

“Not a problem at all,” Roy said, still smiling. Fuck him. Didn’t his cheeks hurt? “It was nice to see you. And nice to meet you, Winry.”

He was absolutely the kind of person who would remember everybody’s name. Did you just wake up one morning and realize that you were a suave, gorgeous, intellectual bastard and start rolling with it, or was it something you were born with? Had he been disarming people with his crinkly-eyed little smile and complicated sentences since he was five, or what?

“You, too,” Winry said, and she was already getting out of her chair, but she hovered close—not outright offering a hand or an elbow for leverage, but leaving them readily accessible if Ed started reaching.

Damn it. She was so much better than he deserved.

“See you in class,” he said to Roy, managing the chair dismount in one relatively stable maneuver.

And then he booked it, and Winry bailed with him, because she was the best.

She was also the best multitasker, apparently: she could sip a latte, shake her head, and start walking along the pavement with him all at once.

“Oh, my God,” she said the instant they were safely out of earshot. “You didn’t mention he was foxy as hell.”

Ed wondered if you could drown yourself by drinking coffee fast enough. “What the hell does ‘foxy’ even mean? Like, foxes aren’t attractive. Unless you’re talking about the animated Disney ‘Robin Hood’, in which case—yes, unfortunately, and also that’s a conversation we probably shouldn’t have in public.”

“And the new one from ‘Zootopia’,” Winry said reflectively. “But yeah. We can talk about that later.” She sipped. “Or never.”

“Never’s good,” Ed said. “So what the hell is ‘foxy’ in this context, then?”

“It’s more than just attractive,” Winry said. “There’s an aspect of, like—not seductiveness, exactly, but… interest, I guess. Receptiveness, and maybe pursuit.”

“Still sounds like you’re talking about foxes,” Ed said. “Hunting them, specifically, which is unethical and also fucked up—”

“Point is,” Winry said, louder than necessary, “I think he’s into you.”

“Not a chance,” Ed said.

“Why the heck not?” Winry asked. “He was awfully personal for somebody who just wants to
grade your midterm. I think he wants to grade your midterm, if you know what I mean.”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Ed said.

“Yes, it does,” Winry said. “It’s actually a great innuendo, ’cause grading would require you to look really close, right, and ‘midterm’ could be your midsection, so I’m saying he wants to take your clothes off and examine your abs.”

A passing student openly stared at them. Ed wasn’t sure whether to cringe or give Nosy Nancy a choice finger, so he settled on a scowl, which was a pretty solid compromise expression in just about any situation on Earth.

“How do you know he wasn’t interested in you?” Ed asked. “Most guys are straight, and most straight guys would give any appendage except their favorite one to get to talk to you for five minutes.”

“Guys who are into me,” Winry said, “who are self-aware enough to realize that they shouldn’t just gawk at me and drool, tend to sneak glances at my neckline the whole time they’re near me. And the ones who aren’t self-aware just direct every sentence right at it.”

“Ouch,” Ed said. “Sorry.”

“Jeez, Ed,” Winry said. “It’s not your fault.”

“I know,” Ed said. “I’m apologizing on behalf of all of the shitty men in the world.”

“Thanks,” Winry said. “If you were representative of the whole demographic—setting aside the sexual preference thing, obviously—I think we’d have a lot fewer problems.”

Ed eyed her sideways for a long couple of seconds. Apparently his silence was suspicious, because she noticed, turned to him, and blinked in an inquiring sort of way several times.

“Are you feeling okay?” he asked.

“Uh,” Winry said. “I think so. I mean, I haven’t finished this yet—” She raised her latte. “—so it’s hard to be sure, but… I guess. Why?”

“You’re not a random compliment person,” Ed said. “So if you’re saying things like that, to me, then it’s either because you’re delirious with caffeine deprivation, or you’re really sick, and you’re trying to make sure you get to say all of the deep-down important stuff before it’s too late.”

Winry stopped walking.

It took Ed’s legs a second to get with the program; his brain registered that Winry had disappeared from his peripheral vision, and then figured out why, and then sent the signal that he should probably quit walking, too, and by that time he’d already taken another step and a half, and then he sort of stumbled on his left foot as his muscles got confused.

Miraculously, not a drop of coffee spilled from his sloshing cup. Even while it was staggering around helplessly, his body had its priorities in order.

“Ed,” Winry said, “come here.”

Ed wasn’t sure how close ‘here’ was, considering that they were standing just off towards the side of a pretty major campus pedestrian artery, but he figured that moving into about a two-step radius of
her was probably a reasonable start. Plus if she went to smack him upside the head, the odds were about fifty-fifty at this distance as to whether he could dodge, and since that matched the odds of whether he deserved it, it always seemed sort of fair.

Winry reached out and grabbed his coffee away, which was so startlingly incongruous that he let it happen, because the bewilderment paralyzed him in the critical moment when he could have held it away from her. She put both of their cups down on the stone retaining wall on the side of the path, and then she proceeded directly inside the two-step radius and put her arms around him.

“Edward Elric,” she said, “you need a break.”

“Christmas isn’t that far,” Ed said, which was… sort of true. It sure as hell felt like forever, and he’d probably need to spend it writing apps for research opportunities and internships and stuff, but still—

“No,” Winry said. “A break from crap happening to you so often that you believe that the world is a terrible place.”

“It is a terrible place,” Ed said, patting her back gently. She wasn’t a complimenter, but she was a clinger. If you hugged her back too much, she went full-limpet and never let you go. “But it’s got great stuff in it, too, so you have to put up with the terrible parts if you want the payoff.”

Evidently he’d timed the patting correctly, because she drew back and gave him an expression that he wanted to call a resolute pout. Was that a thing?

“Hang on,” she said, and then she was pulling out her phone and tapping, and then the line was ringing on speaker. “You have another half-hour until class, right?”

“Yeah,” he said. Speakerphone made him uncomfortable when there were other people around; he could control what he said, but… and who was she even—?

“Hey, Winry!” Al said, voice slightly distorted by the connection but unmistakably cheerful all the same. “What’s up?”

“Your time in Medicine Prison, I hope,” Winry said.

“Not just yet,” Al said. “But they’re going to let me out early for good behavior.”

“I’ll believe that when I see it,” Ed said around the unidentifiable spiky object that had taken up residence in his throat.

“Brother!” Al said. “Hi!”

“Hey, kid,” Ed said.

“Were you worrying about me?” Al said. “Is that why Winry had to call?”

“When have I ever worried about anything in my entire life?” Ed asked.

Winry actually snorted, which was cute.

“Seconded,” Al said. “I’m okay, Brother. Really. I mean… as okay as… me-okay. Okay by the standards with which I have to judge okayness given the circumstances.”

“Okay,” Ed said; and then “Shit,” because that sounded stupid.

“How much class did you miss?” Winry asked.
“Just the two days I’ve been here,” Al said. “And there weren’t any exams or anything, and I did some of the work online, so it’s really no big deal. Besides, I’m pretty darn good at catching up by now.”

The spiky thing in Ed’s throat started to swell.

“You’re pretty good at a lot of things,” Winry said. What the hell was going on? Was it Hand Out Compliments Day, and Ed’s calendar just hadn’t listed it? “You gonna try to be pretty good at getting better?”

“Gee,” Al said. “I dunno. I sure do like hanging out this tiny room, lying around on this rock-hard bed in a flimsy little hospital gown that must’ve been printed in the late nineties, ’cause the pattern is these super-faded blue and brown interlocking diamonds that look like a bad wallpaper. If I get better, do you think they’ll force me to leave?”

“Very funny,” Winry said.

“I know,” Al said sunnily. “Brother—listen. I’m fine. I’ll let you know how it goes, and in the meantime I want you to worry about you. Okay? I want you to worry about class, and your homework, and especially about how you’re going to cram a little bit of fun into the teensy little pockets of spare time you left yourself. Can you do that for me?”

“I’ll try,” Ed said, grudgingly, because Al could have asked him for the moon and the stars and a bottle full of sunrise, and he damn well would have tried.

“Great,” Al said. “Hop to it. I’ll talk to you tonight, okay?”

“You bet,” Ed said.

When they’d said the requisite half-dozen goodbyes, Winry hung up and gave Ed a significant look.

“What?” he asked.

“You know what,” she said.

He didn’t, exactly, but he supposed he got the gist of it, and sometimes that was enough.

Al sent a text just before seven that night, when Ed was making his way out of work at the little campus café that they’d assigned him to. It was a centrally-located joint which made everyone who came in and spent their mealpoints there un-miserable, and him extra-miserable, because one of the two managers was an asshole, and he was perpetually exhausted, and life was brief and meaningless and really shouldn’t have had quite so many college students asking him to make toasted sandwiches in it.

But the text said No hospital can hold the likes of ALPHONSE ELRIC!!!! They’ve released me from my confines and Granny Pinako says I look pretty good for an invalid which I think is her way of saying she’s glad that I’m back home. You doing okay?

So at least that was good.
Fretting—which was probably what Winry would call it, which was stupid, because it would’ve been callous and horrible not to fret about your baby brother being in the hospital and all that shit—always made Ed’s will a little weak. Coming down off of the wired-manic high-key adrenaline rush always left him kind of shaky.

It wasn’t like excuses really changed anything. Why was he making excuses about it, anyway?

Casanova hadn’t left the onlookers and the acolytes any new narrative posts, but he had answered a bunch of questions. One of them was *So who are you fucking this weekend??*, which Casanova had dignified with no more or less than *I do need to sleep occasionally, you know.*

Someone had also asked *do you have any pets?*, which had merited a bit more detail:

*I’ve always felt, Casanova wrote, in some deep-down, inextricable little warm-and-fuzzy crevice in the back of my brain – too small and remote to sweep out when I’m dusting for sentimentality – that I should really get a cat. A black one, probably, or perhaps a calico. Probably a she. (I think all calicos are female because of the hereditary coat patterns? Why do I ask these things as questions; I’m going to Google it. Ah, yes – X-linked. Why do I know that? All of this drivel in my head; I could have used that RAM to store something useful. If you know what I mean.) Where the hell was I?*

Ah, yes – the point is, a part of me has always believed that I should have a cat. It enhances the tea-connoisseur career-bachelor aesthetic, I think. I’ve read cats are really meant to have other cat friends, much like dogs, but somehow we have such a strong impression of them as solitary animals, best-suited to people who spend a lot of time being quiet and thoughtful and alone.

*I love dogs. But I could never coop one up in here, and I don’t think I’m emotionally available enough for one, ha. There’s some delightful irony in that once you’ve been called a dog enough times, isn’t there?* …I suppose I should say that I hope none of you know that feeling quite as intimately as I do. But if you happen to, give me a call; we can go get lunch and talk about people’s absurd expectations and then have an extra delicious one-night stand.

*I also hope that all of you appreciate that my remarkable facility for the art of narration has somehow brought us back to tawdry sex stories even though the original question was about pets. And not the heavy kind.*

*Damn, I should have just gone with that from the start and made this easy on myself.*

There was something about this Casanova guy that was—not familiar, exactly, but… recognizable. Relatable. That was the hashtag the kids were using, wasn’t it? Even though his experiences were worlds apart from anything Ed had ever done—anything Ed had ever *dreamed* of doing, honestly—there was always a note underneath it that was so immensely, unmistakably the trailing thought patterns of a person who had been hurt, badly, at some point, and was trying not to let it taint the whole damn world for them.

Then again, maybe Casanova was just a shameless manwhore, and Ed was reading too much into it. Or maybe Casanova was a shameless manwhore who *wanted* people to think he was really a wounded dove underneath a sorry-my-dick-does-the-thinking act, but *that* was the act, because nothing seduced well-intentioned people quite like hinting to them that there was something sad
behind a screen of confidence.

Or maybe—

Maybe Ed needed a hiatus from the internet, or at least this stupid blog. Maybe it was all ridiculous anyway, since there was literally zero chance that he’d ever meet this fucking guy, whether the tantalizing tinge of melancholy was an elaborate catfish thing or not.

Someone else had written in with *if you got a cat you’d have to kick it out of the room every time you wanted to get laid bc they like to climb on your bed and pat you while you fuck*

It was a good thing Ling was out—as per usual; and as per usual whenever Ed dared to read this blog—because his face was on fire.

And apparently the universe was in balance again, because Casanova had answered: *That is the primary reason I do not currently have a cat.*

Fucking Casanova.

But not literally.

Although Ed probably wouldn’t have said no.

Well—he *would* have; of course he would have; he would never have flung himself at some weirdo over-sharing sex fiend from the internet. No matter how much of the inside of said weirdo’s head he’d seen through the filter of a tell-all blog; no matter how much he weirdly kind of liked the way Casanova examined the world and, at least purportedly, treated the people he found in it. No matter how fucking excellent it would probably be to hit all those first-time milestones with someone who knew exactly what they were doing and wanted to make sure that everything they did felt good for you.

He would have said no.

But he would have been really, really tempted to say yes instead.

On the one hand, it was a good thing that the sadistic upper management trolls kept scheduling him on Saturdays and Sundays, because it meant he didn’t have to sprint over from any given class, arms flailing, leaving a trail of flame and scattered problem sets, if his professor ran over the allotted lecture time by anything more than thirty seconds. On the other hand, it meant he never got any fucking time off.

Which wasn’t a change, or anything. He was used to the zombie routine. He was used to getting up and coaxing himself through the day one step at a time; and if the coaxing was insufficient, he was used to dragging his own sorry ass through on a minute-by-minute basis. He’d made it this far, and he’d make it through this, too.

Losing weekends sucked, though. He’d had them off at his administrative job at the community college, because all the offices were closed so that the Real Adults who worked there could occasionally get some rest, and he’d been hoping he might get them off here so that he could Skype with Al on a regular basis or something.
But it wasn’t life or death. And he did get breaks, so he was using those to text Al pretty much nonstop for the duration of every ten-minute breather. Despite the brief stint in Sterilized Linoleum Hell, Al was already on top of all of his coursework and everything, or was committed to convincing Ed that he was, and that was a plus. Ed could get through just about any workday—just about anything—for the likes of that.

Or at least that was what he figured right up until the moment that he looked up from gazing at his aching feet to see that the person who’d just walked through the front doors was none other than fucking Roy.

At least Ed was at the registers tonight—not like lunchtime, when he’d been sweating from the heat of their stupid conveyor-belt sandwich-heater oven-thing, racing back and forth double-time to serve a bunch of ungrateful fellow students their damn food as fast as humanly possible, with his damp bangs dragging down from a baseball cap because at least it was marginally less-stupid-looking than a hairnet. At least he only looked like he’d been to hell and back in recent memory, rather than being in hell at this precise moment, writhing away from the flames and slinging sandwiches across the counter like this was Subway on speed.

Those were some nice little consolation prizes for the fact that he was, at this precise moment, dying of humiliation.

“Oh,” Roy said upon spotting him standing there, stranded like a deer in the middle of the road, not sure which way it’d be faster to run, or if it was even possible to get out of here without ending up splattered on the pavement, and paralyzed by the prospect of what to choose. “I didn’t realize you worked here.”

Ed’s own esophagus was trying to strangle him, after everything he’d done for it over all these years. “You seem like the kind of person who makes it your business to know everything about everybody,” he said.

“I am,” Roy said, beaming. “But there are an awful lot of things to know about an awful lot of people on a campus this size, so occasionally I get a little bit behind.”

“Right,” Ed said. He was running on fumes at this point; it was sort of a minor miracle that he’d produced an identifiable word at all.

“Well,” Roy said, breezily, as he sauntered over to one of the refrigerators and started sorting through the juices, “now I’m catching up on you.”

“Cool,” Ed said. “Nothing stalkerish about the way that sounds.”

Roy laughed. He had a nice laugh, which Ed hated; nice laughs were a fucking lie; you wanted somebody who sounded like a donkey braying into a megaphone with a little snort-wheeze at the end, because people with bad laughs had been embarrassed about it their whole lives, so they never faked it for your sake.

While Ed agonized, Roy selected a bottle of juice from the fridge. He’d picked a green one that looked like the unholy lovechild of snot and pondscum, which was not even remotely a reasonable color for juice to be. ‘Natural’? Maybe. Kiwis were green, and sometimes they put kale and spinach and salad-shit into those fake-healthy juices and then ruined the supposed benefit by sugaring them up so that you’d still be able to choke them down. But it wasn’t right. Juice was supposed to be fruity. And… orange. Or pink. Or something. Science—at least the science of the prepackaged juice companies—had gone entirely too far with that one, as far as Ed was concerned.
Roy then came over to Ed’s register and picked up a candy bar.

Mindful as Ed was of the eyes of his lackadaisical coworkers tracking their every move—more out of boredom than malice, though he was willing to bet that any of them would report him for a minor malfeasance in a second if they thought it would get them preferential treatment when the shift sheet rolled out—he couldn’t help giving Roy a long, slow, eyebrow-raising smirk at the incongruence of those two choices.

“I see you moonlight as a nutritionist,” he said. “How do you find the time?”

Roy laughed again. Still nice—warm and mellifluous and a little bit lilting; there was nothing harsh or grating or too-loud in it at all, but it somehow sounded perfectly genuine even without being over-the-top.

Probably he was faking it, and he was just really, really good. One had to be a natural-born bullshitter to TA, Ed would wager, and Roy was the likeliest candidate for that position that he thought he’d ever met.

“Touché,” Roy said, and if the bastard spoke French, Ed was going to burn this university to the ground. “I wish I could; I’m sure I’d make a fortune in consultation fees alone.” He was on the verge of winking. Ed was on the verge of punching him out just to get that fucking grin off of his face, because it was a weapon, and he waved it around all the time like he didn’t even know it was so fucking sharp. “I just found out I passed my quals.”

“Congrats,” Ed said automatically, because that was the sort of thing you said to someone who had accomplished something difficult, even if a part of you wanted them dead. Mom would probably have been ashamed of some of the things he’d done to get here, and some of the things he would sink to in a heartbeat in order to get through this, but not of his manners. Never that.

“Thank you,” Roy said contentedly. “They’re really more ceremonial than anything else, but I managed to stress myself to the brink of lunacy with them anyway. So this—” He held up the chocolate. Dark, with almonds, which at least was... slightly less candy-ish than it could have been. “—is my reward for surviving; and this—” The juice, if it could even be called such without offending strained fruit the world over. “—is to try to trick my immune system into saving me from getting sick now that I’m past it.” He set both on the metal tray just ahead of the register. “But I’d probably better stop here before I replace my blood with high-fructose corn syrup.”

“Probably,” Ed said, ringing the items up in turn. “You get that, too? The relief-cold when your brain knows your body doesn’t have to hold out through the hard part anymore?”

“Without fail,” Roy said.

“Sucks,” Ed said. “Six sixty-four.”

Roy blinked, then recovered and went for his wallet. So at least it was fairly likely that he was human, although Ed wasn’t going to call it confirmed just yet.

“I like the hat,” Roy said.

At least Ed had been able to turn it around so that the stubborn bits of his bangs poked through the snapback. He looked like a moron, but at least he looked like a moron who didn’t care, rather than a moron who was wearing a sun visor indoors.

“Thanks,” Ed said. “I want to incinerate it, but we’re not allowed to put anything inedible in the sandwich oven, so it might have to be in lab.”
Roy fished cash out of his wallet and offered up another perfect little laugh. What a fucking asshole.
He held the bills out. “Is that your way of warning me that if I take my eyes off of you for a second,
I’ll have a room full of smoke and no more job?”

“Possibly,” Ed said, clipping the bills into the register and starting to count out the change. “I’d have
to talk to the ethics committee about the last part, but I’m pretty sure that’s how the incineration stuff
is going to end. You want your receipt?”

“That’s fine,” Roy said. “Thank you. Guess I’ll have to keep an eye on you from now until you
graduate.”

“Nothing stalkerish about that, either,” Ed said, holding the change out.

Roy cupped his hand for it, and Ed dumped it, and their fingertips brushed, and he steeled his spine
and didn’t shiver and didn’t blink.

“I try,” Roy said. “Thank you.”

“Sure thing,” Ed said. “Come again.”

Roy gave the fucking hat one last lingering look. “I might just. If only to enjoy your headgear
choices while I can, before they get converted into kindling.”

“Don’t wait too long,” Ed said. “This one doesn’t have much time to live.”

Roy shot him another grin, and then favored him with a wave on the way out the door. “See you in
class. We can burn it outside afterward, if you like.”

“Don’t tempt me,” Ed said.

The bell jingled, and then the door shut.

Ed turned back towards the register. The guy manning the sandwich counter was openly staring at
him.

“You got a problem?” Ed said.

“Nah,” the guy said. “Can you burn my hat, too?”

So that could’ve gone worse.

“S’up,” Ed said towards the speaker the next time Winry called on a Friday night when he was
buried in glorious mathematics.

“Ed,” she said, and by the half-stifled delight in her voice, he already had an idea what he was in
for. “Catherine can get us into a party tomorrow night.”

Catherine was Winry’s sorority friend. Ed had actually met her when she happened to walk by
during coffee one time. She seemed nice. She also seemed really smart despite being bubbly, so Ed
wasn’t sure what to make of that whole sorority-girl stereotype thing about them being a bunch of
bleach-blonde ditzes. None of the blonde girls he’d met were anything less than brilliantly incisive—
albeit slightly evil, too.

“Okay,” Ed said.

“Is that a I guess I’ll come because I love you-’okay’?" Winry asked. “Or a I’m probably going to bail on you at the last minute because I have all this homework-’okay’?”

“Uh,” Ed said.

“C’mon, Ed,” Winry said. “It’s a Halloween party! It’ll be fun!”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “Nothing says ‘fun’ quite like broke-ass college students buying cheap, skeevy costumes so that they have more money to drink themselves stupid with.”

“You’re darn right,” Winry said. “It’ll be great, Ed. It’ll be fun ’cause it’ll be us. The hospital was fun because it was us.”

She had him there, and always would, and he couldn’t even resent her for it. “Fine. But what the hell are we supposed to wear?”

“Oh,” Winry said. “Oh, crap.” Ed started to sigh, but she didn’t let him finish. “Wait, I totally got this. Just sit tight. I’ll have a costume for you by three tomorrow.”

“It’s your lucky day,” Ed said. “I don’t get off until four.”

“Perfect,” she said. “I’ll come by your dorm.”

“If you dress me up as a slutty pumpkin,” Ed said, “our friendship is over.”

“Aw, man,” Winry said. “There goes my plan to curl your hair and spray-dye it green to be the stem.”

“Over,” Ed said. “Permanently.”

“Oh, hush,” Winry said. “You know I wouldn’t do that to you. I’ll find something that more or less preserves whatever both of us have left that passes for dignity.”

“Real encouraging,” Ed said.

He could hear the beaming grin in every syllable. “I try!”

He probably should have known better, but he still found himself staring into the mirror Saturday afternoon and uttering a more-than-slightly defeated “Oh, God.”

“You’re adorable,” Winry said.

“Eew,” Ed said.

“Hey,” Winry said. “At least it’s not a slutty pumpkin.”

“Here today,” Ed said; “gourd tomorrow.”
“Turn and look at me,” Winry said. “And don’t move. And close your eyes.”

“That is the most terrifying series of instructions I’ve seen since the SATs,” Ed said, but he trusted her too much, so he followed them.

There was some almost-tickly pressure on his face. She was drawing on him.

“If that’s permanent,” he said, “I’m going to be almost as upset as I would’ve been about promiscuous squash.”

“It’s eyeliner,” Winry said. “You have whiskers. And a little bit of lip gloss for your tiny pink kitty nose. Open your eyes?”

He did. The upshot was that she was somehow totally rocking the cheap plastic pointy witch hat, so at least one of them looked good.

“Cute as heckie,” Winry said. “Hang on—” She was pulling her phone out and throwing an arm around his shoulders. “We gotta get a selfie for Al; he’s going to flip.”

“Yeah,” Ed said, scowling a little harder in the direction of the camera. Cats probably liked selfies even less than he did; he wanted to be in character. “And then he’s going to assume this is permission to get a kitten.”

“Tell him he already has one,” Winry said. “It’s you.” She grinned, tilted her head back, and snapped three shots. “I’m actually secretly helping you, see?”

“It freaks me out when your after-the-fact logic kind of makes sense,” Ed said.

“It always makes sense,” Winry said. She was sending the photo in a text. Ed’s life was ruined. “You know you love it.”

“‘Love’ isn’t exactly the word I was thinking of,” Ed said, “but okay. So—where’s this stupid party-thing?”

“It’s at one of the smaller frat houses,” Winry said, trying to figure out which pocket to put her phone in so that her access to it wouldn’t be obstructed by her polyester robe-cloak-coat-thing. “Catherine said they have a huge, loud, horrible, chaotic party at the biggest one—Omega Chi something—but that everybody kinda knows this one’s better. That’s why they have a cover charge. They do games and stuff.”

“Games like Cards Against Humanity?” Ed asked. “Or ‘games’ like strip poker?”

“I think it’s strip beer pong,” Winry said. She waited for Ed’s face to contort in agony. “I’m kidding; I just made that up.”


“It’s, like, a two-degree incline,” Winry said. “You’re so dramatic.”

“No,” Ed said. He pointed at his foot. “It’s so dramatic.”

“You’ll be fine,” Winry said. “But we can’t go now. It isn’t supposed to start until seven, and you sure as hell can’t show up early to a party.”

Ed stared at her. “You… can’t?”
“It’s not like class or something,” Winry said. “If you show up early, you just labeled yourself as a loser with nothing better to do. You have to look like you don’t really care about going, and you’ll probably take off if you get bored.”

“That’s stupid,” Ed said.

Winry put a hand on his shoulder and offered him a mournful expression.

“I hate to break it to you, Ed,” she said, “but life usually is.”

“That doesn’t mean we have to make it worse on a daily basis,” Ed said, “by submitting to stupid-ass social rules about showing up late to parties on purpose.”

“Succumb to the tragedy of the zeitgeist with me,” Winry said, “just this once.” She frowned over at the empty bed across from Ed’s. “Where are Ling and Lan Fan, anyway? I thought they were gonna come.”

“She started feeling real sick,” Ed said. “She said she has some kind of obscure nut allergy, so that might be what it was. He was walking her back to her dorm. I dunno if he’s going to meet us there, or stay with her and stuff. I’ll text him.”

“Poor thing,” Winry said. “Tell him to tell her I hope she feels better. And then tell him that if he’s still coming, he should meet us at Blondie’s for pizza first.”

“Is that how we’re going to kill the time between now and the hour of fashionable lateness?” Ed asked.

“Unless you’ve got a better idea than Blondie’s,” Winry said.

Ed raised an eyebrow at her. “There aren’t any better ideas than Blondie’s. Studies have proven it.”

“Uh huh,” Winry said.


“Right,” Winry said. “Well, move your cute kitty tail, then.”

“Bossy-ass witch,” Ed said.

Winry gave him an admirably overstated set of finger guns.

Ling was dressed as a cheerleader, including pigtails.

A girl cheerleader, that was. In a little pleated skirt. He’d shaved his legs.

“Where did you even get that?” Ed asked. He didn’t recognize the mascot, although that wasn’t saying much, given how many high schools there were in this state.

“A magician never tells,” Ling said. He was definitely, absolutely, incontrovertibly rubbing his shins together and enjoying the… whatever it was. Smoothness? Novelty? Reckless and sudden rebellion against heteronormative expectation?
“Does the magician want pepperoni or combo?” Winry asked. “We can get a medium and just split it half and half.”

“Make it a large,” Ling said. “So that there’s at least a slice left for each of you once I’m done.”

Winry gave Ed a Why do you hang out with him? look, and he gave her back a It was your idea to text him, Win! She made a face, but it was an Oh, crap, you’re right face, so that was okay.

“You two are so married,” Ling said. “How much is a soda?”

Somehow… somehow, that had brought him… here.

Here, at the foot of a staircase in a frat house, stranded with a mostly-empty bottle of cider in his hands and nowhere—except the designated beer pong room—to run from his extremely hot, extremely obnoxious, and extremely tipsy TA.

Somehow, Ed was simultaneously unsettled—nerves trilling so much that it felt like there were termites moving underneath his skin—and had the powerful sense that this had been inevitable for a long, long time.

Edward Elric did not believe in destiny. He did not believe in fate, or fatalism; he did not believe that there was some pattern woven out between the stars, and the thread that you dangled from was predesigned. He did not believe that there was anybody up there beating the shit out of them on purpose—he blamed that on entropy, because that was the only thing that made any concrete physical sense. Things fell apart. The universe didn’t give a fuck. Life hurt, and hurt, and hurt, and then it ended. You had to snatch up the good moments while you got the chance, like picking up shiny candy icons in a video game before they flickered away.

But somehow, this—

This felt—

Resonant. Like it harkened back, and whispered forward, and neither of them could change that, and neither of them could get away.

“So what the hell is a TA like you doing in a place like this, anyway?” Ed asked. Oh, shit, that sounded like… something. Flirting, probably. How was it that you could flirt on accident just by making conversation with the wrong words? It wasn’t like you could build a house on accident using the wrong materials. Christ, language was a trip. “Don’t you have better things to do? Like… scholarly shit? Your thesis? Making functional witches’ cauldrons with dry ice in the lab?”

“I had a lot of fun with dry ice this morning,” Roy said. “No one else found it quite as amusing as I did.” He shrugged, and his cape rippled around his annoyingly-nice shoulders, and gorgeous melodramatic assholes the world over shivered with a tiny frisson of inexplicable satisfaction. “I don’t make a habit of crashing underclassmen’s parties, if that’s what you’re asking, but every now and again it’s nice for a change. I tend to meet interesting people.”

“Better keep looking,” Ed said, sweeping the hand not burdened with a bottle downwards at himself.

“Are you kidding?” Roy asked. The little pointy plastic teeth should have ruined his grin, but they
didn’t. Ed blamed the fucking cider. “You are, without a doubt, one of the most fascinating human beings I have ever had the unrivaled good fortune to encounter.”

Ed stared at him.

“Sorry,” Roy said. “I am an effusive drunk.”

“Case in point,” Ed said.

“But you are,” Roy said. “Effusive or not, it’s the truth. I’m not just saying that to get into your pants, although if getting into your pants is on the table, please do feel free to advise as far as the best and safest routes towards that destination.”

“Y’know,” Ed said over the intensifying gallop of his heartbeat as the blood careened through his veins, pooling in his cheeks and very possibly starting to percolate in other places too, “the ethics committee has spies everywhere.”

“Mm,” Roy said, swilling his cup and then raising it too slow to hide the smirk. “Are they hot?”

“If I knew who they were,” Ed said, “they’d be shitty spies.”

Roy turned the full power of the smirk on him, which had to qualify as an act of violence in most civilized countries. “Are you one of them?”

“That’s classified,” Ed said.

“Aha,” Roy said, and his eyes gleamed so bright that Ed would have turned to look for the light source if he’d been remotely capable of looking away. “I can’t go back to jail. Perhaps I’d better pat you down to see if you’re bugged.”

Some of this, so far, had been debatable.

That was not.

That was a come-on.

Roy was his TA. Roy was his drunk TA. Roy was, apparently, not straight after all, or at least not especially rigid about it, or at least extremely curious about how flexible he could get. Roy was so tempting they should have put him on labels to sell desserts with too much chocolate.

Roy was off-fucking-limits, because he was going to be grading Ed’s work later on, and no matter what he said he wanted while he was intoxicated at a shitty party, both of them would regret it later if anything happened now.

Roy more than Ed, probably. Roy would regret it in ways he hadn’t even dreamed up yet, and he’d feel cheated and betrayed, and that was a nice new can of venomous worms that Ed had no intention of popping open right now.

It wasn’t worth it. It just wasn’t worth it for a couple minutes of something maybe-good. Something maybe-really-good; something maybe-amazing; something—

No.

Ed peered down the neck of his cider bottle and sloshed it around a little bit, taking a couple of deep breaths to try to bring some oxygen to his brain. He still had a handle on this—or he could get one. This wasn’t his first awkward conversation by a long fucking shot, after all; he could drag both of
them out of this alive if he focused, and thought clearly, and worked hard enough to disentangle
them from the hotly-twisting ribbons of the possibilities unrolling out ahead.

“Jesus fuck,” Ed said. At least that phrase sounded marginally cleverer when you’d had a drink or
two. “Are you even allowed to do that?”

“Do what?” Roy asked.

Ed’s throat did a funny thing that he wasn’t sure was natural. Perhaps it was a belated allergic
reaction. “Um—hit on me. Like you were—that was what you were doing, right?”

“Yes,” Roy said, mildly.

The throat thing got worse. “And you’re my fucking TA, so—”

“The contract is a bit unspecific on that point,” Roy said. If his eyes hadn’t been just the slightest bit
hazy, he would’ve sounded so sober that this would’ve been scarier by half. As it was, the whole
thing was weirdly sort of… intriguing. Who the hell was Roy Mustang when you peeled back all
the suavity and shit? “I’m not allowed to date you while you’re in my class. But something like this
isn’t about to affect your grade, obviously, since your grades are, without exception, absolutely
perfect. But I think the spirit of the law is the important thing here, to everyone except the judge.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” Ed said.

“I believed in the Easter Bunny longer than I believed in Santa Claus,” Roy said, “because I assumed
that the Easter Bunny had an intricate network of warren tunnels underneath the surface of the Earth,
whereas Santa had to contend with wind resistance, so the Easter Bunny’s ubiquity made
significantly more physical sense.”

“Okay,” Ed said. “That was the second dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. How old were you when
you worked that out?”

“Five,” Roy said. “When I told my foster mother my theory, she patted me on the head for a minute
and then immediately enrolled me in a science camp.”

“God,” Ed said. He had to do something. He had to…

Drink more.

No, wait—change the subject.

“How did you get invited, anyway?” he asked, helplessly, feeling like a kayak coming unmoored
and drifting out across a lake that was probably home to a hungry cryptid.

“I didn’t,” Roy said. “I always just show up carrying a few two-liter bottles of Coke and say ‘Where
should I put these?’ Everyone always forgets the mixers, so they’re so glad to see me that they never
think to ask whose friend I am.”

“Diabolical,” Ed said.

Roy’s grin was sharp enough to slit throats and sever veins. “Why, thank you.”

“I’m not sure that was a compliment,” Ed said.

Somehow—by some truly unholy magic—the grin got even worse. “Aren’t you?”
“Now I’m sure it wasn’t,” Ed said. “You don’t deserve one. And your ego doesn’t need the help.”

Roy laughed—bright, but not too loud, and fuck him. Fuck him, fuck this, fuck the way Ed’s heart was throbbing in his throat, the way his mouth kept going dry, the way Roy’s jaw met his neck at such an exquisitely beautiful angle, the way the bastard’s flyaways ghosted across his forehead every time he moved—

“I think you’ve got me there,” Roy said.

Ed wanted to get him naked on the floor, or possibly against a wall, but that was a different problem entirely, and one that he was trying to smother inside his brain.

“I have a serious question for you,” Roy said next, and Ed’s heart did a feeble flip-flop thing that would’ve made a breakdancing toad green with envy. Greener with envy, maybe, depending on the complexion of the toad. “That girl—Winry. From the coffee shop the other day. You came with her tonight, didn’t you?”

Why did he know that? Why was he paying so much attention? Trying to find alternate explanations for this whole scenario was contorting Ed’s brain in ways that should have been impossible and hurt like a bitch.

He felt his eyes narrowing, which probably looked especially idiotic with the cat-ear ensemble. “Yeah. Why? What’s it to you?”

Roy’s tongue darted out and swept across his bottom lip, and shit—“Is she your girlfriend?”

“Everybody thinks that,” Ed said, trying to keep his heart from going haywire by force of will. “But—eew. No. She’s like my sister. I’d fucking die for her.”

That had come out… well, not exactly too honest; it was just honest enough. But too sudden. Too personal. This cider shit snuck up on you. Ed needed to start trusting alcohol about as much as he trusted people, i.e. not at all.

Roy smiled thinly, which was—shocker of the season—also a good look on him. What a bastard. “I know the feeling. It’s important to have someone like that in your life. Someone who has your back.”

“Yeah,” Ed said, relaxing a little. Maybe that was Roy’s way of saying that even though he was a giant flirt, he had an awesome significant other somewhere out in the ether who supported him.

What was it that people said? The reckless-lucky people—the ones who had a lot to live for and nothing real to lose. Nothing ventured, nothing gained? The only thing more off-fucking-limits than your drunk TA was your drunk TA after you’d confirmed that he wasn’t single.

A part of Ed didn’t want to know, but the rest of him was well-aware of what happened when he gave his brain an inch of quarter to dream with. “You… got someone like that? Somebody important?”

“I am lucky enough to have several people who are important,” Roy said, and there was a softer quality to his smile for a merciful two and a half seconds before it curved a little bit wicked again. “But none who are, as you might say, significant. As in, a significant other.”

“I got it,” Ed forced out around the renewed leaping of his heart into his throat.

“How about you?” Roy said, and he was—oh, shit, he was doing the thing where he half-turned and
somehow managed to make lifting an arm to lean against the wall look graceful instead of inconceivably stupid. How had he just done that? It was the most contrived pose imaginable; it was some *fuckboy shit*, but somehow he’d used it to elongate his body until he looked like a panther at rest, and he was smoothing his hair back, and Ed didn’t know if he was going to make it out of this alive. “Girlfriend? Boyfriend? Non-binary date-mate?”

“What?” Ed said. “I—no, I… No. I don’t… have… anybody. Like that. I’m not—dating. Right now.” Fuck and fuck and more fuck, with a dollop of fucksausage on top, and some fuckfries on the side, and a little bit of fucksalt on those. “Why do you even want to know? It’s not l—”

“We have,” Roy said, and there was something about the effortlessness of everything he did that was downright mesmerizing the instant that he opened his mouth, “a frankly staggering amount of sizzling sexual tension.” He *winked*. There was no God, and no justice, and no hope. “In case you hadn’t noticed. But that’s not a guarantee of availability, so I like to be sure that I’m not jeopardizing anything before I act on the impulse.”

“What?” Ed said again, more because it felt stabilizing than anything else. At least bewilderment was familiar; at least reacting to Roy with a nose-wrinkle and a confused interjection was terrain he recognized; at least if you backpedaled fast enough, sometimes you got away.

Roy reached out—which stopped the breath in Ed’s throat, stopped the churn of his thoughts, and set the many-winged insects in his guts to swarming—and tapped one fingertip underneath his chin.

“You’re magnificent,” Roy said. “So I need to be sure you’re single.”

“I’m not,” Ed croaked out.

“Magnificent?” Roy asked. “Or single?”

“Drunk enough,” Ed said. His mouth felt numb; his brain was just funneling words out without vetting them. “I’m not drunk enough. For this. For you. For—what the fuck?”

“Here,” Roy said, offering his cup.

Most of Ed wanted to say *No, it’s fine, I wasn’t really serious*—but that part wasn’t driving anymore, and the part behind the wheel was the part that was stupid, and overheated, and way too invested in the shape of Roy’s collarbones.

“Thanks,” that part said, and it took Roy’s stupid red Solo cup, and Ed drained it. Whatever had been in it tasted a bit like soda, a bit like ethanol, and a bit like death.

When he surfaced from choking it down, he made the mistake of looking at Roy as he tried to hand the cup back.

Roy was watching him.

Roy was watching him; and the tip of Roy’s tongue was running very slowly across his upper lip; and when he swallowed, Ed’s eyes were drawn to the progress of his throat, and it just wasn’t fucking fair that someone could turn up in a shitty polyester cape and still make Ed’s guts drop out like there was a trapdoor underneath his diaphragm; and—

Roy’s fingers brushed repeatedly over his as the cup changed hands again.

“You’re my TA,” Ed said. His voice had sounded louder a couple minutes ago, hadn’t it? Maybe it was whatever he’d just slugged that Roy had been drinking. “It’s not—we couldn’t—I mean, it’s—
practically illegal.”

“It’s not illegal at all,” Roy said. “Although how good you look in low light probably should be.”

“Jesus Christ,” Ed said. He couldn’t help flushing *hot*—which probably made him look even more stupid, despite substantial previous evidence that he had attained peak stupidity a long time ago. At least it was a good thing insofar as any blood in his face was being kept away from other, more dangerous places it could congregate with intent of conspiracy.

Roy reached out again, and Ed’s will trembled as violently as his fingertips. He clung to the bottle of cider; no matter what a den of sin this place was or could be, it’d still be rude as hell to spill booze on their carpet.

But then Roy’s fingertips froze just centimeters away from Ed’s forehead, and Roy slanted another little smile.

“May I?” he asked.

Ed swallowed twice, dug for his voice, and disinterred a fragment of it. “I—what?”

“May I touch your hair?” Roy asked.

Shit. “Um—I—” Had this officially spiraled out of control by now? If it was past hope and past help, he could just give in, right? The only question was where you were supposed to draw the line.

Ed was pretty sure he hadn’t been able to steer this thing in at least five minutes. Was that a suitable interval to cling grimly to the controls before throwing your hands up in the air and just letting it happen?

Wait—what would Al say? Or Winry.

Well, Winry would say *Heck yeah, look at those gorgeous hands, Ed; get ’em everywhere!*, which, while entirely reasonable, wasn’t exactly the guiding light of shining wisdom Ed was looking for.

Al would say…

Al would probably say *Well, Brother, what do you want? Setting aside what you think you should do, because it’s polite or safe or better for others, what do you actually want right now?*

Ed listened to his heart beat three times to be sure he was interpreting his own thoughts properly. In real time, none of this was probably taking as long as it felt like, because both his heart and his brain were moving at about a thousand miles a minute.

“Okay,” he said finally. “S—sure. Yeah.”

“Thank you,” Roy said, and there was a peculiar gentleness to his expression for a second that made it seem like he was really, really grateful; like it wasn’t just a platitude—

And then his skin grazed Ed’s, and Ed’s whole scalp tingled, and he forgot where he’d been going with that.

Very slowly, very cautiously, Roy guided Ed’s bangs back and tried to tuck them behind his ear, which never held for more than about a quarter of a second, but that was pretty evidently not the point. If the point was making Ed’s mouth go dry, and his throat go drier, and his head go light, and his skin go sparkly pins-and-needles all over, then… well, Ed got the hint, was all.
What he wanted, to answer an imaginary version of Al’s unasked question, was for Roy never to stop doing that basically ever.

“So—” It was a trial to keep his eyelids from fucking fluttering; this was the most delicious torture he could think of; having a hot guy’s fingers flirting with your face was to die for, and he’d go out happy. “So what do you think?”

“It’s even better than I dared to hope,” Roy said, “when I was watching you in class.”

Ed managed to winch his eyes open enough to level a suspicious look at Roy. “You were—you watch me in class?”

Roy blinked at him, and then blinked at the wall.

“Ah,” he said. “I probably shouldn’t have said that.”

Ed raised the cider bottle to his lips and emptied the rest of it.

That helped.

It didn’t help the situation, obviously, because alcohol couldn’t alter the fabric of reality; and it didn’t help to make Ed’s fumbling brain any swifter—but it sure did help him care a little less about what his future self was going to think of this tomorrow.

“To be fair,” he said, “I spend a lotta time watching you in class, too.”

Roy grinned.

Then he paused.

Then he said “Hang on,” turned around, extracted his plastic vampire teeth, tossed them into his empty red cup, and set the cup down on the floor in the corner made by the bottom stair.

He beamed as he faced Ed again. “Can’t believe I didn’t think of that earlier.” The bright grin vanished and was replaced with another devastating smirk of unmistakable intent, faster than a photon through a vacuum—which was, on a related note, a pretty good summation of what the contents of Ed’s lungs felt like. Had there ever been air here? Had he ever tasted air in his life?

“Would you like to dance?”

Only if you mean the horizontal tango, motherfucker, Ed’s brain helpfully supplied.

“I can’t,” he said instead, because apparently he hadn’t quite drunk himself off the stupid cliff just yet.

Roy leaned in close—so close, so impossibly close; close enough that his breath made the wispy hairs around Ed’s ear flutter as his mouth came so damn near the shell that every nerve in Ed’s body ignited at once—

“So you can,” Roy said. “Everyone can.” Too close, mayday-close, S.O.S.-Houston-we-have-one-billion-problems-help-me-you-motherfuckers-close. He drew back, but not far enough, and unveiled another slow smirk like a scalpel blade. You didn’t feel a thing if they numbed you first. Surgeries were like venomous animals that way. “You can,” Roy said. “You won’t.” He licked his lips, and Ed’s whole body jolted with the impulse to shift forward close enough to follow the example and taste that bastard’s fucking mouth— “I dare you.”
There were a lot of things Ed could have said. *No, thank you* was one of them, most likely the one Al would have vouched for, but that had gone out the window, never to return, the instant the word “dare” had entered the conversation.

He could have said *Why don’t you go, and I’ll watch.* He could have said *I’m pretty sure all those people are just sort of swaying while they drink; I dunno if that really counts as dancing.* He could have said *Dancing is against my atheism.* He could have said *Nah.*

But he didn’t say any of those things.

He grabbed the collar of Roy’s stupid-ass cape in both hands and pulled him down and pressed their mouths together.

Roy’s breath caught, which at least confirmed that there was still oxygen in this space, since Ed’s body didn’t seem to have processed any in the past ninety seconds or so. His head felt floaty; his hands felt extraordinarily distant. He wanted to check that they were still there, stretched out and curled into the slightly slippery fabric of Roy’s dumbass costume, but he’d closed his eyes on instinct.

Oh, right. Kissing. Fuck. He was kissing Roy. He was kissing *Roy*.

Roy’s mouth was every bit as gorgeous on the inside, in the self-imposed dark, as it had been from a distance—and from across the café table, and around the corner of the lab benches, and in the depths of the half-stifled fantasies. The whole thing tasted like cheap booze, unsurprisingly—there was some substantial room for improvement there, but Roy had tilted his head, so Ed rolled with it, and their mouths fit together so fucking perfectly that it seemed geometrically implausible, and—

And it was so *good.* Roy was so good; he was so—what? Tender? And gentle, and warm, and his fingertips were sliding slowly into the hair at Ed’s temples, and Ed just kept shivering, but *upward*—further into it—

Roy made a noise in the back of his throat somewhere between a whimper and a whine, and his fingers curled slowly into Ed’s hair, and the little everywhere-tug of it made Ed’s skin go haywire with a prickling like electricity all over again. The tip of Roy’s tongue brushed his upper lip, and it should’ve been—weird, or gross, or too-wet, or too-*something*, but instead it was—intimate? And delicious, and thrilling, and he parted his lips for it like he could drink it right the fuck in—

And then he—

Remembered.

Suddenly, like the sun had scampered away behind some clouds, but they were breaking, and the light was filtering back through.

He planted both hands on Roy’s chest and applied just enough pressure to pry them apart.

Roy let him—although it might have just been the surprise making him pliable; he looked more than a little dazed. Dazed and… tickled, maybe. Pleased. Chuffed. Some word like that. Like he’d gotten away with something, and he definitely wanted to keep getting away with it, possibly forever.

Ed struggled with oxygen for a long couple of seconds, which was bullshit. Bodies were bullshit. All his wanted to do was fist both hands in Roy’s shirt and haul him in again.

“Fuck,” he forced out instead. There was fake-whisker-eyeliner smudged on Roy’s nose. Ed lifted his shaky left hand and tried to scrub it off, but he mostly only succeeded in smearing it around. “I
fucking—kissed you. I can’t fucking kiss you.”

“You can do anything you want to me,” Roy breathed, eyes half-lidded, lit hot and fervent from within. “We can make a safeword. How does ‘strontium carbonate’ sound to y—”

“You’re my TA,” Ed said. His hands had settled flat against Roy’s chest, and he could feel the bastard’s fucking heartbeat, but if he moved them, there’d be no barrier in between their bodies, and he had no idea what the hell might happen then. “I can’t fucking kiss my fucking TA, period, end of story, close the book, throw the book out the window, pour some lighter fluid after it, drop multiple matches in case one goes o—”

“Your fucking TA kissed back,” Roy purred.

“That’s beside the fucking point,” Ed said. His head was spinning; Roy was so fucking beautiful and so fucking real—so accessible; so utterly, brain-meltingly, all-consumingly tempting that it was an uphill battle trying to remember how to think, let alone how to shape thoughts into words, let alone how to put enough sound behind them to speak them aloud.

“Is it?” Roy asked, slow and sultry as all fucking get-out—like he wasn’t in a hurry in the least. Like he had nowhere to go, because there wasn’t anywhere he’d rather be, now or ever. “No one would have to know.”

That—

—landed.

Cold and sharp and singular—one absolutely unique shard of glass dropping to a marble floor and shattering into a thousand icy slivers.

“No,” Ed said. He pushed—not forcefully, but hard enough to make it clear that he was serious—at Roy’s chest. Roy’s eyes widened, and the corners of his mouth twisted, but he stepped back immediately, and he didn’t raise his hands. “I’m not— doing that again. I’m just—not. I gotta go. I need—I need to—find—”

“Hey,” Roy said, reaching down—and then putting one hand against the wall to stabilize himself—in order to collect the cup with his vampire teeth in it. “Wai—”

Ed did not wait.

Ed did not wait; Ed did not listen; Ed did not care; Ed proceeded directly down the hall and turned the first corner and tried to will one of the human specimens he was quasi-responsible for into being so that he could collect them both and leave this fucking nightmare behind.

He turned the first corner that his muddled brain identified—there had to be rooms down here; and people inhabited rooms, as a general rule, so it was as good a place as any to start trying to turn up the probably-intoxicated remnants of his something-like-a-squad.

He was striding as fast as he could while still scanning side-to-side with some semblance of specificity—it made his head hum a bit, but he hadn’t drunk that much, so reduced body mass aside, he was still… mostly coherent. Mostly awake. Mostly cognizant of reality, and aware that the three tasks at hand were to evade Roy, to gather up his terrible friends, and to escape this hellhole. In that order, preferably, although he was willing to mix it around if necessary.

He’d somehow ended up in the kitchen, but it looked like it led on to another room, and over the unsettlingly insistent beat of the pumped-up bass from the “dancefloor” in the distance, he could hear
what sounded like a couple of girls laughing really hard. That was promising. Winry was cute and funny; she made people laugh all the time; maybe she was there.

Just as he was about to pass through an arched doorway into the room that the laughing had emanated from, he heard another combination of noises from just to his right: a violent *bang* against the wall, and a giggle, and a sigh.

There was a door there that looked like it led to a pantry or something.

He paused, and considered the low but extant odds that Winry might be inside, and opened the door. It was, indeed, a pantry. There were more packages of Maruchan instant ramen in it than anyone should have been allowed to own. There were also a redheaded girl dressed as Ariel and a girl with dark pigtails in a short blue-and-white skirt, making out against the shelves so vigorously that they’d upset several cereal boxes.

“Ah,” Ed said, rather stupidly even by his standards. “Uh… sorry.”

The girl with the pigtails looked up, which revealed that she was not, in fact, a girl in a short skirt. It was Ling.

Still in a short skirt, but—

“What the *fuck*?” It felt like Ed was—falling? Collapsing? Something in his chest had burst; something in him had imploded, and there was a frigid void— “Who the hell is that?”

“It’s…” Ling blinked several times. His eyes were sort of hazy, and his smile looked a little bit… deranged. “Caro… line?”

“Oh, my God,” Apparently-Not-Caroline said, shoving Ling away from her and storming out of the pantry. She shoved past Ed, rather mercilessly he felt, but it was sort of fair, since he hadn’t been able to un-freeze his limbs enough to move out of her way. “Fuck you.”

“Another time, perhaps!” Ling called after her.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Ed asked. His throat felt numb; his hands felt numb; his brain kept whirling and wouldn’t latch onto anything except the single, terrible, gut-wrenching thought: “What about Lan Fan?”

Ling went very still for a very long moment—which couldn’t be comfortable, since he was leaning against a shelf with a bunch of boxes of Rice-A-Roni and stuff on it, but Ed didn’t give half a fuck about Ling’s comfort right now.

For the duration of the very long moment, Ling looked puzzled.

Then his eyes went wider than Ed had ever seen them, and he swallowed hard.

“Oh, shit,” he said. “Oh, _shit_—Ed—Ed, my friend—Ed, you can’t—”

Once again, Ed’s paralyzed muscles failed him; he couldn’t move, and in a matter of seconds, he found himself with two arms full of squirming, clinging, pleading Ling Yao.

“Ed,” Ling said, “you can’t tell her. You can’t tell her _anything_. I love her! I love her more than _life_! What if she leaves?”
Ed’s brain, formidable as it had always been, was currently completely overloaded. Too many problems. Too many fucking disasters; from under the avalanche, all he could do was grasp towards one thought at a time.

And in a way, this one was safer, wasn’t it? He tried to start dragging Ling the rest of the way out of the pantry and towards the room where Winry might be. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t,” Ling said. “She was so cute, Ed. She was singing all the musical numbers, and I just… I didn’t… She kept making me drinks! She’s so talented! I wish I remembered what her name was.”

“No, you fucking don’t,” Ed said.

Ling’s legs went out, and he sagged in Ed’s arms so suddenly that Ed’s right knee gave, and they both toppled to the floor.

“Ow,” Ed said, which didn’t really encapsulate it. “Fuck.” He tried to tug on the back of Ling’s stupid fucking cheerleader shirt, even though a rational remnant of his normal brain knew very well that it was hopeless, and there was no way in hell—or anywhere else—that he was going to be able to drag both of them upright with his left leg splayed out on a linoleum floor and Ling all over his lap. “C’mon. Get up, asshole.”

“I’m not an asshole,” Ling said, in a very small, very sad little voice. “I am a decent person who recently made some poor decisions.”

“That’s what an asshole is,” Ed said. “Get up.”

A shadow fell across them, and Ed looked up, and—

Maybe, maybe, there was some sort of a benevolent higher power, at least sometimes. Maybe there were flashes of godliness in the universe after all. Maybe there was a glimmer of hope that the whole world might not have to be all shit, all the time, uninterrupted.

Winry put her hands on her hips and cocked her head to the side.

“What the heck are you idiots doing down there?” she asked.

“Debating semantics,” Ling said. “Am I an asshole, Winry?”

“You don’t want me to answer that,” she said.

Ed held both arms up to her. He probably looked like a fucking kid, but he didn’t have it left in him to care.

“Help,” he said.

“How much did you drink?” she asked, but she was planting her feet for leverage and reaching out to grip onto both of his wrists, because she was wonderful and amazing and loved him even though he’d never deserved it.

“Not e-fucking-nough,” he said, working to get his right leg underneath himself as Ling wriggled just enough to slide off of his lap.

One heave brought him upright. She was a saint.

“What happened to your whiskers?” she asked, brushing at his shirt.
“Tell you later,” he said. He held a hand out to Ling, and she offered the second one. “Get your ass up off the floor, or I’ll kick it, Ling.”

“You and what army?” Ling mumbled, but he was meeting them halfway, so that was something.

“Jeez,” Winry said. “I can’t take you guys anywhere.” She turned back to call over her shoulder. “Hey, Cath? I gotta go. Text me when you get home, okay?”

Ed didn’t hear the response, but he didn’t need to. All three of the goals he’d set for himself were in sight, and he didn’t even feel nauseous enough to throw up yet. If he just refused to think about Roy’s fingertips brushing against his cheekbone, and his browbone, and his jaw and his neck and his lips—

Nope. Not going there. Not even driving by slowly late at night with the radio off, wearing a hat just in case someone looked out the window. Not sending it anonymous letters that said _Hope you’re having a nice day_; not glancing in its direction; not even dwelling on the simple fact of its existence.

Fortunately, staging an awkward six-legged race—well, depending on how technical you wanted to get—with Winry to drag Ling out of the frat house made for a pretty good distraction from all of the bullshit swirling in his brain. He was on edge listening for the voice, waiting for the touch, _straining_ to see that smirk in one of the shadows, but no trace of Roy materialized as they staggered out the door.

It wasn’t exactly Arctic, but the cool air seemed to rouse Ling a little bit, and he put his damn feet under his damn knees properly for the first time in several minutes once they made it to the sidewalk.

“Oh, shit,” he said. “Oh, shit; oh, shit; oh… Ed, you know more swear words. Help me.”

“No,” Ed said.

“What happened?” Winry asked. “Are you okay?”

Ed ground his teeth. The alcohol muddled everything; his emotions were just this giant wash of… stuff. Right now, anger kept bubbling up to the surface, and he knew it wasn’t entirely rational, but he couldn’t help it. “He’s a piece of shit, is what he i—”

“Shut up,” Ling said, although it sounded more like a plea than a command. “Don’t _tell_. Come on, Ed; be a pal. Be my buddy. I love you, man.”

“You shut up,” Ed said.

“Both of you shut up,” Winry said. “Where are we going?”

They’d been… walking. With their arms around each other, because neither Winry nor Ed trusted Ling with his own feet yet, evidently.

“Uh,” Ed said. “We gotta…” His head was a fucking slushpit. “We should get you home first. To your dorm, I mean; not home-home.”

“What about Ling?” Winry said.

“Yeah, _Ed,_” Ling said, sticking his bottom lip out. His pigtails were disheveled. Ed wanted all of this to be over—or, better yet, not to have happened at all. “What about _me?”_
“I can handle getting him back with me,” Ed said to Winry. “Or leave him in a Dumpster where he belongs. Either way.”

Winry’s face crinkled up in confusion, which was adorable. “Jeez, Ed, I’ve never seen you like this. What did he do?”

“What!” Ling yelped. “I did nothing! I aaaaaam an innocent maaaan—”

“You leave fucking Billy Joel out of this,” Ed said.

Winry sighed, loudly. “Okay, my dorm it is. I’m never taking you guys to a party ever again.”

“Good,” Ed said.

When he woke up, he felt like he’d been sucking on a cotton ball all night.

It wasn’t exactly a hangover—or, at least, he didn’t think it was. Just mild dehydration, probably. His head did hurt a little bit. But mostly it was just his mouth that felt weird.

Oh—

Fuck.

Oh, motherfucking fucker, fucking son of a fuck, for fuck’s sake—

He cracked one eye open and stared at the wall for a few seconds. The light didn’t hurt him any more than usual—which was good, as far as gauging the damage he’d done to himself; and terrible, as far as reminding him of vampires, which…

He rolled over and propped himself up enough on his elbows to glare over at Ling’s bed. The curtains dimmed what looked like late-morning light enough that he couldn’t distinguish a whole lot of detail, but the curled-up-human-ball under the covers over there looked relatively penitent all the same.

Ed hadn’t taken a shower when they got back in last night, so he felt pretty disgusting—and that wasn’t even counting the special kind of disgustingness roiling around in the pit of his stomach, which he was trying not to look at straight. Or not-straight, really. He was trying not to look at it gay and head-on.

He wrangled his way to the edge of the bed, sat up, pressed the heel of one hand to his throbbing forehead for a few seconds, and then put both feet on the floor. He’d been meaning to come clean to Ling about the whole sordid story so that he could just take the damn thing off instead of risking gangrene or anything fun like that, but…

Well. He’d been meaning to do a lot of things. And instead of doing any of them, he’d made out with his fucking TA at a stupid party.

He picked his phone up off of his desktop to check the time. It was a little past ten, which wasn’t as bad as he’d feared; and he had three texts from Al and one from Winry, all of which were unexpected and promising—so maybe today wouldn’t completely fucking suck after all, right? Blessedly, he didn’t have to work, and he also didn’t have too big a shit-ton of work to catch up on,
and Roy didn’t have his phone number, and… dandy. Dandy and great.

Al had sent the three texts to both him and Winry. The first was a selfie photo of him, looking pale as a sheet but pleased as punch, dressed up as a pirate next to Pinako and a giant candy bowl. He’d added We’re staying home and giving out candy! Hope you guys have lots of fun!!!, and then he’d followed that up with P.S. BROTHER I LOVE YOUR COSTUME!!!!!!! and six copies of the cat-with-heart-eyes emoji, so at least the universe was more or less in order as far as that went.

Winry’s text was in the message chain that was just between the two of them, sent just a few minutes ago. She’d written Drink some water, dork, hope you slept ok!

He took a deep breath, shoved his hair back from his face—not that it stayed there—and put his thumbs to the screen. thanks, i appear to be alive. hope you’re good, lmk later if you want to get food or something

He shoved his phone into the heretofore-gratuitous back pocket in his pajama pants, so that if someone called, it wouldn’t vibrate around until it bothered Ling, and then he snuck out to go snag a quick shower, hoping there might not be anyone in the bathroom—or at least not anyone observant; so far that seemed to be the key.

When he came back to the room—washed clean of the vestiges of the eyeliner and the ambient grime and the various stages of sweat both hot and cold over the course of the night, and with freshly-brushed teeth—Ling was awake and upright.

Shitfuck. Ed froze in the doorway and then managed to shake himself enough to step forward and let the damn door close behind him, at least.

How much did Ling even remember? He’d had a hell of a lot to drink, after all; maybe…

Did it matter?

Did it matter if he remembered cheating on the girlfriend he’d been talking about marrying just a few days before? The deed was done. The capacity was in him. Facts were facts, whatever had lodged in his recollection or slipped away.

Ed swallowed, hung his towel from the little rail on his closet door, and started adjusting the edges so he wouldn’t have to make eye contact. Seemed… sort of natural, right?

“Hey,” he said. “Feeling okay?”

“Like death,” Ling said. “Microwaved for twenty seconds under a paper towel.”

“Should’ve left yourself in longer,” Ed said.

“Yeah,” Ling said.

Silence. Ed fiddled with the hem on his towel for another second, and then he dropped his hand and dropped the feeble excuse for an act. He drew a breath, held it, let it go, and turned. “Do you reme—”

“Yes,” Ling said.

This was the first good look Ed had gotten at his face, and it told a fucking story.

Ling gave Ed just enough time to skim the text before burying it in both hands.
“Please don’t tell her,” he said. “Please don’t. I know… I would understand, I suppose—if you felt compelled. I know that it was wrong; I can’t believe I… I can’t believe it happened. I would rewind, in an instant, if I could; I would burn it all down and tear it all out, and—”

“You can’t,” Ed said. Maybe it was unnecessary, and maybe it came out a little bit hoarse and a little bit harsh, but—fucking— “You can’t undo it once it’s done. Shit has consequences, and you have to live with them.”

Ling was quiet for three full risings and fallings of his shoulders, and then he said, “I know.”

The guilt started as a tiny flicker of a flame, and then it caught the edges of Ed’s stomach lining, and then it sent delicate little tendrils of fire twining up around his throat.

Who the fuck was he to judge? He knew the surface of Ling’s life, sure, but he didn’t know everything. He didn’t have a catalogue of the experiences to flip through, so that he could point at the pictures and say Oh, yeah, that’s why you did X, Y, and Z; that’s what you were taught. Edward Elric was the last fucking person on the planet who was in any position to condemn somebody for making lousy choices and then regretting them. It was a miracle that particular dance didn’t have his footprints worn into the floor to guide newcomers through the steps.

“Look,” he said. “I just—that was really fucked up.”

“I know,” Ling said without lifting his head, and his voice wobbled a little, and Ed froze deeper than dry ice again. “I don’t… know why I did that. It was a mistake. It’s not that I don’t love her, Ed; you know that. She knows that. So just—just—can you please not say anything? It won’t happen again. I swear it won’t. Nothing like that will ever happen again.”

Ed couldn’t say Okay, because it wasn’t. And he couldn’t promise silence, because he knew himself—he knew that if Lan Fan sat on that bed and looked him in the eyes and asked him, he’d crack like a strained dam in a fucking second, and it’d all come pouring out. He knew by now that he was going to have to betray one of them, and his insides fucking writhed with it.

He took a breath and let it out as slowly as he could stand. “I just—I don’t get it. I don’t—hate you or anything.” He did, a little, in a petty, five-year-old kind of way. A little poison-flare of fuck you for putting me in this position by being selfish and careless and stupid and drunk. “It’s… we’ll figure it out.”

“Yeah,” Ling said, hollowly. Apparently Ed’s clever linguistics evasion tactics to avoid taking his side had been a mite more transparent than he’d hoped. “Guess so.”

A part of him felt like he shouldn’t punish Ling any extra when Ling was obviously already beating himself up internally so hard that his soul was bound to bruise.

But another part of him was pissed. How the fuck could you take something as good and warm and nice and long-standing and trusting and meaningful as what Ling and Lan Fan had and jack it up over some person at a party that you didn’t even know?

Ed pushed his damp hair out of his face—not that it stayed out of his face any better wet than dry, but the thought sort of counted, right?—and went to sit down at his computer. At least the internet would distract him, right? At least…

At least he had a fucking email from fucking Roy—oh, God, fuck—

He’d forgotten, somehow, that even if Roy couldn’t find his cell number buried somewhere in the bowels of the course administration website, the bastard had his email address; of course the bastard
But the title of this email was not *Ed, you little shit, you started this; now finish it like a damn adult.*

It was *Additional Office Hours.*

Ed bit the inside of his lip to stop himself from making any obvious panicked faces, just in case Ling emerged from that self-flagellation pose any time soon, and cautiously clicked on the subject line.

It had been sent to the whole class section, presumably—Roy had BCCed everybody, or maybe sent it to an automatic list, so it wasn’t like you could see that, but he’d started it out *Dear All*, and a quick glance down the pixels confirmed that nowhere did he accuse Ed of being a thirsty slut and a tease and a fake and whatever. Rather, all it really said was that because their midterm was on Thursday, Roy was hosting extra office hours tomorrow and Tuesday so that there would be time for them to ask him questions in advance.

That was perfect—wasn’t it? Well, provided that you were using an extremely loose definition of the word. It wasn’t perfect at all, really, but it was convenient as hell.

Ed needed to talk to him one-on-one before they had to share a classroom space—didn’t he? It was the responsible, grown-up fucking thing to do. He had to deal with this; he had to clear the air. He couldn’t afford to have Roy going around thinking that Ed was some grade-hungry gold-digger undergrad trying to… what? Seduce his TA and then bolt out the door like some kind of academic Cinderella?

The point was, if he didn’t lay this to rest before class, shit was going to be awkward as all get-out, and his answers on the midterm might turn out to be a whole lot wronger than they would be otherwise.

Besides—it wasn’t… fair, exactly. It wasn’t fair to Roy, really, because—as Ling had so efficiently demonstrated—lots of people went to parties and fucked around and flirted and hooked up. It wasn’t exactly Roy’s fault that Ed wasn’t one of them, but he’d looked for a couple of minutes like he was. Maybe Ed had given him the wrong impression. It was at least worth having a conversation about.

A really, really, truly horrible and supremely awkward conversation.

It was fine. He’d done, and had, and been through worse. This was barely even a blip on the fuck-his-life register, all things considered. All he had to do was convince a more-or-less decent guy whose tongue he’d sucked on not to wreak petty vengeance on his grade—and Roy didn’t really seem like the type.

Easy-fuckin’-peasy. Hardly even hard.

He’d be fine.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

So I did that thing that I do where I wrote one bit that is SUPER, SUPER LONG WITHOUT ANY BREAKS WHATSOEVER! – for reasons which will make more sense when you get into it, but I just wanted to give you guys a heads up that this whole update is a little over 50K. About 15K of it is in this chapter, and about 30K of it is in the next chapter, and about 6 or 7K of it is in the third one, because… that's how it… worked out. X'D

Roy’s magical extended office hours fell at an opportune time, if such a thing really existed—he’d nestled them right between Ed’s last class and the start of Ed’s work shift, which gave Ed a great excuse to turn up late and an even better one to duck out early. He could, entirely plausibly, make it look like this wasn’t about him not wanting to let the conversation go on any longer than necessary, but about a legitimate pressure on his schedule from both sides. It was foolproof.

It occurred to him as he stepped through the doors of the café that he’d overstated that just a touch. Lots of things were foolproof, but he hadn’t yet met one that was Edproof, and he’d succeeded in fucking up all kinds of stuff that shouldn’t have presented any trouble at all.

For instance, he hadn’t even paused to consider that Roy might not remember what had happened Saturday night. He’d obviously been pretty deep into the motor oil—or whatever it was that he’d been drinking—and he’d handled the whole situation so unperturbedly that it wasn’t far-fetched to imagine that he’d done that sort of thing before. Maybe a lot of times. Maybe it wasn’t a big deal to him, if he’d even stayed conscious long enough to store it in the memory archives. Maybe Ed showing up would catch him off-guard, because none of this seemed abnormal to him, and Ed making a big deal out of it would piss him off, and—

Another thing Ed had not planned for was the possibility that someone would actually use Roy’s midterm-specific office hours to come and talk to him about… the midterm. Which was apparently what had happened, since there was some girl who looked vaguely familiar occupying the chair across from Roy’s when Ed spotted the table that that bastard had claimed.

He hesitated in the middle of the walkway—fortunately the place wasn’t packed with the late-afternoon last-chance-for-caffeine rush yet, so nobody crashed into him from behind. Roy’s gaze flicked over to him, and maybe there was something to all of that Their eyes met across a crowded room bullshit after all, because for a split-second, Ed could have sworn the whole place went still.

Ed couldn’t move. They’d apparently gone from Cinderella to Sleeping Beauty in a matter of minutes; the whole café had fallen under a magical spell, and everything was silent and sleeping except for the furious, electric connection of Ed’s eyes meeting Roy’s.

And then Roy’s eyebrows shifted downward just a little, and he pressed his lips together for the space of half a heartbeat before he turned his attention back to the student in front of him—and then the mask slid back into place, and he was a thoughtful, genial, patient teacher’s assistant again. That facet of him was so damn convincing that even Ed was struggling to believe he’d ever been anything else.
He was free, though—free of the ice, and the paralysis; free to drag himself over to the counter and order a coffee and dump a bunch of sugar in it when they handed it over. He didn’t look over his shoulder, and he tried not to make too much noise. He wasn’t here to start shit; he was here to finish it up as neatly and painlessly as…

Who the fuck was he kidding?

He was here to rip off a half-broken scab so that the wound would start healing properly this time, and it was going to hurt like a motherfucker, and he was probably going to be an asshole about it the whole way through. Roy would probably resent having blood splashed all over his clothes even if he wasn’t the one who had to feel it, and all of it was going to end in bleach stains and tears—

As long as it didn’t sabotage his chem grade. That was the important thing. He had to swallow his pride here, no matter how much it rankled on the way down, and keep his eyes pinned firmly on the prize. This wasn’t about him. This was about college, and opportunities. This was about his GPA. This was about doing right by Al and everybody else who’d helped to carry him this far. His stupid personal life bullshit couldn’t hold a candle to any of that.

He parked his ass at an unoccupied table a little ways away from Roy’s and pointedly didn’t look that way. Roy was just trying to do his job right now; the last thing he needed was Ed’s crap distracting him from a student with real, honest, class-related concerns.

Which was fine. Ed could wait. The longer he waited, the shorter the conversation would have to be, if it started to push up against his time constraints. And he could have some coffee in the meantime, which would make him nice and jittery and weird, which would ensure that Roy never wanted to get anywhere near him or his hair or his mouth or his fucked-up personality ever again.

Simple.

He’d singed several of his tastebuds clean off over the years, but he still had to kill a little bit of time scrolling around on his phone before he felt brave enough to take the first sip, so he only got three or four in before the girl at Roy’s table stood up, collected her bag, and swept out.

This was the real test, and he hadn’t studied, and he didn’t know any of the formulas.

Time to go down swinging.

He got up carefully so that he’d be stable, took his coffee in one hand, curled the other around the strap of his backpack, and headed over towards imminent… something. Not-quite-doom, if there were any benevolent universal powers at all watching out for him today.

He breathed deeply as he got close, and then he gestured—cautiously—towards the empty chair with the hand still holding his coffee cup.

“Is it—” Funny how even when it was pretty cut and dry inside your brain, your vocal cords could still prank you like nobody’s business. “I mean—do you have a minute?”

Roy folded his hands neatly on the tabletop and offered up an extremely bland, completely unrevealing little smile. His eyes were so dark, and so sharp, and so damn mysterious that it was a wonder that people didn’t pass out when they saw him on the street. “If you like.”

It was sort of obnoxious of him to phrase it that way, since it wasn’t as if Ed liked a single goddamn thing about this situation, but he’d never get through this if he quibbled over stupid conversational conventions.
He eased himself down into the new chair and set his coffee on the table but didn’t let go of it. To his own credit—and he was going to take this one; he deserved it—he looked Roy right in the unreadable eyes.

“The other night,” he said.

Roy’s smile faltered for a fraction of a second, and then his expression was Teflon-smooth again. “Ah,” he said. “I hope I wasn’t… disrespectful in any way.”

A strain of white-hot rage flared in the center of Ed’s chest, blindingly bright and wreathed in acrid smoke—

But he choked it down. He had to be a fucking grownup about this; he had to. Even if it meant lying through his teeth, repeatedly, to prevent Roy from believing that anything had gone horribly wrong.

He scrabbled for the last few wisps of what he’d meant to say. None of the rest of it mattered; he’d planned this out for a reason.

“Listen,” he said. “I really—like you, but—I mean, it seemed like we were on the same page for a while there, in that this is…” This made it sound like something concrete and meaningful existed in between them. Language was such an asshole when you needed it the most. “You know, that… we… couldn’t really… I mean, it’d be messed up to start anything—” That made it sound like he had an expectation that the nonexistent thing was shaping up to be serious. “—or—do anything, when you’re… my TA. It just—too much conflict of interest. You know? No—” He had to work the spit around in his mouth for a second before he could force the last part out, but it was important, and he wasn’t a fucking chicken. “No hard feelings.”

Roy’s smile widened—barely noticeably; just a centimeter or so altogether—and then he very deliberately parted his hands and lifted the left one to run it back through his hair.

He was so fucking gorgeous. He was so fucking gorgeous, and Ed had been so close—

Yeah. So close to another cliff’s edge, and another long drop, and jagged boulders at the bottom.

“I could keep those two things separate,” Roy said while Ed was still berating himself for being such a sucker for good hair. “Being your teacher—” He spread one hand elegantly on the tabletop, off to the side, and then the other, as a counterpoint. “—and being with you.”

Ed listened to his heart beating in his skull for a second. That was…

Unexpected, but not insurmountable. He could adapt to that. He was quick on his feet when he had to be.

“But it’d have to be on the down-low,” he said. “Right?”

Roy paused, and then he tilted his head a little, and something about the smile changed. Something about his eyes changed, too—they deepened, somehow. Like wells that went all the way to the center of the Earth.

“It would have to be a bit covert,” Roy said, “given that I would very much like to keep this job.”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “And that’s—fine. That’s cool. But I don’t—” Shit. Here it came. He felt winded. “I don’t wanna be somebody’s dirty little secret. I’m not little, for starters—and I’ve spent enough fucking time thinking that I’m dirty ’cause—just ’cause—I grew up in a hick town, and I’m
into guys, and—whatever shit. If that’s what you’re offering, I don’t want it.”

He did. He did, so fucking badly—anything, any little gasp of air; just a single bubble dedicated to his lips alone—

That was the thing about drowning. You would take anything you could get.

But he knew Al would never forgive him if he turned over the last little shreds of something like his dignity for the sake of a pity fuck or two.

And he’d never forgive himself.

Roy folded his hands together again, tighter this time. He was watching them as he did it, like his fingers were going to try to escape if they weren’t closely supervised.

“I understand,” he said.

Like fucking hell he did; like fucking hell he knew what it felt like lying awake for hours every single goddamn night trying to convince yourself that girls were pretty, and you wanted to touch their hair and their cheeks and all the places they were curvy and supple and soft.

Like fucking hell he knew what it felt like to finally muster up the guts to hold out the most important organ you had, and to have it slapped out of your hand and trampled into gravel.

Like fucking hell he knew what it felt like to get so cozy with the concept of your own loneliness that it practically needed a proper name.

Ed plastered a smile on and made sure it was a good one.

“Okay,” he said. He patted the tabletop with an open palm and then used it as leverage to push himself upright. “I’ll get out of your way.”

He’d just turned on his heel when Roy said “Ed—” too fast and too suddenly for it to be anything but the start of something else.

Except that by the time Ed looked at him, Roy had put the mild-interest face back on, and there wasn’t a crack or a chip or a handhold in it anywhere.

“Any questions about the midterm?” he asked.

Ed bit the inside of his bottom lip hard to stop himself from saying something shitty. He didn’t even know what it was yet; he just knew it would’ve come out mean.

“Nah,” he managed. “Thanks. I’m good.”

“That I knew,” Roy said, but he didn’t give Ed any time to sputter. “See you in class.”

“See you,” Ed said.

He put his head down, squared his shoulders, and walked out—one step at a time.

Not so bad. Not so bad; not really. He’d feel better than this tomorrow, and better still the day after that. He’d make it. He’d be fine. They never bled for too long; the human body had an incredible capacity to heal. He just couldn’t let the stinging phase distract him from the more important shit.
“So what the heck actually happened on Saturday?” Winry asked over dinner—which was late, because Ed had been working—that night.

Ed did not drop his fork, although it was a close thing. Ling stared at him intently, but the flash of fear across his expression made it obvious that it wasn’t because Ed was such a klutz. Lan Fan gave both of them a look.

“Yeah,” she said. “Everybody’s been acting super weird.”

“Wait,” Winry said. “How have I been acting weird?”

“Well, I haven’t really seen you,” Lan Fan said, “and now you’re obsessed with finding out what happened. Which is weird.”

“Okay,” Winry said. “That’s fair. How are you feeling, by the way?”

Lan Fan shrugged. “Better. Thought I was frigging dying, so anything’s an improvement.”

Ling flung an arm around her shoulders and kissed her temple. “No dying on my watch,” he said, stroking her hair a little.

“Get a room,” Winry said, although the delight in her voice gave her away. “Come on, you guys were so messed up. Ed, you had eyeliner all over your face. Did you get some action, or what?”

Ed had been playing with his water glass rather than drinking from it, because he’d known for a fact that she would come out with something like that while he was taking a sip if he tried to consume anything.

He choked on his own spit anyway, and she had to pound him on the back.

“Ah, yes,” Ling said—was the haste of it perceptible to anybody else, or was Ed just projecting now? “Ed was probably macking on every girl he could get his hands on while we had our backs turned, wasn’t he?”

There was a long, long, long pause.

“Oh, crap,” Winry said. She was looking at Ed; he could feel it. He was, however, looking at his water even more intently than she was looking at him. “Um—”

“Yup,” Ed said, raising his gaze slowly until he found Ling’s. “Mackin’ on girls all night long. It’s what I do. If I had a dollar for every girl, I could pay my tuition in cash.”

Ling blinked. There was another pause, nearly as long and nearly as oppressive as its predecessor.

“Am I missing something?” Ling asked.

“Yeah,” Ed said, pushing his chair back and picking up his tray. “Dessert.”

Not now. Not tonight. Another time, when it had stopped hurting. If it ever did.

Ling wasn’t in any fucking position to start to pry.
If nothing else, it seemed like Ling had chalked up the awkwardness at dinner mostly to the portion of it that he’d brought to the table—literally, that was—and the vibe when he and Ed got settled that night wasn’t especially bad. Everything was a little bit... off... now, but Ed figured that was about what you could expect when you were stuck keeping somebody’s shitty-ass secret, and they knew that you resented every second of it.

When the silence was starting to make his skin crawl, though, he turned—in something like desperation—to his old friend Casanova.

It looked like the blog had mostly been pretty quiet this weekend. Someone had asked What were you for Halloween?, and Casanova had answered A functional adult. As a prop I brought a daily planner where I’d checked off a doctor’s appointment, an oil change for my car, and a trip to the grocery store all in the same day, which was way too relatable altogether.

Ed stared at the Tap That button for a long series of seconds, like it might change its tune under scrutiny. Then he clicked it. Then he sat very still and listened to himself breathe for another minute before he clicked into the text box and held his fingers over the keys.

It wasn’t like this was a big deal. It wasn’t like there was anything to lose. He was asking an anonymous question of a total stranger on the internet, and Casanova would probably just ignore it, and... And that was fine. Hopefully it would help a little just to vent it out. That was most of the reason he was here; he felt like he had to tell someone, and it had to be someone who wasn’t involved and didn’t know any of the affected parties, or he was betraying somebody. This was, in a weird, modern sort of way, the best possible solution to the problem even if Casanova deleted the message the second that he saw it.

So it was fine.

Ed typed in, sorry, this is a stupid question, but you give good advice and i need some of that right about now. my dorm roommate cheated on his gf at a party -- nothing with pants off or anything but he made out with this random chick for i don’t even know how long -- and he feels shitty about it and he asked me not to tell her... but she’s my friend too and i have no idea what’s the right thing here and it’s super fucked up. what would you do? He reread it. Perfect: too rambling to sound contrived, but carefully arranged and articulated to convey all of the necessary information while still sounding half-exasperated and half-overwhelmed.

You had to be real specific with this anonymous internet stuff; someone might judge your unspecific avatar from a distance, and you’d never know, and then where would you be?

That was probably proof in and of itself that he needed to stay away from the internet, or at least away from the parts of it that didn’t exclusively host science videos. And even in those little sanctuaries, he’d only made the mistake of forging into the comments section once or twice before he learned his lesson.

He tried to take a deep breath very quietly, so that Ling wouldn’t know anything weird was going on—not that Ling would have any reason to assume it wasn’t just midterm stress, but Ed had grown up with Winry and Al, both of whom were slightly evil and slightly psychic—and hit the button to send the message.

There. Done. Finished. If nothing came of it, nothing came of it, and that was fine, because he felt a little better just having said something, even if it was to a faceless sex god entity on the web.
Now he could set that aside and never think about it ever again.

Or at least not until Apparently-Not-Caroline walked into the store precisely halfway through his shift on Tuesday afternoon.

He had, per habit, looked up abruptly when someone stepped through the door, and evidently people stocking overpriced juices in the refrigerator were noteworthy if their heads snapped up at your entrance, because she was looking back. They both froze. He had a juice in his hand. It was pretty frigging cold, which he supposed was a point of recommendation for their bigger refrigerator in the back.

He was sure of one thing and one thing only: he was going to murder Ling in cold blood for putting him in situations this awkward on the regular.

“Hi,” he said, because somebody had to say something, or they were going to stay here in this weird fucking tableau—her unmoving next to the Red Bull display; him kneeling in front of the fridge with his juice-bearing arm stretched out—for the rest of time.

“Hi,” she said.

Silence.

Fucking Ling.

Ed had to fix this. Someone did. He shoved the juice in next to all the other ones that were approximately the same color and gaudy label design, and then he closed the fridge door, and then he grabbed onto the handle to start levering himself back up to his feet. “Looking for—anything in particular?”

“Um,” Not-Caroline said, “no. Thanks. Just hadn’t… tried this place yet.”

It was starting to seem like half of campus hadn’t tried this place yet, and all of them were making the time while Ed happened to be on duty. Could he get some sort of advertisement bonus for that? Maybe he was the reason. Or, more specifically, maybe his shitty-ass luck was, but if he was unlucky enough times, business was going to be great.

Thank fuck for his retail voice; at least it gave him something to fall back on without even thinking. “Okay,” he said. “Let me know if you need help finding anything.”

“Thanks,” she said again.

“Sure,” he said.

He couldn’t just stand there next to a mostly-empty box of juices, so he bent double to pick it up again and carried it to one of the empty registers. Lunch rush always decimated this place, but then it was dead until five, so the guy behind the sandwich counter was just loitering there and playing with a spatula. He wasn’t even flipping it or twirling it or anything that might entice Not-Caroline to request one and give him something to do; what an amateur.

In the end, she wandered really slowly by all of their cold selections and bought a salad and a parfait.
Ed rung her up, and she paid with meal points off of her card.

Her name was Sara Kasson. She was both significantly smilier and significantly blonder in her ID photo than she was right now.

“Thanks,” he said. “Come again.”

“Yeah,” she said, in a tone that did not exactly scream positivity or promise repeat business. “Thank you.”

She walked out without looking back, which was probably more dignity than he could have mustered.

Ed picked up the box of juices again and carried it off to the back. Might as well put everything away while he had the chance; Ling was a dead man, and Ed was going to jail.

On the upside, Spatula Guy kind of inadvertently saved Ed’s life, or at least his blood pressure, by tipping him off that there was a smaller, secondary gym space tacked onto the back of the main one. When Ed went and checked it out, he found—unbelievably—a back corner spot nobody bothered with where they’d shoved a rowing machine that was angled perfectly to cooperate with his knee. Some charitable soul had even left an adjustable music stand right by the end of it, which meant he could prop a textbook or his notes up on top and just… fake-row for fucking ever. As long as he wanted. Until the sweat had soaked his hair and drenched his back and leached all the nasty thoughts out of him, because he was just too tired to drag them around behind him anymore.

Being able to study at the same time was a godsend of an unprecedented caliber—which did, unfortunately, mean that he’d probably used up every last iota of his allotted luck allowance for the next four years or so; but in the short term, it also gave him an extremely reasonable excuse to hole up there and conveniently avoid the awkward silences with Ling.

The rhythm was soothing, and wearing himself out felt fucking good. Made getting to sleep a hell of a lot easier, too.

He had that. And Al was stable and at home; and Winry would always have his back; and… and it wasn’t so bad, was it? All of it together wasn’t so bad.

If it was just too damn quiet walking back to the dorms by himself at night—

If it was just too damn quiet every time he was alone because there wasn’t anybody, not because it was a choice—

Well.

That was just a sign that he needed more powerful headphones. Christmas wasn’t too far off.

Somehow, some way, he made it through the midterm—probably the same way he made it through
everything: by putting his head down and pushing until the barriers gave. You never knew how malleable the wall really was until you beat your head against it for a while, and sometimes the bricks crumbled before you were even bleeding. Sometimes you just had to fucking try.

He didn’t look over at Roy for the duration of the exam. The prickling feeling was all in his head anyway; he was sure of it. If he glanced up towards the table at the front—at which point he’d risk looking like he was trying to sneak a peek at someone else’s answers anyway—there was zero chance in the stupid universe that Roy would be gazing over at him, chin propped up on one hand, eyes all soft and warm and wistful.


When he finished, he bit back the urge to leap out of his chair, crumple the papers together, hurl them at whatever TA he caught sight of first, and make a break for the door. That was the Ed Strategy, and right about now he needed to think more like Al. He would not, under torture or pain of death, have admitted as much, but the Al Strategy usually held up better over time.

Which was why instead of fleeing the premises in a flurry of abandoned notes, he meticulously checked all of his answers over and over again until class time ran out.

Then he stood up, calmly, and shepherded his papers into as neat a pile as he could, and toted them to the front of the lecture hall with all of the other saps.

Roy was snatching packets out of students’ hands and stapling them with such ruthless efficiency that you sort of had to wonder what paperwork had ever done to him. As the line shuffled forward and spat Ed out at the front, he held his exam out by the furthest corner in the hopes of avoiding getting stapled through the palm. He preferred his crucifixions figurative, and the symbolism waiting in that one was just too heavy-handed altogether.

Roy favored him with a very, very neutral smile.

“Thank you,” the bastard said, tugging the test out of his grip; and then there was a moment—

There was a moment as he lowered his head to the task of stapling where he almost looked—

Something. Maybe sad.

Maybe just sick of waiting for other people to finish taking a test.

Maybe just dreading the prospect of having to grade them all.

Maybe it was a trick of the light.

“Thanks,” Ed said, and he turned, carefully so his heel wouldn’t fuck him over, and walked out into the afternoon sun.

It would have been faster—or at least more direct—to acquire Friday’s requested Emergency Latte from Roy’s usual haunt, but Ed wasn’t about to tempt fate with a strip of juicy bacon like that. If anybody was going to be getting bacon, he wanted it for himself.

Despite the inefficient coffee detour, he still made pretty good time over to the little library where
Winry worked. She was at the front desk, frowning intently at her phone, when he started to walk in, realized that both of his hands were laden with sloshing cups of scalding liquid, and then carefully backed in through the door. At least his ass was good for something.

“Oh, hey!” Winry said. “Oh, my God, you’re the best.”

He set her latte down next to a pile of books she appeared to have been marking with one of those little change-the-date stamps for some arcane archival reason. “You said it was a matter of life or death, so here I am.” He gestured to the phone. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Just that I asked some guy in class if I could borrow a pen when mine died on me, and now he thinks I owe him nudes.”

Ed stared at her.

She blinked back.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he said. “Sorry.”

She shrugged, and then she sipped her latte, and then she sighed happily and sank back into her chair for a second. “It’s fine. Just… sometimes men are so… jeez. Can I say it?”

He braced himself. “Yeah, go ahead.”

She punctuated it with some nice, emphatic head-shaking, and a little bit of raising her fist towards the heavens, which was a nice touch. “Men are stupid, and—it would just be so much easier to be gay.”

Ed swirled his coffee, let his breath out, and raised his eyebrows. “You done?”


“Sure thing,” he said.

She eyed him. “Are you okay?”

He tried to keep his face completely blank while his adrenal glands instantly went on high alert. “Me? Yeah. Of course. Why?”

“I dunno,” she said. “You’ve just been sort of… well, ‘weird’ doesn’t help; you’re always weird. But you’ve been sort of… quiet… ever since that stupid party. Not, like, ‘read me the phone book; you haven’t spoken in years’ quiet—just—kind of… off. I guess. Did something happen?”

Shit. Shit.

The only advantage here was that two things had happened that had unsettled Ed enough to quarantine him in his own brain this week—which was a fancier way of saying what she’d said already. And if he offered her the safer one, he’d put her off the scent of the other, because she’d naturally assume that that was the only thing eating him from the inside.

“Um,” he said. He glanced around the library foyer, but apparently they staffed this place about as well as the café of an average Friday afternoon, so there weren’t any visible eavesdroppers. “You know… Roy?”

“Your foxy-but-not-in-a-furry-way TA?” Winry asked.
“Please never say that again,” Ed said. “Yes.”

“How could I possibly forget?” Winry asked. Her eyes widened as the gears turned. “Wait—was he at that party?”

“Yes,” Ed said. “As it turned out. And—” Fuck. He doodled a molecular structure on the countertop with his fingertip, watching his progress as intently as he could so that he wouldn’t have to look at her. His cheeks caught fire all the same. “We, uh—um.”

“You banged your TA?” Winry asked—loud enough, of course, to shake the pillars of heaven, rouse the denizens of hell, and call forth from their graves dozens of the dead who hadn’t yet made it one way or the other.

“No,” Ed said, waving his hands helplessly and trying to look at every possible part of the room at once to make sure nobody was listening. “We just—you know. Made out for a hot minute.”

“Sure would’ve been a hot minute,” Winry said. “Jeez, Ed, why the hell didn’t you say anything? I can’t believe you made out with the foxy TA and didn’t even tell me, you tart.”

“What flavor?” Ed asked.

“What?” Winry said.

Ed gestured indistinctly. It was sort of supposed to represent a pastry shelf or… something. “What flavor of tart am I?”

Winry rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on. Something sour, obviously. Uh, boysenberry—get it? Because you’re into boys. So—what? When are you guys going out?”

At least she was now speaking at volumes that wouldn’t threaten the structural integrity of the building.

“That’s the thing,” Ed said. “We’re not going anywhere.”

She leaned forward, folding her arms on the countertop to get a fraction closer to him with her eagle-eye stare. “You mean literally, or metaphorically?”

“Both,” Ed said. “We can’t—I mean—it wouldn’t be… we couldn’t really do anything while he’s my TA, anyway.”

“So?” Winry said. “There’s only a couple weeks left in the semester. You could just… rain check.”

“You think a guy like that,” Ed said, “is going to wait until the end of the semester for a guy like me?”

Winry was looking at him like he was a grade-A idiot. Which didn’t really compute, but at least his GPA was still intact. “Flipping duh, Ed.”

“It’s not like we made some kind of secret love pact,” Ed said, endeavoring very hard not to find the idea ever so slightly appealing in the deepest, darkest, most secretly-romantic part of his twisted little heart. “We played tonsil hockey at a party while we were both kind of drunk, and then he said it’d have to be kept pretty quiet, and I went and had a nice, grownup conversation with him to tell him that I didn’t want that. The end.”

Winry made a face—or, rather, contorted her existing one into an expression that combined some of
the best and some of the worst parts of a wince. “Well—I mean, other than that—you do really like him, don’t you?”

“I dunno,” Ed said. It was easier than lying outright. *I lie in bed and stare at the ceiling and think about his face a lot* sounded really, really dumb in his head; he could only imagine how stupid it would sound out loud. “In the long run—” He pointed to his leg. “—I don’t figure he’d really like me.”

“You shut your mouth,” Winry said. “You know that’s not—”

“He has no idea who I am,” Ed said. “And he’s not willing to put much on the table, so—fine. Fuck that. Moving on.”

Wirny was making another face. This one had a subtle hint of reprimandy stuff in it. He was pretty sure she’d picked that up from Al. “You know,” she said, “nobody’s perfect. But sometimes you have to go out on a limb and try something you know’s not perfect to find out if it is, nonetheless, really great for you.”

“That’s pretty rich,” Ed said, “coming from someone who just rejected a dashing gentleman suitor on the sole grounds that he thinks that a temporary loan of a writing utensil qualifies him for s—” The book hit him square in the center of the chest, and he fumbled to catch it. “Ow! Hey! That’s university property!”

“I’m aware,” Winry said, hefting another on the open palm of her hand. “You’re lucky the university didn’t supply me with any encyclopedias.”

Gingerly, Ed slid the book back across the counter. “I was being sarcastic, obviously. I’m on your side.”

“I know,” Winry said, following it up with a deep sigh. “It just gets my goat sometimes that we’re both blonde and gorgeous and smart and single. Like, what gives?”

“What about the goat?” Ed asked. “We could get you a goat. It’d really help with that recycling bin shortage thing they’re having in your dorm.”

“I don’t want a goat,” Winry said. “Thanks.” Her phone buzzed—and Ed’s did, too, in his pocket, so he already had his suspicions about what she was about to say. “Ling and Lan Fan want to go to dinner tonight. Don’t they have any other friends?”

“They talk about other friends,” Ed said, “and supposedly eat with them, but I’ve never actually seen any.”

“Hashtag cryptids,” Winry said calmly, scrolling aimlessly up and down the group message with her fingertip.

“What about you?” Ed asked.

“It’s not like we have any other friends,” Winry said.

“True,” Ed said. “Hey, you want some protein bars from work?”

Winry wrinkled her nose as he dumped a selection on the counter next to her book-weapons. “Are they any good?”

“No,” Ed said. “But they were free, because they were about to go past their supposed expiration
date, and we’re not legally allowed to sell them after that.”

Winry prodded one with a fingertip. “How can leather and dried fruit expire?”

“You got me,” Ed said.

Winry picked up a specimen and squinted at the nutrition information. “Do they attract men who don’t suck?”

“Or do suck,” Ed said, “but in a good way?”

Winry grinned. “Doesn’t say so, but maybe it’s worth a try.”

“At this point,” Ed said. “Anything is.”

That was bullshit. There were still, like, five things he definitely wouldn’t do to get some. Maybe even six.

Since Winry’s shift at the library didn’t end until seven, Ling had suggested meeting up at seven fifteen, which left Ed with plenty of time to finish his coffee, hit the gym, circle back to the dorm, ditch his backpack, shower, and cuddle up with his computer for a while.

As harrowing as showers were when one of your feet couldn’t get traction on tile, the last one was the most dangerous. It gave him time to open up a browser—private, still; he couldn’t kick that habit, which he might be able to blame on the traction-challenged foot if he was creative enough—and check to see if Casanova had answered yet.

Maybe yet was a stupid word to use. Casanova probably got a thousand messages a day, and ninety percent of them were probably from beautiful people sending him photos of themselves in the hopes of getting a date. Ed’s little crybaby note didn’t stand a chance next to nine hundred gorgeous strangers’ propositions a—

His message was right at the top when the blog loaded—mere inches underneath that stupid fancy photo of the teacup. It was a good thing they didn’t have cups like that in any of the cafés where Ed spent time; just looking at it made him sort of… well, horny was a stretch, thank fucking Christ, but it definitely piqued his interest all on its own.

Funny, too, how disconnected the words felt from him, even just a few days later, when they were spelled out starkly in pixels on the page. It didn’t seem like him anymore; he kept glancing back to words he’d picked and wondering if he’d really written this at all.

It was distinctly possible that he’d just solved part of the mystery of why trolling was fast becoming the new national pastime. If it didn’t feel like you, who gave a shit what you spewed out at some other faceless asshole on the web?

He scrolled down before he could fall so deep into that philosophical quandary that he’d never see the surface again.

First off, sorry for the late reply, Casanova had written back. I’ve been a bit distracted recently. Woe is me, etc. etc. Lots of work and very little play, and feeling like I’m dull makes me an
abysmally whiny blogger, so I’ve been trying to abstain.

I wanted to get to this one, though. I meant to earlier, but the world conspired; I hope you haven’t done anything drastic in the meantime, my friend, and that I might still be able to be of some help to you.

Secondly: there’s no such thing as a stupid question. I suspect that asking a rational question repeatedly for long enough will make the words start to sound like nonsense, and there is such a thing as a frustrating question, but that’s neither here nor there. Your question is not stupid – nor are your feelings, nor is your predicament.

I’ve given this some thought, and I can’t find you an easy way out, but here are my suggestions:

Because you have to share a dorm room with this individual – which... well, sorry – for, presumably, at least another term, it’s a bit dangerous to you personally to pick a fight. I know that sounds a bit selfish. Perhaps it is – life has to be, sometimes. If you would prefer not to risk waking up with an entire tube of toothpaste emptied on your face at some unexpected point during the school year, you do need to play your cards a bit more carefully than I might recommend otherwise.

To that end: I get the sense that you have already picked a side. It’s the side I would be on. If it wasn’t for the dorm situation and for the apparent repentance from the guilty party – which I’m not sure I believe, but I know that the constraints of the message box didn’t allow you to elaborate on whether it seems sincere – this would be very cut and dry, and I’d Photoshop you a white knight seal to wear on your tabard when you went over to the poor girlfriend and spilled the sordid beans.

Pity we don’t live in a perfect world. Although it’s also probably a good thing, since I’m still quite an amateur with Photoshop, and I can’t afford to lose the three hours I would have spent making you an escutcheon.

Ergo, my REALISTIC suggestion:

Give him an ultimatum. Tell him that he has to confess to her within a time limit, and that if he doesn’t, you will.

It leaves the power of how to present it in his hands, but it makes it clear you’re not going to stand for this behavior, and the right thing is going to get done in the end – one way or another. If he doesn’t hold up his end of the deal, however, you do have to follow through, come hell or toothpaste-face.

And if you later find out from her that he fabricated some grossly inaccurate alibi-story to cover his ass, I’m afraid it is your duty to step in. It’s possible he can salvage the relationship if he treats her with unerring respect from here on out: hold him to it.

I can’t say I envy you, dear reader, but you will be able to sleep at night knowing that you did the right thing. Hopefully you will also be able to sleep at night without fear of minty-fresh reprisal. Best of luck!

Love,

Casanova

There was something at once satisfying and rather sobering about having his own inclinations vindicated so damn distinctly. On the one hand, fuck yes, he wasn’t overreacting, and he wasn’t being a martyr, and he wasn’t being a sap—he had fucking Casanova cheering him on, after all.
On the other, this set it into stone, and stone was heavy, and Ed had hauled enough inevitable things behind him in his life that he didn’t fancy dragging another one.

Nothing to do but set his shoulders and get it over with, though. There never was.

And he was not—was not—going to think about that parting salutation. Casanova was a wisp of internet whimsy. That was it.

“Back up a second,” Ling said over the culinary marvel that was the dining commons’s chicken alfredo ‘special’. Ed was pretty sure it was chicken, anyway. He was positive it was something intended to be edible, at least. “If you’re a genius in biorobotics, and everyone in your entire family has been a genius in biorobotics, why are you…”

“Majoring in art history?” Winry asked. She smiled, broadly and without a glimmer of joy. “For the people, of course. My classmates especially.”

“How did that guy even get your number, anyway?” Ed asked.

“Group project,” Winry said.

“Oh, fuck,” Ed said.

“My thoughts exactly,” Winry said. She turned a less-icy version of her smile on Ling again. “Nah, just—for me, this is where the challenge is. This stuff is new knowledge. And… I mean, you know—my parents used to talk about the stuff that they’d do ‘someday’ to broaden their horizons, but… they never did. They never got the chance. And with everything that happened to Al, it just—it felt like that was my wakeup call. You have to do what feels right with the opportunities that you have. And if you’re lucky, you’ll keep getting more chances, but—why not now? Why not today?”

Ling gave Lan Fan an adoring look. She rolled her eyes. Ed’s stomach flipped, and he wasn’t sure he could blame it entirely on the ‘chicken’.

“Wait,” Lan Fan said. “What happened to Al?”

There was a very lengthy, very pregnant pause. Ed could feel Winry turning extremely slowly to level an incinerating gaze on him. He attempted to become fascinated by the prospect of shredding a noodle with his fork.

He couldn’t escape her voice, though. “You didn’t tell them about Al?”

“Of course I told him about Al,” Ed said, mostly to the noodle. He owed it an apology. “I just didn’t… tell them every single gory detail.”

“Oh,” Winry said, relaxing enough that he could actually feel it. “Okay. So they know the general story, and why we didn’t come as freshmen in the first place, and why he’s not here yet, and how we have to save up for a place ’cause the dorms would kill him, and about how I invented hospital chic.”

There was an intensely awkward silence.

“I mean,” Ed said, “I told them Al… exists. And… is my brother. And… stuff.”
“Oh, my God,” Winry said.

Ed made a serious attempt to sink far enough into his chair that he would meld with the plastic and disappear. “I didn’t want to freak anybody out.”

“Oh, my God,” Winry said, even louder this time. She sat up straight, cleared her throat, tossed her ponytail over her shoulder, and flattened her hands on the tabletop.

Ling and Lan Fan subtly but unmistakably started to lean back.

“Al is Ed’s brother,” Winry said.

“We got that part,” Ling said, forcing a grin.

“He contracted a practically unprecedented type of cancer when he was twelve,” Winry said, and the grin vanished in favor of abject horror, and this was why Ed didn’t go around hurling this shit out in front of ordinary people all the goddamn time, and— “It was metastasizing mostly in his lungs. Ed wasn’t a match to donate one, and with their dad MIA—” Good of Winry to cram his deepest failure and his greatest frustration into a single sentence; at least that got it over with. “—it wasn’t clear whether he could consent even if he had been, so—that was awful. But they found a donor in the nick of time, so he got the transplant, but now he’s on a bunch of immunosuppressants and all these other medications, and he’s only just recently been doing well enough to be regularly left on his own.”

There was another excruciatingly long pause.

“See?” Ed said. “Now they’re all caught up.” He set his fork down on his plate and nudged it forward, since his appetite had disappeared without a trace at some point within the last few minutes anyway. If it didn’t turn up again sometime soon, he’d have to print some Missing: Ravenousness posters or something. “So that’s that.”

Lan Fan tamped down what looked like a combination of horror and concern and then leaned forward and raised an eyebrow at him. “Do you have any other secrets you want to share with the class?”

It felt, for a long second, like…

Well, not so much like his heart had stopped as that it had sped up so much, so quickly, that the individual beats had blurred into an ongoing, ungodly hum; and that he was falling, swiftly, through a huge white void, and no one would have heard it if he’d screamed.

She knew. How did she fucking know? Sure, Ling had been acting kind of weird, but Ling was always kind of weird; surely being a little off-center from his standard weird wasn’t enough to clue her in to something as colossal as this—

Did she hate him? He should have told her the goddamn instant that it happened, shouldn’t he? He should have asked her to meet up with him somewhere Ling wasn’t and laid it out as gently as he could, and—

And then he realized—

She meant the gay thing.

She was trying to give him a segue to come out to Ling, if he wanted it, which was a weird and pressure-y and backwards way to do it, but probably the intentions were good.
“Hell, no,” he said. “It’s not my fault if the class doesn’t do their homework. It’s right there.”

“What?” Ling said.

“Ah,” Lan Fan said. She picked up her fork and nibbled on the ends of the tines for some reason. Maybe her appetite was jacked up, too. Probably it was the ‘chicken’. There was a lawsuit here. “Fair enough.” She then raised her fork like a baton. “Who wants dessert?”

“Me!” Ling said.

Miraculously, Ed was a little bit hungry again.

“You guys are really cool,” Lan Fan said as they moseyed on out. Ed’s hand were sticky because his frozen yogurt had melted and seeped through the cone. In the interest of not arguing with what she’d just said, he elected not to mention that particular detail of his existence. “I mean—not like I didn’t know that until now, just… felt like it should be said.”

“Thanks,” Winry said brightly. “You guys are cool, too. Maybe we can cross-pollinate our friend networks sometime, y’know?”

“‘Networks’,” Ed muttered, trying not to snicker, and Winry elbowed him unmercifully, but it didn’t seem like anyone else had heard.

“I’ll see when the guys are free,” Ling said.

Ed elbowed Winry back, although much more gently, and with a completely different message. There were some perks to having been best friends since the dawn of time, and the subtleties afforded to you by body language after a critical mass of years were one of them. “I can walk back with you if you want.”

“That’s okay,” Winry said. “Lan Fan’s dorm is just around the corner, so we’re going to go back together.”

“Perfect!” Ling said. He curled an arm around Lan Fan’s shoulders and drew her in to kiss her forehead. “G’night, Murder Kitten.”

That was either the best or the worst pet-name—almost literally a pet-name, come to think of it—that Ed had ever heard, but he didn’t get much time to revel in it, because then the farewell-makeout began in earnest.

Ed had always found it agonizingly awkward when couples kissed in front of their non-couple friends, so he looked determinedly across the street while Ling and Lan Fan said their extra goodbyes.

He couldn’t let himself think about it too much—about the fact that Ling had been doing the same damn thing with that poor Sara girl, most of the way to wasted and utterly unrepentant at the time. He couldn’t think about the fact that Lan Fan had just gone on thinking that she was the one and only, and she could trust him, and he’d never fucking burn and betray and disrespect her like that. It stung. It stung on her behalf, and the pressure of holding it in kept trying to stop up his throat.
“When are you working next?” he asked Winry.

“Sunday,” she said. “I didn’t even know they were open on Sunday. Maybe they’re not, and they’re messing with me as punishment for talking to you while I was supposed to be shelving the other day.”

“On the list of heinous crimes,” Ed said, “that’s right up there with double-homicide.”

“I know,” Winry said. She snuck a glance over at their amorous amigos, so maybe it wasn’t just Ed with the whole *is it more awkward to look or to make a point of not-looking* thing. Fortunately, Ling’s and Lan Fan’s mouths had not become permanently joined in the interim. “You ready?” Winry asked Lan Fan.

“Yup,” Lan Fan said, and then they were off, and…

And despite the fact that Winry could, with appropriate motivation, kill a man with a pebble and a bit of string, and even more despite the fact that Lan Fan had offhandedly mentioned once that she was a double black belt in jiu jutsu, Ed’s chest did a funny squeezing sort of thing as they started to walk away. Spending time with Winry had made him realize that it wasn’t about capability for self-defense, and it wasn’t about awareness of surroundings—it wasn’t about anything external. If something happened to a girl out walking alone, no matter what the circumstances were, the first thing the authorities would ask was how it could have been her fault. If someone had jumped him on his way back to the dorm, the first thing the police would have asked him for was a description of the assailant. If someone had jumped Winry, the first thing the police would have asked for was a description of her outfit, because if her top was even a little bit revealing, that probably meant that she’d *wanted* to get mugged, right?

The whole thing scared him and pissed him off about in equal quantities, which granted Ling a merciful two minutes of ambulatory silence on their own walk back before Ed remembered what he had to do.

“Hey,” he said. “You have to tell her.”

“Tell her what?” Ling asked lightly.

“Tell her what?” Ling asked lightly.

Ed just… waited, projecting the most frigid demeanor he was capable of.

Ling deflated a little bit. “Isn’t it—but isn’t it better to leave well enough alone?” he asked. “It’ll never happen again. Nothing like that will ever happen again. I learned my lesson, and I feel like the worst person on Earth—well, except for my Economics professor; he’s a *bad* man—and it… it’s done and over with, and it’s taught me to be so much more grateful for what I have, and it wasn’t nearly as sleazy as it could have been, and… and in that way, it’s almost a good thing; I won’t eve—”

“You have to tell her,” Ed said, staring at the sidewalk, clenching his hands into fists in his pockets, and ironing the quaver out of his voice by force; “or I will.”

It wasn’t that Ed was afraid of confrontation—far fucking from it; sometimes the only way to get your point across to someone was to stand directly in front of them and shout it in their face, and he’d made his peace with that.

But he didn’t exactly thrive on confrontations with his *friends*. People who cared about you—whether it had just sort of happened on accident because you’d been thrown together in the roommate lottery or what—were different, and getting in *their* faces was a whole different story.
He was trying to keep reminding himself that it wasn’t his fault that they were in this spot—it was Ling’s, and Ling had to deal with the consequences, even if the ripple effect drowned Ed, too. Ling was the one who had forced Ed to pick between his secret and Lan Fan’s dignity. Ling was the one who had landed them in the middle of this remarkably lousy little conversation.

“Okay,” Ling said after a small eternity nearly—but not quite—comparable to some of the ones that Ed had endured talking to doctors about options for Al. “I think—no, I know—that you’re right. I know that’s the right thing.” He managed about a quarter of a nervous laugh. “That’s what’s so damn scary about it.” A deep breath, but Ed was too preoccupied—trying to squint at the uneven sidewalk in the dark and unclench his fists by force at the same time—to take a glance at his expression. “I’ll do it tomorrow,” Ling said, and Ed sort of had to look up at that. Predictably, he almost tripped. “I’ll…” He reached out and batted at Ed’s arm with what was either excitement or desperation. Ed was more familiar with the latter, honestly. “I’ll invite her over here, but first I’ll use that tragic kitchenette on the ground floor—I’ll make dinner, and then we can eat it, and I’ll get something for dessert, and then I’ll tell her, and then…”

Ed blinked. Ling’s face had gone… funny. Weird. The warped excitement had shifted into something like reluctance. Maybe there was something he didn’t want to say.

Oh. That solved the mystery rather succinctly.

“Makeup sex?” Ed asked.

“Well,” Ling said. “One can only hope.”

“Right,” Ed said. Another mystery blossomed in his brain, so he hit it with the pruning shears. “So… you… need me to stay out of the room tomorrow night. Possibly all night.”

It took him a second to register that Ling had stopped walking. By the time Ed had halted his stride, and his momentum-susceptible left leg had gotten the memo, and he’d wheeled around, Ling was down on both knees on the pavement, covering his face with both hands and arching his back to direct a low wailing noise towards the heavens.

“I’m the worst friend ever!” he said. “After everything you’ve done for me—to impose on you like this—” He parted his fingers enough to peek through them. His bottom lip was wobbling.

Ed had no fucking clue how to handle this combination of stimuli. His brain had short-circuited—so far he was just sort of standing there staring.

“I suppose you could—come back later on?” Ling was saying. “How about if… if something goes wrong, or if she—” Ling’s voice caught, and he fake-coughed into the back of his hand to push through it. “If she—leaves, or—or if no one’s pants need to be repossessed and jettisoned off the side of the bed, then… I’ll text you and let you know it’s safe.”

“Okay,” Ed said. “It’s not that big a deal.”

Ling was pulling at his hair. His own hair, fortunately, or this would’ve gone south real fast. “The fact that you would say that is an even surer sign of your magnanimity—I’m so unworthy to call myself y—”

“It’s really okay,” Ed said. He meant the friend thing, not the Lan Fan thing; he hoped that was obvious. The last thing he wanted to do was absolve somebody of a crime he wasn’t even the victim of; that was taking shittiness to a whole new level. “You can… get up if you want. People are
“As well they should!” Ling said. Some of the luxuries of self-confidence blew Ed’s mind sometimes: there were enough valid reasons for people to stare at him that he utterly despised creating more on purpose. He honestly couldn’t imagine not really caring why people were paying attention to him at any given time. “They should heed this cautionary tale of a—” Ed held a hand out to him. “Yeah, okay,” Ling said, taking it to pull himself upright. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Ed said. “Like… really… don’t.”

“Gotcha,” Ling said.

Apparently he didn’t gotcha—it completely—as they were settling down to sleep that night, he rolled onto his side and stared until Ed suppressed a shudder, did not suppress a sigh, and said “What?”

“Ed,” Ling said, “be truthful with me. Does this—what happened. I don’t even… I don’t even know why it happened; it wasn’t ever my intention, and if I’d been… I’d never do something like that. I wouldn’t. I love Lan Fan. I think she’s the single most wonderful person in all six billion in the world—no offense—and the last thing I’d ever want to do is hurt her, but…”


Ling flopped onto his back and made a mournful noise. “It’s all a little… fuzzy. I know I was talking to that girl in the kitchen—I complimented her Ariel costume, and then I started singing ‘Under the Sea’ to her, so she started singing it with me, and then we were laughing, and she started trying to fix my hair. Someone told us to get a room, I think? And somebody pushed us into that closet there, and then shut the door, and… and somehow it seemed like a good idea to…”

Ed felt sick. And it wasn’t even his right to feel sick; it wasn’t even his problem to feel sick about.

Then again, maybe it was the ‘chicken’ alfredo.

“Does that make me a bad person?” Ling asked. “Does it—”

“No,” Ed said.

He did not say But you’re not as good a person as I thought you were. Ed didn’t exactly have a reliable stockpile of universe knowledge to draw from, but he did know a thing or two about guilt. And he knew that hearing someone else articulate the thing that you’d been thinking didn’t help at all—it didn’t make you feel more motivated to mend the burnt bridges and broken fences; it didn’t clear up any uncertainties in your mind and set you back onto a path of resolution and righteousness. You already knew the worst of what someone could say to you. You’d already said it to yourself a thousand times. Hearing it again just made you bottom out a little deeper, and then it was even harder to drag yourself back up.

“But you have to fix this,” he said. “Or at least you have to try. She trusted you, and you violated that. The burden of proof’s on you to convince her that you’re worthy of it a second time. And you have to accept whatever she says, and give her whatever she needs—whether that’s more time to think about it or breaking up or what. You didn’t respect her then. You sure as hell had better do it now.”
“Yeah,” Ling said, somewhat faintly. He gazed up at the ceiling for a while before he added, “You’re really good at this whole relationship thing, Ed. How come you’re single?”

Ow. And ow. And ow, fuck.

“A magician never tells,” Ed said.

Ling winced, and then he laughed weakly. “I… deserved that. But—”

“G’night, Ling,” Ed said.

“Okay, okay,” Ling said. “Goodnight.”

Ed closed his eyes. When your heart was beating hard enough, it was almost possible to imagine you that could see your pulse shivering through the blood vessels inside your eyelids.

Probably that was his stupid, overactive imagination talking, but his stupid, overactive imagination had been guilty of worse.

It was, weirdly, almost nice knowing that he had the whole night ahead of him to do whatever the hell he wanted. After his shift finished at the café, he hit the gym for the better part of an hour, and then he circled back by the dorm to collect some supplies to carry him through his intrepid adventure. He’d been considering just pulling an all-nighter and exploring the real city—you never saw the truth of the grit and the darkness until after three—but he was already pretty wiped after work. There were lots of places to hole up and snooze, though. It was yet another one of those times that he had to pause a second to reflect on how damn lucky he was that he was a dude—and a white dude at that. If someone saw him passed out under an overhang somewhere, they’d either call an ambulance or just leave him alone. That was a privilege. Sometimes it shook him a little to remember that.

Ling had apparently purchased half of the contents of the posh grocery store, so it looked like his strategy here was to coax Lan Fan into forgiving him by plying her with food. As Ed was packing, though, he said something about how being hungry made everything worse, so if he could make this a little less-worse by feeding her before dropping the bomb, then that was something like a kindness, even if from another angle it looked a bit like a bribe. At least he was thinking now. If he’d gone to the trouble of doing that last weekend, they wouldn’t be in this fucking mess.

“All right,” Ed said, shouldering his backpack on. “Good luck and godspeed or whatever.”

“You, too,” Ling said. “I’ll text you if the coast is clear, but…”

“But hopefully it won’t be,” Ed said.

“Right,” Ling said.

They looked at each other for a long second.

“I owe you one,” Ling said.

“Maybe two,” Ed said.

“You’re the best,” Ling said.
“Nah,” Ed said.

But he was doing his best. He really was. Surely that had to count for something, somewhere, with someone who mattered.

Ed had been told, in the past—somewhat consistently, actually; on average probably about once a month or so—that he had a tendency to get absorbed in whatever task he’d set in front of himself to the point of opaque obliviousness. The real gift of it was that he didn’t notice when he was doing it, so there wasn’t any way to prevent himself from sliding off of the cliff and tumbling into the Focus Void.

“Hey,” someone said from the ether after he’d been in the library, zeroed in on his textbook and his problem set, for an indeterminable stretch of time. “Ed—Ed, are you okay?”

“Yes,” he said, because that was the only answer regardless of who it was and why they’d asked.

It occurred to him that he should, however, determine the who, and possibly the why, so he shook off the next sequence of numbers he needed, blinked repeatedly, and lifted his gaze from the tabletop region by force of will. It was not unlike surfacing from a dream—slow and hazy and strangely viscous; with little gluey threads stretched across him to try to pin him down—

Roy.

The interrupter was Roy.

Ed’s brain picked that piece of information up, examined it, categorically failed to make any sense of it whatsoever, and put it back down again unprocessed.

“Uh,” he said. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Roy said. He was doing a concerned eyebrows thing. “What are you doing here so late?”

“What are you doing here so late?” Ed asked.

“I asked first,” Roy said.

That was… fair, unfortunately.

“Homework,” Ed said. “Your turn.”

Roy held up a… grocery bag. Which was rather unilluminating until he tilted it far enough for Ed to see that it was full of paper.

“Midterms,” Roy said.

“Oh,” Ed said. “Fun.”

“That’s a word for it,” Roy said. “Not the word I would have chosen, but certainly a word.” He gestured towards the door. Was he sweating, too, from the sheer effort of pretending this was normal? Or did it just not fucking matter to him that they’d kissed in a dark hallway almost exactly one week before, and Ed’s whole stupid heart had tried to hurl itself into his hands? “They’re going
“What?” Ed said. “Libraries—” He bit back can’t close in the nick of time. Obviously they could. Obviously, if they didn’t care about ruining students’ lives, they could do whatever the hell they wanted. “—shouldn’t… I was gonna go find a couch and pass out.”

It looked like the Focus Void fog had clung to his brain a little bit. He hadn’t meant to say that. There was something—

There was also just something about Roy’s stupid face. There was something about Roy’s stupid face that made Ed want to tell him the truth, even when the truth sounded idiotic.

Roy’s stupid face was currently blinking in what appeared to be surprise. “You were… planning to sleep here?”

“My roommate needed some alone time with his girlfriend,” Ed said. “Is it—sexiled? Is that what they call it? Whatever, anyway—I mean, it’s not like it’s a big deal; I was just gonna shower at the gym and then find a back corner somewhere in here, and…” He put an elbow on his book and leaned his head on it. “Do they still kick you out if you’re just… there, not bothering anybody?”

“Probably,” Roy said. He paused. “It’s a bit unsettling that you have it planned out so well.”

Ed didn’t say Yeah, you pick up a couple things when you’re homeless, because that was not the start of a conversation that most people liked to have.

“Well, y’know,” he said instead, since that was vaguely confirmatory but still functionally meaningless. He managed to tear his eyes away from Roy’s stupid face—which was phasing through several different shades of muted combinations of interest and amusement and worry—to glance at the clock up on the wall. “Oh, shit, since when is it nine?”

“It isn’t just yet,” Roy said. The bastard. “Have you eaten?”

“Yeah,” Ed said, because two people could play at this damn game. “Once or twice.”

Roy wrinkled his nose—which should, by all rights, have been immensely unflattering, but wasn’t. “Allow me to rephrase that: have you eaten dinner yet, tonight?”

“No,” Ed said. “I’ve been here. Why?”

Roy looked at him.

He looked back.

It clicked.

“Oh,” he said. “Uh—”

“Do you like curry?” Roy asked.

“I like everything,” Ed said. “The more it makes my nose run, the better.”

“Then come on,” Roy said. “You’re not going to be able to study very efficiently when you’re weak from hunger anyway, are you?”

Ed had figured out from the first day of lab that Roy was one of those people who told you what he wanted you to do and then made it seem like it had been your idea from the beginning, but that talent
was orders of magnitude more dangerous when Ed’s brain was lagging two sentences behind in the conversation.

“I mean,” he said, “it ain’t my first rodeo.”

“All rodeos are improved by good food,” Roy said.

Ed eyed him. “S’it cheap?”

“Cheaper than dirt at Home Depot,” Roy said.

“What about mulch?” Ed asked. “Is it cheaper than mulch? You know, like—the fancy shit. Gorilla hair and all that crap.”

Roy blinked once, twice, and then a third time.

“I… haven’t been keeping track,” he said. “If it turns out to be more expensive than fancy mulch, I’ll pay for it.”

Ed turned that over in his brain very slowly, since apparently his neurons needed a few extra seconds to catch up right now.

“But not like a date,” he said.

It was a hell of a lot easier to come right out and say the awkward shit when you were a tiny bit lightheaded from lack of food and still half-high on homework. It barely even registered as a total disaster; the humiliation really only scraped across the surface of Ed’s chest instead of stabbing straight into it and skewering his heart through the left ventricle.

Roy smiled, and Ed wasn’t too far gone to notice that there was something a touch bitter and a fragment guarded about it this time.

“Not like a date,” he said. “Like two overworked chemists who were wasting away separately but are currently crawling into a restaurant together.”

“All right,” Ed said, corralling his work into a single pile. “You’ve got yourself a deal.”

The instant they stepped outside, Ed realized that he had woefully miscalculated: the deal in question required him to make small-talk for at least an hour with the TA he’d made out with last week.

“I refuse to ask you about your other classes,” Roy said lightly as they proceeded towards the stairs, “because then I’ll have no excuse for pretending that I’m the only person assigning you homework.”

“Asshat,” Ed said.

Roy laughed. Roy *laughed*, and neither of them was tipsy this time, and how could—?

“I’ve always been puzzled by the intention of that word,” he said. “Is the implication that I’m the kind of person who would wear a hat that looks like an ass? Or is it supposed to accuse me of being an ass and a hat simultaneously? What kind of hat? I hope it’s a top hat. Although I could probably look dashing in a newsboy cap too, if I put my mind to it.”

“And humble,” Ed said.

“I radiate humility,” Roy said, but the flash of teeth in his quickly-parting smirk was giving him away. “I’ve been told it’s inspirational.”
Ed snorted. “Before or after they kicked your sorry ass?”

“You’re taking a vested interest in my ass today,” Roy said—*delightedly*. “I’d like to commend you on your good taste.”

Ed looked at him. Ed looked at him, and Ed looked *hard*, and it…

It was fucking horrible, was what it was, because even in the fluorescent floodlights from the library behind them and the faded streetlamps along the path, Roy Mustang was a stunningly gorgeous motherfucking man, and the gleam of mischief in his eyes made Ed’s guts curl. Talking to him was —fun. It had been at the beginning, and it still was; he was playful and clever and challenging, but every time they’d had a conversation, he’d *listened* to everything that Ed had said.

Ed wanted him. Ed wanted him so bad it ached like a sore throat—hot and sticky and tight and raw; he couldn’t swallow, and he couldn’t speak; and for several long seconds, he couldn’t think about anything else in the whole fucking world.

There was a shift to Roy’s jaw—which was torture, for the record; the way the hinge of it sharpened, and the shadows moved—and Ed could tell that the silence had just stretched long enough that Roy was about to ask if everything was okay.

Ed had a couple things saved up in his head for moments like this—crowbars to shove the train back on the tracks when he’d derailed it by thinking too long. You just had to sell it, and he’d been selling bullshit all his life.

“This better be the best curry I’ve ever had,” he said, “if I have to put up with you, your ass, and your ego the entire time.”

Roy’s grin looked a tiny bit relieved.

Nailed it.

This whole being a functional person thing wasn’t so hard.

---

This whole being a functional person thing was fucking impossible.

“Roy,” Ed said, in as low a voice as he could, “I am the only white person here.”

Roy glanced around. “Oh. Looks like it.” He beamed, and—winked. Fucking *sadist*. “That’s how you know it’s good.”

The ravening hunger was not helping to sustain Ed’s higher functions. “Is that… I mean, is that cool? Or do they resent you for it?”

“I don’t think anybody minds,” Roy said, grin widening, “unless you start acting like an asshat.”

Ed made a face at him, and then turned it on the menu. “I don’t know how to pronounce any of this stuff.”

“Just point to something that looks good and start sounding it out,” Roy said. “They usually take mercy on you.”
“‘Usually’?” Ed asked.

“That or they give you a completely blank stare and silently enjoy your suffering,” Roy said. “What do you like?”

“Everything,” Ed said. “Weren’t you listening?”


What Ed would have liked was to have a word with whoever had made up all of the taste descriptors in English and then lent them out to innuendo.

“Spicy as fucking hell,” he said.

Roy was smiling at him in a way that did not especially befit a languishing scientist who’d happened to drag another sap into a food-service establishment alongside him. “I thought you might say that,” he said. “I’m not sure they offer that as an option, but I’d recommend the vindaloo.” He reached across the table to put his fingertip on Ed’s menu, which was entirely unnecessary—and which made it all the more devastating when his eyes lit up. Proximity was a fucking killer and no mistake.

“And you have to try their chai. It’s incredible.”

“I don’t really do tea,” Ed said. The intelligent part of him wanted to lean back—put a safe distance in between them; get away—but the susceptible majority screamed it down, and he stayed.

“Right,” Roy said, grimacing and—to spare Ed’s laboring heart a little trouble—sitting back. “Your primary character flaw. But believe me; you should really give theirs a try—the secret is that they boil the milk during the process, rather than adding it cold after the fa—”

“I don’t do milk at all,” Ed said.

Roy looked shocked, and then heartbroken, and Ed hated him with a great and terrible fury that would have blackened the skies and scorched the Earth from here to Timbuktu if he’d dared to unleash it. “Are you lactose intolerant?”

“No,” Ed said. “It just sucks.”

Roy did an unconscionable little twist-thing with his mouth. “…I see. Is this some kind of anti-dairy grass-roots movement of one, or—?”

“What?” Ed said. “Not really, I guess, just—I mean, ice cream is great. Cheese is usually okay, unless it’s weird cheese. Yogurt is pretty gross. Sometimes cream is all right, and whipped cream definitely is. Just—maybe it’s the consistency or something. I dunno. Milk makes me gag.”

There was a dirty joke there—waiting, begging, to be implemented. Huge and obvious, in plain sight, and Ed braced himself and started sorting through the eye-rolls and the canned rebuttals that he normally used, trying to determine which one would shuck this off the fastest.

Roy smiled, and closed his menu, and arched his perfect eyebrows one more time.

“What if I promised you it doesn’t taste much like milk at all?” he said.

It took Ed a moment to register that that could not, by any stretch of the imagination, be interpreted as a dig about Ed’s gag reflex.
“I dunno,” he said, scrambling for control of his brain again. Why was Roy so—why was this so—why was all of it so—

Nice?

“Don’t figure it’s worth wasting a whole cup if I hate it,” he managed. “I’ll just—have a sip of yours.”

…oh.

Oh, God.

“I mean—if you—I mean, I’m probably a germ hotel right now; the dorms are disgusting, but if you—I mean, only if you—”

“I think that’s much more efficient,” Roy said, and there wasn’t a trace of condescension in his smile.

Fuck this. Fuck him. He was making this way, way, way too hard.

There was a dirty joke there, too.

The good news was that their waiter had laughed when Ed asked for his vindaloo “as hot as you’re allowed to serve it to white boys,” and then delivered a curry that was making his nose drip, his tongue burn, and his ears steam.

The bad news was that Roy watching him intently while he took the first sip from the tea mug made him dumb enough to breathe while he drank, which made him choke, which made him sputter, which made him forget to pay attention to the taste. And instead of laughing in his idiotic face, Roy reached out towards his shoulder and asked if he was okay and said Of course, of course—are you serious? to the request for a second chance at actually trying the damn thing.

To make it worse, the tea was kind of… good. Even with the milk in it.

Worse than that, Roy kept saying things like You’ve always struck me as the type who’s finished a lot of fights but started very few of them, and it was just so goddamn easy talking to him that everything in Ed’s brain and his body and his psyche wanted to relax.

By the time they had demolished all of the naan (of which Roy offered Ed the last piece, even though he’d probably had more than his share, which was not a remotely rational reaction to food this good), he was starting to wonder if maybe he’d passed out in the library after all, facedown on his open textbook, and he was currently lying in a puddle of drool that was melting the ink on the pages and transferring it to his cheek, and this was all an extremely elaborate wish-fulfillment dream. Had his brain just acknowledged that Roy was out of bounds and decided to offer him a consolation prize in the only way it knew how?

“After that,” Roy was saying, swirling the last of his tea around in the mug and grinning like the Cheshire Cat, “the building’s facilities and my lab manager outlawed using dry ice for—and I quote—‘reckless and unscientific escapades including but not limited to mixing cocktails, skating down the laboratory aisles, and dramatic emergences from the restrooms’.”
Ed had always taken Roy for a tight-ass and a rule-stickler, but all of those annoying flaws were dissolving like the sugar in that stupid chai. “They wrote that?”

“I volunteered to help,” Roy said. “I told them it was because I wanted to apologize, but really it was so that I could include the loophole about ‘unscientific’. The part where we were skating with dry ice masking-taped to our shoes was extremely scientific; we were calculating each other’s velocities, and you have to factor in all sorts of extra variables to account for how fast it evaporates.”

“I’ll friggin’ bet,” Ed said. “Damn, now I want to try. They didn’t kick you out?”

“They should have,” Roy said. “But I put in eighteen hours of incredible experimentation the next day and then pulled an all-nighter the day after that so I could hand them finished data.” He smiled and raised his mug in a mock-toast before sipping from it demurely. “Grudgingly, they kept me around for the remainder of the summer; and, even more grudgingly, they were forced to include me in the author list for their Nature paper. It was a coup. If you go to McKane and so much as whisper my name, everyone in the facilities office still shudders.”

Ed realized too late to stop it that he was shaking his head in something like admiration. “And here I took you for some kinda goody-two-shoes.”

“Oh,” Roy said delightedly, “I am. I never break the letter of the law—I just have a knack for violating rules that haven’t been written down yet.” He paused, and then he winced. “However, I was very young and very stupid then, and with liability insurance as it is, I really don’t suggest trying to replicate my success.”

“How about warming up food in the ‘Science Only’ microwave?” Ed asked.

“Well,” Roy said, “everyone does that. It’s practically a rite of passage.” He paused. “I didn’t just say that, of course.”

“Of course not,” Ed said. “And I’m not getting any bad ideas. Definitely not taking detailed mental notes.”

Roy grimaced. “Of course not.” He swilled his tea a little more vigorously, although the grin was coming back. There was something about—that. Something that was fucking ineluctable.

And there was something about his hands. Something—familiar, something—

“Why was I regaling you with tales of my undergraduate indiscretions, again?” Roy was asking. “Oh—yes, of course, sorry. The… the point is, there are quite a lot of research opportunities on campus for the summer, which are an excellent way to get your foot in the door. And, as you can tell, many of them have remarkably low standards for the moral character of their awardees.” He smiled, winningly, which was probably how he’d gotten that research spot in the first place. “Or, if you’re more inclined, there are a huge number of local companies that offer internships at about the same time. I’d be happy to send you some links.”

“That would be friggin’ amazing, actually,” Ed said, meaning it. “I think—I mean, what’s more likely… this sounds mercenary, but it’s just—we’ve got a lot of—leftover medical bills to pay and shit. So if there’s something… that you think is more likely to pay well, rather than just… enough to break even, y’know—”

The smile had gone gently sympathetic, and this was not fair; this was not fair, and it wasn’t right, and Ed didn’t know how much more of it he could handle without doing something very, very stupid
like asking Roy if they could have a second shot at that tonsil-tasting business they’d tried the week before.

“Industry will probably compensate you better,” Roy said. “You know—I have a few friends and acquaintances who were much more involved in that side of things, some of whom have graduated and moved on to jobs; I’ll see what I can turn up.”

“Thanks,” Ed said, meaning that, too—with every weary fiber of his being and every weakened fragment of his soul. “That’d be really c—” His phone buzzed, but just once, which meant it was a text and not an emergency call.

All the same—it could’ve been Al, *Hi, Brother, back at the hospital, anybody you want me to say hi to?*; or it could’ve been Pinako *Bad news I’m afraid please call me*; or it could’ve been Ling, *She dumpejd me and i think i’m duing but it’s ok u can sleep in ur bed tonite*—

“Sorry,” he said, fishing the phone out of his pocket before his blood pressure could soar through any more anticipatory acrobatics. His shoulders had tensed up so much that he probably looked ridiculous. “Let me just—”

“Not at all,” Roy said.

Fortunately, it wasn’t any of those disasters of varying dimensions: it was Winry. All she’d written was *Are you working tomorrow or can we do lunch?*

“Damn,” he said as he typed back *nope so yeah, just lnk what works for you*. “I was really hoping that was my roommate giving me clearance to reenter the love-nest, but apparently… I mean, it’s *good*. Just not for me right this second.”

A glance confirmed that Roy had his elbow on the table—wasn’t that supposed to be rude?—and his chin on his hand and his dangerous smolder-eyes turned up to an eleven out of ten.

“I have a couch,” he said.

Ed looked at him.

Roy looked back, eyebrows rising.


The corners of Roy’s mouth quirked. “Allow me to skip to the end of this repartee: I insist that you sleep on my couch instead of out in the cold somewhere; no, I really wouldn’t mind; in fact, I’d be delighted; while I greatly value the precious solitude afforded to me by a studio apartment, as someone who grew up in a house that was never empty or quiet, I do sometimes wish there was another person inhabiting the space, so in that way it would really be me imposing on *you*, rather than the other way around.”

“What?” Ed said.

“I won’t be able to sleep tonight if I know you’re wandering the city somewhere,” Roy said, “so please consider utilizing my perfectly serviceable, entirely unoccupied furniture instead. It’ll feel neglected if you don’t.”

Ed attempted to dig through that pile of SAT words. “Are you trying to emotionally blackmail me into sleeping on your couch?”
“It’s really just for the couch’s sake,” Roy said. “It gets so lonely.”

“Oh, yeah?” Ed said. “What’s your couch’s name?”

Roy blinked. “Uh—”

“I refuse to believe that your couch has feelings if it doesn’t even have a name,” Ed said.

“Santiago,” Roy said. “My couch’s name is Santiago.”

“Like hell,” Ed said. “You just made that up.”

“Santiago is his nickname,” Roy said. “His full name is Juan Santiago Salvadèr Perez.”

“Now you’re being racist,” Ed said.

“No, I’m not,” Roy said. “Come with me, and I’ll show you the ‘Made in Mexico’ tag on the back.”

“You’re making that up, too,” Ed said. The revelation sunk in slow—and warm. “You’re—holy shit. You’re a nerd.”

That wiped the increasingly smug grin off of Roy’s face for a second. “Did the fact that I voluntarily consigned myself to half a dozen years of additional schooling in the sciences not give that away?”

“Sure,” Ed said. “I knew you were an intellect-nerd. But I didn’t know you were a personality-nerd. They’re different.”

Roy’s face contorted. “I can’t tell if this is a compliment or an insult. Is it a compliment? Please tell me it’s a compliment.”

It was Ed’s turn to smirk, at long flipping last. “I dunno. I haven’t decided yet.”

“Now you have to come to my place at least long enough to think about it,” Roy said. “You owe it to my deeply wounded ego and my deeply wounded couch.”

“If it’s deeply wounded,” Ed said, “it’s gonna be crap for sleeping on.”

Roy flagged down their waiter, and Ed drew his wallet out and set it on the table so that there was no way the bastard could steal the bill. This was not a date. Ed’s life, or at least his dignity, or at least his feebly-mended little heart, depended on this not being a date.

“If we get there, and you hate my poor, sad, lonely couch,” Roy said. “We can call you a cab.” The waiter reached their table before Ed could continue to argue, more on principle than because he had a real objection. “So sorry to bother you—can we get the check, please?”

“Are you paying together?” the waiter asked.

“Yes,” Roy said, at the same instant Ed said, “No.”

There was a pause.

“I have cash,” Ed said. “I can just…”

“Together’s fine, then,” Roy said, flashing the waiter another of those blinding smiles. “Thank you.”

This was not a date. It was nothing like a date. It might have looked like one from a distance, if
your vision was a little blurred, or maybe it was raining, or maybe the steam from the amazing curry was obscuring your line of sight—

But it wasn’t.

At all.

It was just—two scientists, trying not to starve, having a civil conversation, and neither one of them was going to offer the other one something devastatingly tempting that he couldn’t really have.

Right?

Right.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Two Three items of note about this monster of a "chapter":

1. Later on, this is one of the parts that the fic is rated E for. If that's not your thing, please feel free to skim through, past, over, etc.! Nothing of note or necessary to the plot ("plot" XD) happens. There's some good schmoop at the end, though. :D

2. Before all that, there is a METRIC TON of backstory stuff, so… get comfy, I guess! XD

3. DERP, I TOTALLY FORGOT THE IMPORTANT THING – there is a bucket of cold water in the next chapter, so you might want to stop after the end of this one if you want to get to keep the warm-fuzzies until tomorrow's updates!

“It says ‘Made in Portugal’,” Ed said.

“Damn,” Roy said. “I was really hoping. Well, he can still be Santiago.”

Ed had had to plant his good knee very carefully in order to lean that far over the back of the couch, because of course the tag was on the very back and the very bottom for some unknown reason. It occurred to him—way too late—that he’d just more or less shoved his ass in Roy’s face for the duration of this venture. “Where’d you get it?”

“Garage sale,” Roy said. “It’s nice, isn’t it? Nice and comfortable… luxurious, even…”

“Sure,” Ed said. “I guess.” He sat down on it properly to test it, since that much was only fair. It wasn’t that Roy was sort-of-kind-of convincing him that maybe toughing it out overnight on the sidewalk somewhere was a less appealing option, or anything. “This is all just yours? This whole…” He waved his hand in what he hoped looked like an ambient sort of way. “Attic… thing?”

“I believe the advertisement said ‘studio loft’,” Roy said.

“I bet it did,” Ed said.

“But to answer your question,” Roy said, “yes. Finding a place I could rent alone that wouldn’t put me instantaneously in the poorhouse was something of a challenge, but I like a challenge, so here we are.”

Ed… kind of liked it. The couch, which Ed was not going to call Santiago under any circumstances, was a nice sort of pale gray leather, and rest of the place was done up in light shades so that it looked bigger and kind of airy, even with the sky outside the bedroom’s bay window completely dark. There wasn’t a whole lot other than the bedroom—the couch was crammed, albeit about as gracefully as you could cram a substantial piece of furniture, against the wall of the kitchenette that backed onto the bedroom in question, and a little bathroom sat tucked off to the side. Lots of white—white cabinets, white tablecloth, white sheets, white curtains. Who even had honest-to-God curtains anymore?
“Here we are,” Ed said, because he sort of had to say something.

Roy leaned back against the kitchen counter, folded his arms, and tossed his head to get his hair out of his face. Ed wasn’t sure he’d ever seen anyone do that in real life before. “Can I make you a drink?”

Two could play at the arm-folding game. It was Ed’s favorite. “You know I’m not legal, right?”


“Always a good idea,” Ed said. “But—nah. Thanks. You’ll just have to get your kicks somewhere else tonight.”

There was a pause. Speaking of kicking, Ed was doing it to himself, inwardly, with an immense amount of force.

“You… know what I mean,” he said.

Shit, that made it worse.

Except that Roy had this weird habit of smiling at him, serenely, instead of pouncing on the first sign of weakness and going for the throat.

“So,” he said. “How’s Santiago?”

“I am not calling your couch ‘Santiago’,” Ed said.

“How about for twenty bucks?” Roy said.

Ed chewed on the inside of his lip for a second. “Make it fifty, and Santiago’s dreamy.”


Ed prodded the cushion next to him. “You’re shitting me. This is a nice couch.”

“I know,” Roy said. “And it’s a nice loft. I get lucky sometimes.”

Ed opened his mouth.

Ed nearly said “I fuckin’ bet you do, looking like that.”

Ed closed his mouth again.

He reconsidered, and then he said, measuredly, “That’s pretty cool.”

“I try,” Roy said. “Which usually makes it less cool, because trying to be cool is anathema.”

“So is using words like ‘anathema’ in a sentence,” Ed said.

Roy grimaced. “I know. My curse.” The amusement was never far away with him—always darting in the corners of his eyes and toying with his mouth, and it was mesmerizing. Dangerous for that. Addictive. “So who’s Edward Elric when he’s at home? What are you into, other than scientific brilliance and working your fingers to the bone?”

“Uh,” Ed said. “I dunno. I like…”

What the fuck did he like? It had been a long, long, long damn time since that mattered.
“Coffee,” he said. “And… hanging out with Winry and my brother, I guess.”

Roy tilted his head. He looked like a puppy. Ed was fucked. “I didn’t know you had a brother.”

“Well,” Ed said, shifting, “I mean—how would you? But… yeah. He’s the best. In pretty much every possible way, I mean—he’s the best at everything, and he’s also the best person that I know.” He considered. “Except that he loves cats.”

Roy, still grinning, which had to be hurting his stupid-perfect face by now, went to the refrigerator. “What’s wrong with cats? Can I get you anything? Water?”

The insides of Ed’s cheeks and the back of his tongue were still prickling a little bit with the vestiges of the vindaloo spice. “That’d—be pretty amazing, actually. Um—thanks. And nothing’s wrong with cats, except if you spent all of the seventeen years of your life since you learned how to talk bugging your brother about whether you can get one.”

Roy crossed to the couch bearing two glasses of water and sat down without spilling either of them, which was the sort of thing that people like him probably did all the time, effortlessly, and completely took for granted. Ed sometimes wondered what life was like for people who hadn’t been hopeless klutzes even before the extenuating circumstance thing.

“Well?” Roy said, offering Ed’s glass. “Can he?”

Ed snatched it away. It sloshed. A little bit of it beat the surface tension and splattered on his thigh. He managed not to say Case in point, remembering in the nick of time that Roy hadn’t been privy to his previous thought process.

“Oh, Roy,” he said, even though it hadn’t been his fault at all. “Sorry.”

“No worries,” Ed said, despite the fact that anything that drew Roy’s attention towards his crotch was, in fact, probably something he should worry about.

Roy was sitting… not-quite-too-close. At a distance that would’ve been pretty normal with a friend, but after what had happened—but that was the whole point, wasn’t it? They were both supposed to be trying to make this whole thing—rapport, relationship, situation, whatever—not-weird. Which, in cases like this, meant not acknowledging that there had been a thing that had happened last weekend that would make this weird if they admitted that it had taken place. So Roy was acting exactly the right way. Probably. He hadn’t done the cheesy-ass arm-stretch-hug thing, at any rate; Ed needed to un-tense and stop freaking out about human nature every forty-five seconds or so.

“And anyway,” Ed said, trying to drag the conversation back onto the prior trajectory, “he knows very well that he can have one when he graduates from college on the Dean’s List. As long as it’s small. And nice. And doesn’t try to eat my hair.”

“I hope they keep the small, nice, not-hair-hungry ones in a separate room in the shelter,” Roy said. “Do they let you interview them?” He held a hand over his chest and sat up very straight, eyes half-shut, to do what was apparently his impression of a generic interviewer. “Hello… Fluffskie, is it? Yes, your C.V. is excellent—I’m particularly impressed with your feather-chasing record, and your pouncing form is truly exemplary. Can you tell me a bit about your strengths and weaknesses? Have you ever woken up in the middle of the night craving the sublime taste of your owner’s hair follicles?”

In a strange way, it was sort of sweet that he’d jumped to the conclusion that they were going to adopt a shelter pet. Then again, it had probably become agonizingly obvious over their brief
acquaintance that Ed didn’t exactly have the kind of money you had to throw around if you wanted a
designer, purebreed fuzzball ready to strut the competition circuit. Maybe it wasn’t that Roy was
decent and sort of gentle-hearted: maybe he was just smart. Yeah.

Framing every situation that way might make it a mite easier for Ed not to carve his own heart up on
a platter like fucking Thanksgiving and serve it up hot.

“Fluffskie’s ‘Special Skills’ section makes me suspicious,” he said. “I don’t believe that she speaks
Dog and Rabbit. Most cat colleges only require one. You should make sure you grill her on that.”

Roy leaned back and folded the arm further from Ed behind his head—holding onto his glass with
the other, of course—which was, on the one hand, courteous, because it meant he wasn’t
encroaching any further into Ed’s personal space or threatening Ed’s vulnerable skull with his elbow.

On the other hand, it elongated his body in a way that made Ed’s mouth water like a whole fucking
monsoon season at once.

It wasn’t even that Roy was tall, dark, and handsome—he was relatively tall, not that that said
anything about Ed’s standards of measurement; and his hair was definitely dark, and the eyes were a
Problem worthy of the proper noun; and he was definitely a fucking looker and no mistake. But lots
of people were naturally like that.

The thing about Roy was that he knew it, and he knew how to use it, and he knew how to
foreground it in a way that never seemed contrived but always replaced the cartilage in your knees
with a shear-thinning non-Newtonian fluid.

Or your knee, singular, as it were, depending on your personal joint count.

Point was, every time he moved, and every time he spoke, and every time he tilted his head so that
his stupid bangs would sort of dance across his forehead on their way out of his eyes, he managed to
get even hotter than he’d been the second before.

“If Fluffskie really wants the job,” Roy said, “she’s going to have to knock my socks off.”

“Especially since Socks is a pretty good applicant, too,” Ed said. “His track record with chasing the
laser pointer light is incredible.”

The next thing Roy did was not contrived in the slightest—it was a grin that started slow and soft at
one corner of his mouth and then brightened across his whole face, and… And oh, shit, that was the
worst thing yet. That was the worst thing, and Ed wanted nothing more than to lean across the
casual-friendly space between them and kiss the edges of it, because it merited the worship, and it
was just so fucking cute—

He gulped down some of the water instead.

This was fine. Everything was fine. He had it all under control. He was just sitting on his mind-
bogglingly hot TA’s couch, thinking intently about how he should not be thinking about wanting to
taste every last corner of that amazing mouth, because he’d missed a few the first time, and that was
really a shame.

“Well,” Roy said, lightly, resettling himself on the couch and crossing one leg over the other, “I’m
wishing your brother the best of luck.”

“Thanks,” Ed said. “That—um.” He looked down into the now-half-empty—for the record, the
Winry voice in the back of his head saying It’s half-full if you believe it is, Ed! needed to shut up—
glass for a second while he struggled to rein in the impulse to say... more. Lots of things. Everything, maybe; everything that he tried not to say to anybody else—

It was fucking weird to want to say all of that stuff to Roy. He barely knew Roy at all—they’d had, what, a handful of conversations? And sure, most of those were pretty high-quality conversations, except for the one in the hallway at the frat house, which had been more physical than verbal towards the end, there, which was great in its own way, and also awful, but—

“That sort of means more than you meant it to,” he said.

Fucking... crap.

“I mean,” he said quickly, which made it worse, “it’s—it sounds like—it’s just that he’s really sick, and he’s been really sick for years, so it’s—so that—that’s a nicer thing to say with context than... just for the cat thing. Is all.”

By all rights, Roy should have pointed in his face and laughed. That was a travesty of a sentence. And when you really got down to it, Ed was a travesty of a person, so—

“Oh, hell,” Roy said. He looked... stricken. “I’m—sorry to hear that; that’s... God, I’m sorry.”

As if Ed had needed further proof that the universe was an asshole—which he didn’t, and hadn’t since he was about six—his psyche chose this idyllic moment to demonstrate the fact that someone expressing sympathy and kindness when you were trying to keep it together always made things a billion times worse.

“I mean—thanks,” Ed said, because he hadn’t been raised in a goddamn barn, whether or not some people heavily implied it once they found out where he had been raised; “but it’s not... I mean, it’s not like it’s a new thing or something. It just—is. And you just—do the best you can. You know?”

“I know,” Roy said, with the sort of soft subtlety that made it clear he really fucking did. “All the same—recognizing it as immovable doesn’t make it any easier to have to push against it.”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “Physics doesn’t help too much with the human side of this shit.”

“Not so much,” Roy said.

“It’s—” Ed said. He felt... effusive. He felt like he was on the verge of overflowing. And that was weird, all right, because he didn’t like to share this shit; he didn’t go plastering his filmy, sticky grief over other people’s lives and leave the residue clogging up their minds. He just—didn’t. It was rude as hell to treat somebody else like they owed you comfort or consolation or their time or their sympathy or whatever the fuck it was. Other people didn’t owe you shit.

But some part of him wanted to tell Roy fucking everything.

Some part of him wanted to pry open one of the little gaps between his own ribs and let it all come pouring out.

“It happened when we were kids,” he heard his traitor voice saying, and that was the first drop through the dam, and they were in deep frigging trouble now. “Because—I mean, shit, it’s hard to explain without telling it backwards, but you don’t need my whole stupid-ass life story, so—what happened was... I guess in a way it started when we were just getting big enough for school, because before that, we lived further up north right across the street from Winry and her grandma. I mean—I guess it probably started when my dad fucked off. Or maybe when her parents died. I dunno. Something—they both happened about the same time, and something changed in my mom
right about then, and when I was starting the third grade, she moved us down to the city instead so we could go to a better school. It was a pain in the ass getting into a good district and everything, but I guess she found a place she could just barely afford in one of those little gerrymandered corners, and… and it was okay. She worked like a fucking maniac, though; I’ll tell you that.”

“I suspect that may be genetic,” Roy said. He was still using the gentlest voice Ed could remember hearing out of another human being—or at least one who wasn’t in this story from the start.

“Whatever,” Ed said. “Anyway, she was… it was… tough, I guess. But the school was pretty good. And it was—hard, for me, sometimes; I never got along with any of the other kids, and mostly Al did, but he was also pretty small, and we were weird, and—worst of all, we were fucking poor, which… so kids’d try to give us shit, and I’d try to kick their asses, and it was all a big mess. But I knew we had to make the best of it, because Mom must’ve wanted a lot for us to go to this school if she’d done so much, so… So I started learning to just… avoid them as much as I could, and try to keep Al safe and away from it and everything, and… y’know. Force it to work. Force myself to get as much out of it as I could, even when my teachers were liars or assholes, or they were wrong.”

“I had a few who were all three,” Roy said.

Involuntarily, Ed wrinkled his nose. Nothing bothered him quite like bad fucking teachers who turned kids off of all of the cool things that there were out there to learn and discover and disseminate. “Yeah? What’d you do?”

“You?” Ed said. “Unbelievable.”

“Yeah, me and my devious child.” Roy said.

“You?” Ed said. “Unbelievable.”

Roy flashed that dubiously-legal grin again. “I know. I used to ask leading questions to try to figure out what the bad teachers were afraid of—you know, spiders, moths, little things. I wasn’t quite cruel enough to go for proper phobias; something in me knew that was crossing a line, but I… gathered information. I got the other kids to start wondering, so that they’d bring it up, and I’d just happen to overhear.” He cleared his throat, smiled blandly, and shrugged. “And then, on the last day of the year, I would tell my mother I had to be at school early, and I’d take the bus to the exotic pet store, and I would buy whatever little lizard-food creatures they had that most closely resembled the teacher’s worst nightmare.” He folded his hands in his lap. “And then I would release them from nearby someone else’s desk and sit back to bask in the beauty of revenge.”

Oh, God. Ed liked him way, way, way too much. “How old were you when you started doing that?”

“Seven,” Roy said. “That was the first year I had a teacher who didn’t find me plucky and charming, so I had no choice but to declare war.” He blinked, then cringe-smiled. “But—you were telling me about you.”

“Oh,” Ed said. “Right. Um… yeah. School. It was—I mean, it could’ve been a lot worse. It was important to Mom, so I really tried not to fuck it up. And—I mean, one or two parent-teacher conferences aside, I think I did okay.”

“Knowing you,” Roy said, and the really bizarre thing about it was that it didn’t sound bizarre despite the fact that they didn’t know each other at all; “I can’t imagine that there’s anything you couldn’t do if you set your mind to it.”

“Up to a point,” Ed said.
Apparently Roy had been through enough shit to have a sense of what that meant, because he was pre-wincing already.

“Ah,” he said.

“She died,” Ed said, and it didn’t choke him up anymore; it didn’t; it’d been ten fucking years, and he was more than that now; he was more than a terrified kid with no parents and no prospects and a sobbing baby brother asking what happened now—“And… and we didn’t—I didn’t know what to do. We hadn’t even known she was sick—not that she, not like… and we called an ambulance, because we didn’t know what else we were supposed to do, and—they helped us figure out—I dunno, the coroner, and somebody from a funeral home, and someone got a lawyer, and… she was really great. The lawyer. She figured out some way to get into some of Mom’s accounts and stuff to pay for the funeral and everything. Mom had left us all her stuff, ’cause I guess she knew it was bad, so she’d had her will done up and whatever else, but either she’d figured on having longer than she did, or she had a crap lawyer at that point, or something, because we couldn’t touch it ’til we were eighteen.”

“Oh,” Roy said, slowly. “Oh, no.”

“Yeah,” Ed said.

The wince was no longer preliminary: it was full-fledged and full of intent. “What—happened? What did you do? Did you have someone—you friend’s grandmother—”

“See,” Ed said, “that would’ve been the smart thing to do. But ten-year-old me was a fuckwit who didn’t want to bother anybody, and who thought that if he let anybody else help out, he was failing at his responsibility to take care of his brother, which was the last thing he’d promised his mom that he was gonna do.”

“Ed—” Roy reached out for his arm and then—stopped, just about halfway, and dropped the hand. “I—well. Hell. I know it doesn’t change anything, but—I’m sorry. I am.”

Bastard had no right to go around being decent as well as disgustingly hot.

It was really, really hard to pretend that Ed’s heart hadn’t leapt into his throat at the prospect of that touch. “It’s not like you had anything to do with it,” he said. “But—thanks.” No barns. Not a one.

“Anyway, uh—shit, sorry, this turned into an essay. Um—I mean—we just… we started getting the eviction notices at the apartment, but I knew we had to fake it so we could keep going to the school she’d wanted for us so bad, so I started poking around after school and found a warehouse where they didn’t lock up very well, and they didn’t even use the second floor, so we just sorta…” Stole. Scraped. Lied. Hid. Bartered, bargained, toughened up. Got beat to shit more than once and got back up and spat blood and wiped it off with the back of a hand and kept going. Never had a choice. “…survived.”

“Christ,” Roy whispered.

“Just about a year,” Ed said. “Then—then Al started—coughing. And he said he was fine; I think he knew I was already run ragged just trying to… y’know. Get us by. But he kept coughing, and then he started coughing blood, and I knew—I knew—it was ’cause of the shithole I’d picked for us to live in. There were probably all kinds of fucking industrial chemicals in the air and the floors and the water in that place, but I’d insisted, and he’d said we should try to get help, but I was so fucking scared that if they sent us to foster care, they’d split us up, and—”

He took a breath, held it, and stared at Roy’s fridge. There was only one magnet on it. It was a
university seal from another school, and underneath it was what looked like a hand-scribbled grocery list. Of course Roy would write out a grocery list. He probably never forgot what he’d walked into a room for, either.

“Anyway,” he said. “I wasn’t gonna—I couldn’t risk losing him, so I called 911, and then from the hospital I called Winry’s grandma, and… and in the end, she moved to a better school district and took us with her. Not the same one, though. I think she knew it wouldn’t’ve gone too well if I’d had to stay there, and there’s a really nice hospital just about ten minutes from her house now. It’s mostly the stop signs that make it take that long, too; you can walk it if you have to. And… the community college up there’s not too bad, as far as that stuff goes, so—so that’s about it, I guess. Everything that matters, anyway.”

“Not everything,” Roy said, quietly, and with a funny velvet quality to it that made Ed glance at him. His elbow had somehow crept up to the back of the couch—not unaided, presumably—to settle there so that he could rest his cheek against his palm. It was a pose out of a sitcom, and he made it so gorgeous that all of the spit that Ed’s mouth had produced over the last day dried up instantly. “I still don’t know what you like. I know what you care about. I think I’m a little closer to who you are. But I don’t have the slightest idea what makes you happy.”

Ed did not say Me neither, because that was fishing for sympathy, and that was an asshole move. But he had to say something.

So he said, “Science. And… wasabi.”

Roy’s mouth curved. “Does it have to be both at once?”

“Sometimes,” Ed said. “I’m a busy guy.”

“That I’d noticed,” Roy said.

“Well—” Ed felt blood filtering outward towards his epidermis to start betraying him in the form of a stupid, flustered little throat-and-ears-and-cheeks-and-forehead blush. He swallowed twice and tried to remind himself that Roy Mustang was a big old dork. “I mean, what do you want me to say? What makes you happy?”


“Aha,” Ed said. “There it is.”

“Curses,” Roy said. “You’ve seen right through my cunning façade. I would have been able to hold that up for at least another hour before you saw the sprawling collection of Besheda games directly above my desk.”

“Other than the last part,” Ed said, “it sounded like you pulled that from a classified ad.”

“How do you know I didn’t?” Roy asked.

“If it was anybody else, I’d think you did,” Ed said. “But it seems like you just talk like that.”

Roy pressed his lips together to keep from laughing, and Ed’s hand twitched with the sheer force of
the impulse to reach out and brush his hair back and drag a lingering fingertip down along his cheekbone.

“That may be the most succinct backhanded compliment I’ve ever received,” Roy said. “Thank you.”

“Case in flippin’ point,” Ed said.

“Touché,” Roy said.

“Okay,” Ed said. “So—” Was this too weird? Was this crossing some kind of invisible line into date-land? “You got my whole stupid story out of me—what about you?”

“What about me?” Roy asked. “There isn’t much to say, I’m afraid. I’m married to my research these days—I’m working on protein folding, mostly in computer simulations designed to work through the permutations of ways they could bend themselves and how their properties change with each possibility. That’s why I can screw off and sit in coffee shops with my laptop instead of the lab when it gets too loud in there—I still do some benchwork, but a lot of it’s just staring at numbers and letting simulations run. And I’ve cleverly fooled my PI into thinking that she can trust me when I’m off in the ether somewhere, sending her poetically ambiguous answers every time she emails a question.”

“’Poetically ambiguous’ should be the title of your autobiography,” Ed said.

Roy grinned, ever so slightly ruefully. “It really should, shouldn’t it? In any case, long story short—for my degree, I’ve gotten particularly interested in modeling the active sites of existing drugs to see if there are any that we can repurpose for physiological problems or diseases or what have you—”

He was leaning forward, and he’d put his water down so that he could gesture in a way that Ed was pretty sure was supposed to represent a protein with a bunch of different formations, because he was putting his fists together in several combinations to make a series of funky shapes.

It was absolutely ridiculous. And it was very possibly the cutest thing Ed had ever seen from anyone other than Al.

“—because then, if they’re already FDA-approved, but you’re repurposing them, you can completely bypass the valley of death and actually get it to a patient so much faster, and you already know what the side-effects are, and there’s so much potential for these existing chemical combinations that have properties we never even dreamed of—and there’s so much data there; it’s just that it would take a human being a billion years to sort through it all in the first place, let alone make the kind of logical and correlative connections that you can teach a computer to make in a matter of minutes, and… Sorry.” He sat back, hands settling flat on his knees, and looked at the floor. “Did I go off like Bill Nye on a bender? I do that.”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “You did.”

Roy’s shoulders dropped—subtly, but if you were really watching, there was a shift to his body language all over.

The implication in it was of shame. Someone had told him to shut up about wanting to change the world with science one too many times.

Ed knew that feeling. He knew it way too fucking well, and seeing it reflected back so clearly in someone else’s face made his heart seize up and squeeze tight and wring itself until his voice came out of him without his permission:
"I fucking love it."

Roy looked up.

Every cell in Ed’s face caught fire in the same instant.

"Um," he said.  "I mean—I—it’s so—cool when people—get excited about their research.  Is all.  It’s just—that’s the whole point, isn’t it?  Science is fucking cool and fucking powerful, and it takes passionate people who like sharing it to get it anywhere.  That’s the whole… thing.  So—so I’m really glad you—went full Bill Nye on me.  Bill Nye’s the bomb."

"The homemade bomb, presumably," Roy said, starting to smile again, and that shouldn’t have been such a damn relief.  "Made entirely with ordinary kitchen cleaners and a bit of string."

"That’s dangerously easy, by the way," Ed said.

"I know," Roy said.  "So do the ghosts of my fourteen-year-old eyebrows."

Ed snickered despite himself, and the last of the wrongness went out of the angle of Roy’s body.

In fact, his torso was tilting pretty distinctly towards Ed again—in every possible measure, that was; he’d closed a little of the distance between them on the couch, and he’d resettled so that he was sitting mostly sideways, with his chest facing Ed, which… would have been much less of a problem if he hadn’t had such nice damn shoulders and such nice damn collarbones and such nice damn other mysteries currently concealed by his inconvenient T-shirt.

Nobody should have looked that good in a plain old frigging T-shirt.  Ed was going to call the fashion police and have Roy Mustang locked up.  With chains.  Somewhere Ed could go look from behind a trick mirror for as long as he wanted.

"Is that the direction you’re planning to go with your scientific career?" Roy asked.  "Master chemistry to make explosives?"

"Hell, no," Ed said.  ‘Blowing shit up is just a hobby.  I dunno.  I like—I mean, I don’t think I’d like what you’re doing, exactly, because I’m not sure I’m cut out for the computer science parts, and ’cause I hate waiting for shit—"

"Shocking," Roy said.


Roy was smiling at him again.  Ed’s mouth was dry.  He tried to swallow, failed, and hastily drained the last of the water from his glass.

"Thirsty?" Roy asked, and Ed managed not to say Now you sound even more like Winry.  “Do you want a little more?"

"Yeah," Ed said, getting up—with a bit of difficulty because not-Santiago-the-couch was so damn comfortable that it had been starting to consume him from the ass up; “but like hell am I gonna let you serve me.”

"I really don’t mind,” Roy said, and he was up off the couch, too—even though Ed didn’t look back, he heard it creak, and Roy’s clothes rustled, and he was trying not to be—
What? Nervous? Piqued? His heart was doing all kinds of shit so weird that it would have made an eighties aerobics class envious. If he was remembering right—which was an open question with his heart jittering around so hard that his brain was vibrating with the force of it—Roy had just filled the glasses from the sink, so…

“There’s just so much I want to do,” Roy said, leaning back against the counter to Ed’s left—so close, too close, within reach, within easy reach—“It’s… I know I have to focus on this part of the process to get my degree before I can even think about branching out, or building something new, but there’s just—there’s so much that’s possible when you’re willing to risk failure a couple thousand times.” He grinned, but there was a softness to it; and then he folded his arms across his chest and shrugged lightly and tilted his head back and closed his eyes against the fluorescent lights. “That’s my favorite thing about it—about science. That it teaches you that, at least when you learn it the right way. And it’s my least-favorite thing, too, because there’s just so much I want to do, you know? There’s so much I want to try and mess up and try again, and so much I want to explore—so many ways you can use it to do something really big, something really wonderful. So many ways to help people. So many ways to improve the quality of the lives of people who have given up on that possibility—the people who need it the most; people who don’t even believe anymore that things can get better for them, because they’re just so used to how hard it is, and they haven’t known any different in such a long time. I just want to—do something. Alleviate that. Even just a little. I just want to make things better, in any tiny way I c—”

The glass had clinked on the countertop as Ed set it down, and he’d drawn in half a breath en route, and then both of his hands were full of Roy’s unholy T-shirt, and Ed was kissing him—hard, and meaningfully, and with all of the liberated heat of a full week’s smothered fantasies.

Maybe it was appropriate; maybe it was ironic; maybe it was just a sign that he’d gone off the deep end once and for all, and there was nothing down here but weird associations and mangled figures of speech—kissing was sort of like science, wasn’t it, in a way? The individual aspects of it didn’t seem like they should have added up to what it did; there shouldn’t have been significance to what was more or less an extended session of sucking at each other’s mouths—

But it was. Significant, that was. It was significant, and Roy’s fingertips were so soft against Ed’s jaw and then his cheeks and then his temples, sliding through his hair—

And Roy used his tongue better than any surgeon Ed had ever seen with a scalpel—and he’d met a few. Roy’s body rose, rolled, molded itself to the front of Ed’s so that the heat hit him from the hips on up—

Ed wanted this. He wanted someone like this, someone gorgeous and talented and funny and smart, to want him so much they couldn’t stop grabbing for each other in hallways and kitchens; so much that he could hear the edge of a groan on every faint breath Roy released—

Roy was his TA.

Roy was his TA, and that was part of what was so attractive about him—and probably all of what made Ed attractive to Roy; it was tacky and taboo and ethically questionable, and this was going to be super fucking awkward in class next week, and—

Ed forced his fingers to uncurl themselves from the front of Roy’s shirt, trying to draw back and pat it down and pant for air all in the same motion. Might as well be efficient. It wasn’t that he was lightheaded, or anything; that would be stupid. It wasn’t that his heart had given up galloping and just learned to fly.

“No,” he said. “Fuck. I wasn’t gonna—fuck.” He smoothed Roy’s shirt out a little more, watching
in mild fascination as his hands shook, and then took two sizable steps back and dared to glance up at Roy’s face.

Roy’s mouth was so gleaming-wet and red and fucking delicious-looking that Ed’s will quavered even before Roy bit his bottom lip and offered up an enigmatic little smile.

“Don’t,” Ed said, because he was going to say something incisive and inconvenient; you could just tell. Ed stepped back again for good measure and shoved his hands into his pockets so that at least he couldn’t see them trembling with their stupid impulse to cling to Roy’s clothing again. “We—agreed. Right? We agreed we weren’t gonna—do—fuck. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t’ve—I’m sorry. I’ll—I’ll just leave; I’ll—”

“It’s really all right,” Roy said. “Santiago would be devastated if you took off now. Don’t worry about it.”

People who said that had no idea how worrying worked.

Or they knew exactly how it worked, and that was why they wanted to spare everyone else from it, whether or not it came out sounding like a weak-ass platitude.

Ed worked the last straggling remnants of spit in his mouth around his tongue for a second while he weighed his options. He had a clear shot at the door—he could make a run for it; grabbing his backpack would require a two-foot zigzag detour, but he could be halfway down the hall before Roy realized he’d bolted.

And then he could… go shower at the gym, and then curl up with wet hair underneath the overhang of a protruding window display at some hipster clothing store, with his bag underneath his head so that nobody could snag his wallet without waking him. Wait out another miserable night locked up in his own brain, berating himself for all the things he should have known and should have done—retread the regrets one more time, when they were already so familiar that his footprints were worn in four inches deep.

“It’s okay,” Roy said, and he was still smiling, like maybe he meant it. “We’re cool, or—whatever it is people say. Really.”

Ed managed to raise a relatively sardonic eyebrow at that. “‘Whatever it is people say’?”

“Whatsoever the kids are into,” Roy said. “The young’uns with their slang and their rap music and their pants that don’t fit—”

“Stop there before I barf,” Ed said.

“Give it a couple years,” Roy said. “You’ll understand.”

“I’ll die first,” Ed said.

“That’s also possible,” Roy said, “but I sincerely hope not.”

Ed stared at him.

Roy grinned, albeit a bit weakly this time. “Ah… sorry. That was dark. Would you—how about an immensely luxurious shower in my spacious lavatory?”

“Good save,” Ed said. He crossed to his backpack and did not make a break for the door, even though it was still kind of tempting. He rummaged to extract the collection of miscellaneous toiletries
that he’d rolled up into a bundle inside his towel, stood up carefully, and clutched it to his chest. “I’ll just…”

Roy gestured, grandiosely. “All yours,” he said. “All ten square feet of it.”

Ed didn’t have a measuring tape, but once he’d shut the door, it became apparent that Roy probably wasn’t exaggerating for humorous effect. He was willing to bet that it was a price worth paying if you wanted to live alone, though.

Because he was himself—i.e. remarkably stupid with remarkable frequency for someone that everybody seemed to think was relatively bright—he didn’t realize that there were a few things he hadn’t brought until he’d already started the water, stripped down, stepped in, and soaked his hair. The stream of swear words he strung together under his breath was such a marvel that it was a pity no one had witnessed it; he turned the water off again, hopped out, hopped to the door, opened it, and stuck his head out, trying not to drip on the carpet in the hall.

“Hey,” he said, pretending that his face was on fire again because of the heat of the shower, rather than from his own idiocy. “Is it okay if—can I use your shampoo?”

Roy’s eyes were on his hair first, and then his forearm where he was hanging off of the door handle, and then his face, and then his chest, and then the doorframe.

“You can use anything associated with me;” Roy said, “in any way you like.”

Ed blinked.

“Oh,” Roy said. “Sorry. Autopilot. Of course; be my guest.”

“Th… anks,” Ed said.

He shut the door.

He took a deep breath.

He tried, valiantly, not to think about what he could have done with that opportunity if he’d been… what? Reckless? Sexy? Brave?

He wasn’t any of those things. And he couldn’t risk faking them—he’d be found out when it came down to it, and the only thing worse than being accidentally pathetic was being deliberately deceptive. Ed wasn’t about that. Enough in life was backwards and fucked-up and packed so full of lies that you barely even heard them anymore. It was better to be honest and alone.

It wasn’t like he would get far if he tried anyway.

He tried to keep the shower fast and fairly chilly, which served two purposes—firstly, there were probably things in the universe ruder than using up all of your host’s hot water, but Ed couldn’t think of any just now; and secondly, it discouraged him from thinking in too much detail about what parts of himself he would have wanted Roy’s hands on first.

He just had to get through this bit without going overboard on the daydreaming—nightdreaming, eveningdreaming—about things he couldn’t have and wouldn’t have known what to do with if he did get them, and then he could pass out on the couch that definitively did not have a name, and then today would be over, and tomorrow he could crawl back to the dorm. Maybe Roy would let him loiter around for an extra hour or two so that it didn’t look like a walk of shame that he hadn’t even earned with the fun part. Maybe he could get Roy to take a look at his homework for his other...
classes if he put in twenty bucks towards Roy’s next grocery run.

Maybe—

Maybe he needed a reset button for his entire life.

Washing his hair in a manner Al would grace with the adverb “properly” tended to take about a billion years, so he did a rush job and then dried off and brushed his teeth and put on the shirt and sweatpants and clean socks that he’d brought so that he could sleep in them on a bench somewhere, if it had come to that. He supposed he was pretty damn lucky here, all things considered. What did most people—people who didn’t have charitable and perhaps slightly psychic TAs who would tow them out of the library and take them in late at night—do when they got kicked out of their dorms like this? It couldn’t be an unusual set of circumstances if it had a clever name, after all.

…well, presumably those people had… friends. Other friends. Enough of them that one of the friends would be in a suite room or something, where there was a foyer with a couch that no one needed at the time. Was that it? He could have asked Winry, and he knew she would have defended him to the death if her roommate had thought it was weird, but he didn’t want to put her through that on his behalf, and it’d been such short notice, and…

The point was, life had actually cut him a huge break for once, and here he was complaining about the details. What kind of a fucking loser was he? No wonder the universe took such unrivaled pleasure in kicking his ass the rest of the time, if he was this ungrateful when it finally threw him a bone.

He hung his towel up on the hook on the back of the door, which Roy didn’t seem to be using. Probably he was going to forget that it was there, but at least imposing on future-Roy by making him bring and return Ed’s towel was better than making him bring and return Ed’s moldy towel if he just shoved it somewhere completely out of the way, right?

Maybe aspiring to be anything less than the worst guest in the entire world was setting the bar a little low.

It’d been a hell of a day, though, and despite still feeling more than a little keyed-up after the whole supposedly not-romantic dinner—followed by a substantially more romantic hands-on follow-up examination of Roy’s tonsils—Ed was pretty sure he was ready to go to sleep and put this sucker to rest. Everything always looked better in the morning, right? Maybe in the morning, Ling would have used this opportunity to fix his relationship, so Ed could go back to hanging out with Lan Fan without feeling like he was the one lying to her; and maybe he and Winry could have a nice lunch, and maybe they’d each meet a guy who was just as fucking perfect as Roy without being so agonizingly out-of-the-goddamn-question…

He had to laugh at himself—inwardly; he hadn’t completely lost his grip on reality just yet—after that thought. What the hell would he do with a perfect guy if he found one and somehow convinced the specimen to stick around past all of the initial shocks and disappointments? He wasn’t the kind of person who could keep a perfect guy—he wasn’t the kind of person who could keep a perfect guy happy. He wasn’t the kind of person who could do that and be that for anyone. He was more the kind who tried really hard to be what he thought someone might want, but apparently the two or three things that he was looking-slash-begging for in a relationship were so much trouble that they were deal-breakers for the tiny sliver of the eligible population that was actually interested in him despite the flaws, and—

And that turned his stomach a little bit, which was dandy, because stepping back out into the kitchen and seeing Roy sprawled across the couch with a book in his hands made it twist up and try to wring
itself to bits.

He looked so—welcoming. Was the thing. He looked so comfortable, and so comforting; he looked like he belonged there, and there was a calmness to the contentment of it that made Ed’s fucking heart ache—that made him yearn like there was a creature in him straining to curl up against Roy’s chest just there and nestle right in under the curve of his arm.

Was Roy really—was all the kissing and shit reliable proof that Roy was offering something like that? Ed had started it, both times, but Roy—

Roy kept touching him. And looking him in the eyes, and listening to what he had to say, and respecting his voice and his intellect every bit as much as his space, and…

“Ed,” Roy said, flashing another damn smile at him, jumping up, and tossing the book down on the couch cushion before Ed could ask what it was. “Come here.”

He should have had a choice.

He should have had the choice to stay where he was, rooted to the spot in the middle of the kitchen floor, two feet to the left of the table, a few spare paces from the stupid couch.

He shouldn’t have been compelled to follow and then proceed as Roy moved to the accordion doors that opened into the bedroom and swept an arm through them to usher Ed inside.

“What?” Ed said. Roy hadn’t been bullshitting him; there were a ton of video games lined up on the second shelf over the desk. The first shelf was half textbooks and half knickknacks.

“I miscalculated,” Roy said.

Ed still wasn’t sure what he was supposed to be ‘come here’-ing for. He didn’t know where to look, so he tried to let his eyes range around in case he found it without having to ask. “Uh… oka—”

Roy’s fingertips grazed the small of his back, and he whirled around—more on instinct than because he didn’t want it, or like it, or—it was startling, that was all—and Roy’s raised eyebrows were worse; and he stumbled a few steps backwards, and his left leg wasn’t helping at all.

“Sorry,” he managed. “What’d—what’d you miscalculate?”

Roy paused. Roy was not the kind of person who paused because he couldn’t think of anything to say—Roy was the kind of person who paused because he was currently reevaluating the thing he’d already thought of and shaping it into something more appropriate as the situation developed. Roy was the kind of person who paused because he was in perfect control of his brain and his mouth both, every minute of the day.

And he was the kind of person who would never, ever, ever have settled for Ed.

“I don’t have much in the way of spare linens,” Roy said. “And I would not be able to live with myself as a host if I left you to suffer for it. I have a few blankets here and there, but I insist that you take the bed.”

“I’m not going to sleep on your bed,” Ed said.

“Why?” Roy asked. “Is there something wrong w—”

Ed dropped down on the edge of the mattress and bounced experimentally, more to disprove the
half-finished question than anything else, but as it turned out... holy shit, what a nice bed. “No,” he said. “It’s just—God, you—”

His heart was banging in his throat again; he could practically taste it—iron and meat and a tiny sour tang that had to be the edge of panic. He shoved his hair back, and then one of his hands got tangled, and that proved the point better even than he’d intended. Working his own fingers free of his stupid wet hair had to be the most idiotic-looking thing he’d ever done, and that was a pretty varied and extensive list.

“You’re a ten,” he forced out. At least the preoccupation was sort of smothering the awkwardness enough to let his voice slip past it. “You’re a ten out of fucking ten, Roy. Okay? Maybe a nine and three-quarters sometimes when you’re being really smarmy and you know it, but—Christ’s sake, I’m scraping for a three on days when my hair is cooperating, and—”

Roy sauntered towards him, and Ed realized far too late that he had made a terrible mistake: he was sitting on Roy’s bed, and his hands were too bound up in his own fucking hair to use for self-defense. He was helpless here, and Roy was... smirking.

“Don’t give me that,” Roy said. He was close again; so close; breathable and tangible and far too tempting. A part of Ed wanted to make a fucking run for the fucking door again, but that part was in the minority. The rest of him—

The rest of him was a traitor, and it leaned up into the brush of Roy’s fingertips across his cheek, and it let his eyes fall halfway shut, and it fucking basked in the contact, and it reveled in the way it felt like his skin was shimmering.

“I’ve graded your homework,” Roy said, softly, and then his clever hands were carefully freeing Ed’s— “I know you’re better with numbers than that.”

Ed sat very, very still as Roy’s fingers worked through his hair—disentangling it from around Ed’s knuckles first, and then gently taking his hands and lowering them, and then Roy’s hands went back into the damp rat’s nest and started separating strands from each other.

“I wasn’t sure,” Roy said, “at first, whether it was an academic problem specifically—if it was just the fact that you’re a transfer, and you’ve been told so many times that community college is a cop-out, or it’s easy, or it doesn’t count, or it’s just for stoners, or whatever it is they’re saying. Or if perhaps someone had told you, a long time ago, that if you didn’t play by the right rules and spit out the same answers as everybody else, you couldn’t possibly be ‘smart’.”

The gentle tingle of the tugging on Ed’s scalp felt transcendent, but his heart just wouldn’t stop thudding fit to split his ribcage down the middle, and the contrast left him fumbling for words even more than usual. “Y—so what? I mean, it’s—if I get—decent grades here, who cares? It’s fine, it —”

“It’s not fine,” Roy said. “Because it’s everything for you, isn’t it? You never think you’re enough—smart enough, nice enough, good enough. Not enough to make up for a few desperate things you did as a child that you’re still blaming yourself for; not enough to cure your brother by force of will alone.”

Ed’s heart stopped fucking around with beats and just started jackhammering. “Wh—shut up. What the fuck, Roy? Shut up; you don’t—you don’t know anything. You—”

“You’re gorgeous,” Roy said, and he shifted—
Oh, too fast; Ed was frozen solid but for shaking again, and he’d barely managed blinking before Roy had one knee up on the bed beside him and both eyes locked on his, and they were close enough again to be sharing breath—or would have been, if there’d been any damn oxygen left in this room.

“In fact,” Roy said, “I think you are the single most maddeningly unintentionally attractive person I have ever met in my life. And I’ve met a few.”

“Shut the f-fuck up,” Ed said.

Roy grinned at him again—slow and smooth and wolfish.

“Make me,” he said.

“No,” Ed said. It was a miracle he remembered any words. “S’your turn.”

“To initiate, you mean?” Roy murmured. At Ed’s helpless half-nod, he ran his tongue across his bottom lip, which immediately jacked Ed’s helplessness score five marks higher. “My pleasure,” Roy said, and—fuck—

Ed knew better. He knew better. Was this what had been going through Ling’s head in that stupid pantry at that stupid party? It was so damn obvious; he knew; he knew—

But the instant Roy’s fingertips dappled underneath his chin, he tilted his head back and parted his lips and made a little involuntary sound of surrender, and that—

That made Roy’s pupils dilate, which made Ed’s heart skitter, and Roy leaned in to close the distance and sealed their mouths together.

Ed kept trying to stop this, but it just felt so—what? Fated? Immense and inevitable, like the momentum behind it spanned far more than just a few months’ acquaintance and a couple jokes and a curry-scented not-a-date—

Ed didn’t believe in any of that destiny shit, but God, did he fucking believe in the way Roy kissed him—like it was urgent; like it was necessary; like they were magnetic, and the space between them was offensive to physics itself; like Roy wanted to, more than anything, but he simply couldn’t have held back even if he hadn’t. Like this meant something. Like this was meant to happen. Could you fight that, if you tried? If the highways and byways of life and coincidence always led you here—

Roy’s body moved, and Ed’s eyelids rose a little bit, instinctively; Roy was turning his torso and shifting his other leg, and then he put his right hand down on Ed’s left knee for leverage.

And withdrew it like he’d been scalded.

He was staring, and Ed’s insides had turned to ice.

He’d known it was coming. He’d known it was only a matter of time. It was a lot of why he’d been dragging his feet—well, foot—all this time. He’d known that delaying this moment was like procrastinating on an assignment that was going to come due no matter how many games of Tetris you put between you and the last-second scramble to produce something decent in the dwindling hours left. He’d known that no matter how cutesy and witty and scientific he convinced Roy that he was, this was the end of the line, and they were always, always bound to reach it before the train could take them anywhere good.

In a way, it was a relief. He didn’t have to try to downplay it anymore; he could get out of this
before Roy got in trouble or anybody’s feelings got hurt. He would never have the chance to ruin it the old-fashioned way, by fucking it up with his shitty personality and his pathetic inability to read and react to another human being.

If he said it loud enough in his own head, he could almost make it true.

“I’m—sorry,” Roy said. He was staring. Of course he was fucking staring; people always stared. “I—”

“It’s fake,” Ed said. He put the tip of his index finger down on the edge of the plastic rim, which hit about halfway up his thigh. Well—which hit at the bottom of his remaining thigh, which would have marked halfway if there’d been any more of it. “Up to here.”

This might have been the most awkward Roy had looked since the beginning of their acquaintance—which wasn’t to say that he was even registering on Ed’s awkward scale; only that you could see, in the tightness of his eyes and the pained twist of his mouth, that he’d completely lost control of this situation, and he was still fumbling to find something to grasp. He stepped back from the bed, and his hands hovered in the air for a second before he dropped them to his sides, and then he slipped one into his pocket and shoved his hair back with the other.

He looked breathtakingly, mouth-wateringly good—more than usual, that was—for a long second while he was holding his hair off of his forehead. It changed the shape of his face and emphasized the sharpness of his eyes somehow. Fucking stunning.

Which was exactly why Ed needed to extricate them both from this shitty situation so that he could make an ungainly exit, come to think of it.

“What—no, that’s a terrible question,” Roy said. Had he ever gotten tripped up in the middle of a sentence before? Ed couldn’t remember an instance, at least. It was train-wreck engrossing, watching Roy Mustang fumble for dignity like this. Like watching surgery. Ed couldn’t help feeling fascinated and wanting to wince at the same time. “I—”

“What happened?” Ed asked. “Is that what you wanna know?”

It was what everybody wanted to know. It was only fucking natural, but they always thought it was rude.

Roy’s face contorted for a second before he smoothed his expression back out to something closer to neutrality. “I don’t—it’s none of my business, at all, and the last thing I want to do is to make you uncomfortable, a—”

“Al was at the top of the lung transplant list,” Ed said. “But lots of kids die at the top of the list just like they die at the bottom, so I wasn’t… well, it was shit. But—but out of nowhere they got somebody. We were in class, and they called us to the office, and Winry’s granny was there to pick us up to take Al to the hospital to get the transplant and everything. But I had a big-ass test at school that day, with one of the kinds of teachers you would’ve released spiders on, and he said he wasn’t going to let me retake it, so I was gonna fail his class if I left.”

“What a fucking asshole,” Roy said, faintly, and Ed—to his despair—had never wanted him more than in that moment.

“Yeah,” Ed managed. “Anyway—I took the stupid fucking test, and then I was running to the hospital, ’cause like hell was I gonna wait for a bus. Know how I said it was walkable? But yeah. About half a mile out, lady in a minivan took a corner too fast and didn’t see me running on the
“Oh, God,” Roy said, even more faintly this time.

“Yeah,” Ed said again. “You get the idea.”

“I—” Roy hesitated another second—which was weird; Ed was pretty sure that the weirdness of Roy being unsettled couldn’t be emphasized enough—and then sat down on the bed beside him. “Well—hell. For the little that I know it’s worth, I’m… sorry. I am.”


He also appreciated—in the sense of the word that meant understood—that this encounter was over, and he should probably leave before he made it worse.

He stood up.

“Where are you going?” Roy asked.

His voice just sounded surprised, but by the time Ed turned, the bastard was smirking, and he had an eyebrow arched, and he was raising one hand and extending it to curl a finger into the hem of Ed’s T-shirt.

“I’m not finished with you yet,” Roy said.

“What?” Ed said. It seemed like the only logical reaction, after all, but—


“It’s fake,” Ed said, pointing again. “It’s a prosthetic.”

“I got that part,” Roy said, but his face was so blank it wasn’t any goddamn help at all; didn’t he—?

“I have, like, three-quarters of a leg,” Ed tried. He was pointing even more vigorously now—jabbing, more or less—but it didn’t seem to be sinking in.

“Yes,” Roy said, slowly. “I… follow.”

There was an excruciating pause, and then Roy’s eyes—which were already so wide you could have discovered brand-new constellations in their depths—managed to swell a little larger.

“Oh, my God,” he said. “You don’t have the slightest idea how gorgeous you are, do you? That’s it, isn’t it?”

“What?” Ed said. “No. I mean—not, ‘No, I don’t’, but ‘No, I’m not’—are you—what?”

Roy stood up. He stepped forward. Ed’s stupid flipping feet refused to flipping move. Roy lifted both hands, waited like he thought Ed was going to back away or protest or ask him whether he was sure he wanted to run the risk of skin-to-skin contact with someone so irrevocably infected with Loser Disease, and then set the hands in question on either side of Ed’s waist.

Which—

Oh.
“Ed,” Roy said, “since I think it bears saying in so many words—I am still attracted to you when I’m sober. I’m still attracted to you knowing that you have a prosthetic leg. I was attracted to you the instant I saw you and haven’t been able to muster any sort of rationality about the issue ever since. And I would very much like to prove it to you, if you’re up for that.”

The only part of Ed’s brain that hadn’t fallen apart or over at some point during that series of sentences was the portion that was adamant that he would not utter another bewildered ‘What’ during the course of this conversation, on pain of death.

“You can’t,” he said. “I don’t know how.”

Roy resumed staring in amazement at him, which Ed deserved. At least it hadn’t been ‘What’. It had been an all-new exposition of unparalleled ineptitude and social failure, sure, but at least it hadn’t been his third dumbass ‘What’ in as many minutes.

“I mean,” he said, scrabbling and finding a few more handholds this time, even though Roy’s palms pressed against his hips felt like firebrands made flesh, “you—can’t. You’re my TA. The ethics committee—”

“What the ethics committee doesn’t know won’t hurt them,” Roy said. He did a little massaging-thing with his hands. Ed’s solitary susceptible knee quaked under him. “I need to know what you want.”

“I don’t know,” Ed said, which was the honest fucking truth. It was nothing short of miraculous that he was still speaking, really; his heart was halfway up his throat and banging harder even than before, and Roy was so close Ed could count his eyelashes, and there were a lot of them, and they were lovely, and he had never seen anyone with eyebrows as nice as Roy’s. They were all… smooth and… dark… and… delicate. But still so damned expressive. Like right now; that expression was disbelief again. “I mean—I really—you’re—obnoxiously hot, but—you’re my TA, and I’d make a fucking idiot of myself, and—and I don’t—”

“You don’t have to know how,” Roy said. “Thank you, by the way. I think. And—I’d be honored to teach you everything you need to know.” His hands skinned up Ed’s sides; his fingertips flirted with Ed’s ribs and then glided back down, and God— “I’d be delighted to share, and to show you what we’re both capable of.”

Ed swallowed, and swallowed again, and looked past Roy’s left ear at the distant pale wash of the ceiling, because if he let Roy’s eyes hypnotize him any worse, this was going to go the same way every other thrilling thing in his life had gone when he thought maybe it was worth taking a chance.

“No,” he said. “I mean—yeah, I don’t… know how to do—any of that. But I meant—I don’t—I don’t know how to do fucking—relationships, either. I don’t—”

He risked a glance, and Roy looked—

Hungry.

“Holy shit,” Ed said. “You have a virgin kink, don’t you? Oh, my fucking God, Roy—”

Now Roy looked less hungry, and more like he was trying not to laugh, but either way Ed had finally broken the spell—or at least snapped a corner off of it, which was enough to allow him to step
back, out of range of Roy’s dizzyingly tantalizing body heat.

“In the spirit of honesty,” Roy said, “there is a distinct possibility, but that’s not the point.”

Ed set his jaw and folded his arms and fought the urge to just—throw himself down on the bed and peel his shirt off and hope for the best. He wanted to. He wanted to; he’d gotten just enough of Roy’s hands and Roy’s mouth to know that he wanted them on every last damn centimeter of his skin. “What the fuck is the point, then?”

“I like you,” Roy said, and Ed’s breath quit, and his heart quit, and— “A lot. I don’t…I know it’s a bit inconvenient given the TA situation, but I just can’t help it; I’d really love t—”

Ed’s knee also quit.

Which sent him down like a sunken cruiser in Battleship, including the overstated crash noise as he collided with the nightstand and brought Roy’s lamp and alarm clock down with him, ending in a huge tangle of limbs and cords on the floor. Huge being the operative word. Since he was, even without the addition of household appliances.

“Ow,” he said, although it was a bit late for that.

“Oh, my God,” Roy said, and there was some ambient scrambling, followed by an extremely shapely pair of hands attempting to extricate him from the alarm clock cord—or perhaps to extricate it from him; he couldn’t tell for sure. “Are you okay? I’m sorry, I—”

“The fuck are you sorry for?” Ed asked. He pushed tentatively at the lampshade half on top of his face and managed to shift it without tearing it to shreds. Roy looked great from this angle too, the bastard. “This is…this is standard. This is me.”

Roy lifted the lamp off of him and smiled like there was nothing strange about this situation.

“I think you’re wonderful,” he said.

Fuck him.

Fuck him; how could he talk like that, like they were—

Like they were—together, or something. Like they were a couple. Official. Affectionate. All of that semi-mythical, barely-imaginable cotton-candy fluff that Ed had to swear up and down he didn’t crave, because he knew it just rotted your teeth and left you starved for substance; it didn’t even help—

Roy leaned down, fingertips twisting into the wispy hair right around Ed’s ear, and kissed him—lightly, softly, sweetly, tenderly—like it was a moment’s thought, sincere but ordinary; like it was normal; like it was just another gesture shoring up a barricade of little touches, carefully delivered and genuinely meant—

Lovingly. That was the fucking word.

And then he was offering Ed both hands, and Ed’s instincts made him grab onto Roy’s wrists instead of his palms for better leverage, and instead of commenting, Roy followed suit and gripped on tight and hauled backwards to help pull Ed up to his feet.

He was kind of strong for a pretty boy.
Ed had just thought those words in his own brain, and now he could never take them back.

Roy was dusting him off, which was another thing Ed had always assumed was a figure of speech and not an action people actually executed, and then brushing his hair back from his face again. It still tingled. Every time Roy’s fingertips made contact with his cheeks or his forehead or his temples or his scalp; every single time.

“You’re okay?” Roy asked.

“I’m a hell of a lot harder to damage than that,” Ed said.

They stood there for a second, looking at each other, which was sort of stupid and sort of great. It was less-great in that it gave Ed a second to stop flushing hotly long enough to think.

“Is this—” Fucking nothing ventured, fucking nothing gained, as they said. Or as they mostly said; he’d embellished a bit. “Is this, like—a thing?”

Roy’s eyebrows drew together, and his smile was slightly more… what? Guarded? Uncertain? An average of both? “How do you mean?”

He’d never had a conversation like this before—not out loud, anyway. He’d had a hundred-thousand conversations in his head with Russell that never happened, and that had been so much of the problem, hadn’t it? He’d just—never said what he needed to. Never come forward and spread out his expectations and pointed at the important parts. People weren’t mind-readers. Everybody was just doing their best to do right by themselves. He had to get through this, and he had to be as upfront as possible, or this was just going to blow up directly in his face like the last one, and all of the unuttered Listen to mes would sour in mouth all over again.

“I mean,” Ed said, “I know it’s—I know we can’t… like… strip each other naked and make out in the quad or something, or the ethics committee’d fire your ass at a hundred-eighty-six-thousand miles per second, and—I get that it’s, like… neither of us knows where this thing is gonna go, so you can’t possibly know if it’s worth throwing your job away, and—hell, I wouldn’t want to ask that anyway, and… besides, we’re both so damn busy—I mean—do you want to just—keep it kinda chill, and just… go out sometimes on weekends, or something?”

He hadn’t really known what he was trying to say until he’d said it, but by some fucking miracle, it’d come out just about right. Apparently, sometimes when you talked out of your ass, you got lucky.

Which was, incidentally, sort of the topic at hand.

Maybe that was why—maybe the power of the pun had rescued him from the quagmire of confusion in his own brain.

“Pity,” Roy said, half-voiced, gazing at the wall. “About the quad. Ah—” He focused again, eyes so sharp and smile so bright that Ed’s knee started acting up again. “To return to a previous topic,” he said, “my kink is making people feel good. Physically, emotionally, what have you—that’s all I want. Well, to be honest, I suppose… that, and getting to know you more.”

Ed set his jaw and lifted a hand, and then he waved the latter around in a way that he was hoping looked extremely casual. “What I mean is—I don’t do this… one-night-stand shit.”

“All right,” Roy said. “I can commit to more than that.”

Ed had no idea what that meant in practice, rather than just in pithiness, but he was pretty sure you weren’t allowed to pry into somebody’s semantics before you’d even gone on a second date. There
were rules about that sort of thing. Or, at least, he thought there were. He’d always assumed that the primary reason that all of his previous attempts at romantic interaction had failed was because there was a stringent guidebook somewhere, and his copy had gotten lost in the mail.

“Okay,” he said. “Cool, then. Um.”

Roy’s grin was a work of art and a loaded gun. “So.”

Ed looked up at him—not that far, obviously, but a… touch. An inch or two. “I think maybe I got ahead of myself here.”

On the upside, that toned the smolder down; on the downside, Roy raised a hand and tucked a lock of hair behind Ed’s ear, and suppressing the shiver took all the willpower he had. He wasn’t sure what was going to happen next time he needed some, but he was betting he was about to find out. “Oh?”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “I mean—you don’t even know—what it looks like.”

Roy blinked more than that merited, although there was a good chance that Ed had omitted at least one critical word. “What it…?”

Ed stepped back—and bumped the bedside table again, because of course he did—and then hooked both thumbs into the waistband of his sweatpants and shoved them down.

His heart was pounding in his throat so hard he had to hitch a breath in around it one stuttering bit at a time, but it was better to get it over with. He couldn’t let himself slide any deeper into this before he knew—before both of them knew; before it was all on the table. The reactions came on a spectrum, and where Roy landed would determine a lot of how Ed was going to have to act going forward from here. It was still possible that all of this would go out the window right here, right now. What people said was one thing; what their faces did—when their real feelings showed—was an entirely different beast, and Ed had felt its teeth a thousand fucking times.

He felt like an idiot with his pants around his ankles and his arms folded across his chest, but at least that wasn’t really a change as far as tonight went—he’d probably set a couple of world records in dumbassery today. His cheeks burned, but as bad as it was, he had to watch Roy. It was always the first instant where people were the most real. It was that impact that mattered; anybody could do damage control.

Startlement was ambiguous, unfortunately. The flash of bewilderment could’ve been from the dropping of the trou instead of the big reveal, and Roy was such a master of his own damn face—he was already schooling all of the features back into a calculated calmness; Ed could see it.

Except then he was dropping to his knees and—

Kissing Ed’s.

Both of them.

Which should’ve been so fucking cheesy that Ed’s nerves went numb in protest; which should’ve been such an overstated pity-loaded pile of shit that he should have said Yeah, the oil’s nice for dessert, isn’t it? and sidestepped out of range and put his pants back on and started for the door, but—

But instead—
Something in him melted into magma and fucking misery, and his throat stuck, and his heart stuck harder, and his whole body went still and then began to shake.

Roy’s mouth grazed the inside of his right thigh, feather-light. Ed couldn’t feel the kiss itself when the bastard shifted and switched targets, obviously, but Roy’s hair was tickling at his skin, and he could see Roy’s lips, completely shameless on the steel, and it—

Hurt. But in a way he wanted more of, too.

“Knock it off,” he said, and—fancy that, his voice was shaking too. “Roy—fuckin’—quit it, all right?”

Roy sat back and looked up at him, one hand lingering on the knee that could register sensation.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and maybe it was the angle, but it looked like he meant it. He stood up, and this angle was a problem, because his eyes were just so goddamn deep. “I thought—”

And Ed couldn’t say You are the first person who has intentionally touched that like it’s part of me in as long as it’s had to be.

He couldn’t say I can’t afford to be indebted to you like that on the first fucking night of a maybe-something.

He couldn’t say This was just supposed to be fun, but you’re so damn sweet, and you’re so good, and you keep making all these lousy promises—but you don’t expect me to believe them, do you? You’re just playing the game. But this is real to me, Mustang, and it’s going to be even realer when I lose.

So instead he threw his arms around Roy’s neck and twisted both hands up into his hair and dragged him in to kiss him again, hopefully hard enough to drown out the echoes of those thoughts.

Roy’s hands ranged down his back this time, moving slowly, mapping out his shoulder blades and then his spine and the—oh, holy mother of God, practiced fingers squeezing his ass felt so good that Ed almost jumped out of his skin at the completely unheralded spike of endorphins.

Roy guided them backwards, one step at a time—although “step” was a generous word for the cooperative stumble of three legs and a piece of admittedly fairly sophisticated machinery—until the backs of Roy’s knees hit the bed, and the collision made both of them pause, and they drew apart enough to stare at each other while they tried to catch their breath. Ed had stepped out of his sweatpants somewhere along the way. This was a disaster, but he couldn’t muster any desire to go back.

His guts were pulsing. The blood was running so hot through him that his thoughts just kept evaporating; it felt like everything in his body softer than his hipbones was on fire.

“I’m gonna get grease on your white sheets,” he said, in defense of his Most Awkward Asshole in the World title. You really had to work for it these days.

“They’re just sheets,” Roy said.

Ed’s heart throbbed in his throat a little more, and he couldn’t force it down and send it back into his ribcage where it belonged, no matter how many times he swallowed.

Roy’s fingertips smoothing his hair back from his face made his fucking eyelids flutter. It was involuntary, yeah, but that didn’t make it any less embarrassing.
“Are you sure about this?” Roy asked.

“About what?” Ed asked. It occurred to him—three syllables too late, obviously—that Roy probably meant that they were going to fuck, and was inquiring about his resolve to fling his virginity out into the void and wave a handkerchief at it as it disappeared in the distance. “I mean—are you sure? You’re the one who could get in all this trouble.”

“As someone who just felt up an ass so finely-crafted that it challenges my agnosticism,” Roy said, “I am very, very sure.”

There went the fire in Ed’s face again. “Holy shit, you—”

“Me,” Roy said. “Irreplaceably.” He sat down on the edge of the bed and settled his hands on Ed’s hips again, and Ed was absolutely positive now that a lot of things in love and war were profoundly unjust. “You look like you’re thinking.”

“I am,” Ed said. “It’s pretty neat shit; you should try it sometime.”

Roy’s grin curled slow and languid and utterly merciless. “Counter-suggestion,” he said, and his hands slid around to Ed’s ass again, and his fingers dug in, and—

“Fucking Hell, that was so—”

“You should try taking a break from thinking sometime,” he said, “and just… feel.”

Ed was struggling to keep his insides on the inside—the organs were jittering around like hot coals, which couldn’t have been healthy and probably wasn’t safe. “What’m I supposed to be feeling?”

Roy pulled him forward until they were almost chest-to-chest again, and the only thing that made sense was to hike one knee up onto the mattress, and then the only thing that made sense was to straddle Roy’s lap, and—

Shit—

Roy was half-hard and radiating heat, and there was no goddamn going back from here, and it was weird, sort of—grinding down on another guy; even just the fact that this moment existed; just the fact of voluntarily sharing something this fucking intimate with another human being, any human being; he’d never even considered—

But it was—

“Good,” Roy murmured, arching up against him, and their dicks rubbed harder, and lightning rode Ed’s spine from tailbone to cerebellum. Roy’s mouth moved against his throat, wet and warm and unmistakable: “You’re supposed to feel good.”

“Oh,” Ed said. “Okay.”

It sounded stupid, sure, but Roy’s fingertips pressing into the meat of his ass made his brain dissolve into oatmeal with gray matter chunks, so he was grateful that he’d managed a recognizable word in the right language.

Roy stroked both hands up his back, dragging his shirt up with them, and started to peel it off—excruciatingly slowly, but that was bizarrely appealing when it meant that Roy’s hands were just… sliding and brushing and grazing up and down along his skin the whole fucking way—

“How’s that?” Roy was asking, as if Ed had any intellect left over to consider that question; and then it occurred to him, as the T-shirt rolled up and off, and Roy popped the collar off over his head, and then he was sitting on Roy’s lap with both arms stretched up over his head, that he was getting naked
fast, and Roy…

Was both still fully-clothed, and running both hands slowly and reverently up Ed’s chest and chasing their progress with the damp heat of his gorgeous mouth—

“Christ,” he breathed against Ed’s lowest rib, and that felt so much better than it had any fucking right to— “Were you born gorgeous, or did you work at it?”

The weak laugh that jackknifed up and out of Ed’s throat must have been terrifying, but apparently Roy was too high on hormones to express rational amounts of fear. “You normally wear glasses, don’t you? Shit, that’d explain it—”

“Excuse you,” Roy said. “I have twenty-twenty vision, and I know precisely—” He was looking up at Ed again, eyes impossible. He ran the tip of his tongue over his teeth, and Ed’s skin sizzled everywhere. “—what I like.”

He’d smoothed his hands up far enough to reach the creepy pale tracks of the interweaving scars on Ed’s back, even if the light was somehow obscuring his view of their brethren, which crossed and crisscrossed over Ed’s right shoulder and made their merry way down past his collarbone. He did not recommend that any other children go head-to-head with a minivan pushing thirty-five miles an hour. The minivan always won.

On the other hand, Winry had once silenced a self-proclaimed drama queen in conversation—and possibly forever—with the words, “Sorry, you’re really not that impressive; Ed once threw himself in front of a car to avoid having to wait for his brother’s surgery to be over.” Ed’s protests that he had been hit, as a passive action, had been drowned out by the demands for details from every side.

“Crap,” Ed said—or gasped, if you wanted to get technical, but he didn’t just now. “S’a lot easier to correct vision than to cure delusions; I dunno what we—”

Roy could move so fast that Ed would’ve been a little bit afraid of him if he hadn’t been—well, hell, who he was. What he was. A consummate scientist and a tea freak and a dragon-game dork.

But he slipped one arm under Ed’s ass before there was time to squirm away, and with the other for leverage, he was up on his feet—fuck, getting lifted shouldn’t’ve been that hot—and then he was—

Twisting deftly around and dropping Ed onto his back on the mattress and climbing up over him, one eyebrow raised, with another of those smirks that could’ve felled an army, let alone Ed’s stupid heart.

“Ed,” he said. “I have a suggestion.”

“Shut up?” Ed forced out through his constricted airways.

“No,” Roy said. “Never that. But—” How was it possible that the smirks were even more devastating when he spiked them with a smile like that? “Give this a chance.”

Ed couldn’t remember the last time breathing had been a thing that he was capable of, let alone halfway-decent at. “I—well—shit, maybe—if you were—”

“Distracting you more?” Roy asked, leaning in, and with his mouth gliding up Ed’s neck to the underside of his chin, forcing his head back, Ed could almost taste him—

His voice rasped out of him without his permission. “How the hell do you always know what to say?”
“Mm,” Roy said. “Normally I’d say ‘practice’, but—with you, it’s… I feel like I know you better than I should.”

He punctuated that by dragging his tongue down the ridges of Ed’s throat, which completely oblitered anything Ed might have tried to say and replaced it with an enormously tragic little whimpery noise.

“Do you get that sense?” Roy was asking, perfectly calmly, like this was a completely normal conversation, and somehow that made it even worse, and a weird energy coalesced in Ed’s hips, and they kept trying to—jump, twitch, jolt up off the bed—“Or it is just me?”

“Do you—” Ed swallowed, tried to clear his throat, choked on his next breath, and settled for a reedy shadow of his regular voice. “D’you ever shut up, or—?”

“Only when I’m gagged,” Roy said, and he nipped Ed’s neck, and holy fucking Christ—

The soft moan he made when Ed’s hips bucked up against his was so goddamn satisfying that Ed almost forgave him on accident. The white heat coursing through him made thunderstorms look weak; he was energy incarnate, undiluted photons for breath and bone and blood—

“You bit me,” Ed said.

“True,” Roy said, both hands pressing at his hips, mouth hovering over the mark he must’ve left; it stung, then throbbed, then tingled. “Did you like it?”

“Fuck,” Ed said. He had to do something; if he just let Roy play him like a fucking fiddle here… well, probably it’d be great, but—the whole point was to participate, right?

Instinctively, he arched his back, and then hooked his right leg around the small of Roy’s—which made Roy’s breath catch, which made Ed’s heart scramble to bang out an even swifter rhythm than before.

“Not sure yet,” he managed to say. “Maybe you should try it again.”

Roy laughed—low and deep and rich and ever so slightly darkly.

“Maybe I should,” he said.

“Yeah,” Ed said. “Only first…” He reached out—and then hesitated, because was this even—was this for real? How could he possibly be nearly naked and tangling limbs with his hot TA? Was this actually just a sex dream with the longest lead-up ever conjured by an unconscious brain, or—?

Didn’t much matter at this point. Nothing really did, except the fact that he was burning alive in his own skin, and the only thing he could think to do was to finish what he’d started—reaching out with both hands and gathering two fistfuls of Roy’s shirt, the better to haul on it until Roy laughed softly and then writhed free of it, and—

And—oh. Oh, God, there was so much of him—so much skin; so many beautiful muscles underneath—was there time to trace them all? Was he allowed? Were you supposed to want to touch everything? He just—the human body was so fucking striking, and Roy had tossed the shirt over one of those perfect shoulders onto the floor, and he had hipbones and ribs and a navel and pecs and very defined biceps for someone who seemed to spend the majority of his waking hours watching protein simulations and drinking tea—

Was that the secret? Did a critical threshold of tea consumption turn you into some kind of a sex
god?

Holy shit.

Tentatively—probably it was stupid; probably he was doing it wrong—Ed stroked two fingertips down Roy’s sternum, just to… feel it. Just to make absolutely sure that this was real. And sure, Roy’s bones felt like any other skeletal protrusions; sure, his skin was skin, and the pads of Ed’s fingers glided across it like they would on any other stretch of it, but—

But it was fucking different, too.

Just like having someone else’s hand walking down your stomach to press itself down and start rubbing at your dick felt worlds away from doing it yourself.

Distantly, he heard himself make a stupid noise, and the backs of his eyelids went white for a second, and then red, and when he put it together and realized that he’d closed his eyes, he opened them again—only to discover that he’d flattened his palm on Roy’s chest, shameless by accident. Roy either didn’t mind or hadn’t noticed, and Ed… liked it. Liked the warmth of it; liked having the faint thrum of Roy’s heartbeat so close to the pulse in his wrist; liked the subtle way everything curved and shifted under his hand as Roy leaned in again, angled to kiss—

His mouth, apparently.

Ed was learning all kinds of mind-blowing new shit tonight, including the fact that having someone kiss you and give you a handjob through your boxers at the same time resulted in the most overwhelmingly amazing combination of physical stimuli imaginable.

Were you supposed to breathe while you were kissing? It would’ve theoretically been possible through his nose, if he timed it right, sort of like swimming; he tried to listen close to see if Roy was, and—okay, apparently—yeah, apparently—

A whole fucking metric shit-ton of things were becoming apparent to him tonight.

Roy paused in the slow devouring of his mouth in order to nuzzle at his cheek instead, which was gross and horrible and made him feel disgustingly warm and gooey in the core of his chest. Roy’s hand, which was less cute but every bit as persuasive, maintained a magnificently torturous regimen of squeezing and stroking and smoothing that made it feel like his whole nervous system was rattling.

“With me so far?” Roy asked.

“Y-yeah,” Ed got out.

“Everything okay?” Roy asked, and—

And it was, it was staggeringly good; it was a kind of good Ed didn’t have the vocabulary for; his blood kept seething, and his whole body shivered with it; it felt like opalescent alcohol just slinging through him, faster and faster with every rotation, and he didn’t know how long he could ride this wave. Everything was much more than okay.

But he got the feeling that if it hadn’t been—if he’d lost his footing and started to drown in it; if the foam had choked him; if the heat in him ravaged him too hard, and it shook him in a way he didn’t like—that he could cry uncle, and Roy would stop the gorgeous torment in an instant.

*That* was the scary part—not the tumult of the feelings; not the giddy rush of the endorphins
sweeping through him over and over, harder every time.

It was the fact that he trusted Roy so much already. That was terrifying.

“Everything,” he said, “is—so far—I mean—shit.”

When people laughed at Ed, he felt it, viscerally, like a thousand little spears of silver through the gut.

When Roy laughed, and his eyes did the crinkle-thing, and he buried his face in Ed’s neck like he was shy about getting caught with a case of the giggles, and his hair tickled at Ed’s ear—

No spears. Just the infection, and a hiccup of joy-contagion jumping in his chest. Which was how he knew Roy was laughing with him—or, more accurately, out of the sheer glee of it until he joined in—instead of at his expense. There was a pull to that; there was something powerful and meaningful and startlingly strong.

That was scary, too.

“I’m hoping I can take that as an endorsement,” Roy said. He was still doing ungodly-good things to Ed’s dick, so as far as Ed was concerned, he could take it as anything he damn well wanted.


“Hang on,” Roy said, and his glorious hand departed, and Ed mourned the loss with a grief worthy of several sonnets, but then the glorious hand in question and its brother were spreading themselves under his back and—lifting.

Roy was hiking him further up over the foot of the bed, so that his legs weren’t dangling off the end of the mattress, and then dropping him just far enough again that the air rushed by, and he bounced, and the moment of disarmed panic just jacked him and his adrenaline up to an entirely new plane of existence that he’d never even fucking seen before. It was all stars and white light, shot through with rainbows—prismatic; awe-striking; fearsome and enveloping and stickily sweet. Cotton candy on LSD. Jesus Christ, no wonder everybody was so obsessed with getting laid.

“Is that all right?” Roy was asking, like Ed was still capable of speech; like his head wasn’t so far up in the sugar-clouds that he could taste nirvana and a stinging tinge of sweat.

“You fucking know it’s all right,” Ed said. He couldn’t help himself; his brain had shut down to conserve energy for being horny as all hell and desperate and flinging the blood through his veins faster by the minute as this went on.

Roy had crawled up over him again—one hand burying itself in his hair, mouth dragging down towards the intersection of his collarbones, body conforming to his. “Not until you say so, I don’t.”

“So,” Ed said, arcing his spine up off of the mattress to try to press his hips against Roy’s—against Roy anywhere; he wasn’t picky; he just wanted friction and force and heat and more of that delicious fucking contact—“So. Fuck’s sake, what else?”

Roy was laughing again, but it still didn’t hurt. There wasn’t a whisper of cruelty in it—maybe he just found foreplay hilarious. That definitely wasn’t a deal-breaker when a guy was this hot.

“You,” Roy said, “are so adorable I don’t know what to do with y—”

“Fuck me,” Ed said.
Roy laughed again.

Ed was going to take it all back in another second and just... shove his own damn hand down his pants or something; how fucking dare Roy get him so riled up and kiss him and stroke him and stoke a fire like he’d never felt and then sit there just being amused about it instead of finishing the job; what a fucki—

Roy was kissing him again, and Ed was trying very hard not to up and forgive him, and then the gorgeous hand that wasn’t tangled in his hair was drawing slowly down the center of his chest, and he might or might not have made a wounded-kitten kind of a noise just anticipating its destination. Even the progress of it felt amazing; even just the teasing dance of Roy’s fingertips down, down, down along his skin.

“I think,” Roy was saying, like any of this needed words; “perhaps we should start you with an appetizer.”

If that meant what Ed thought it meant—which collared Roy as a heinous stretcher of metaphors to go with all of his other assorted crimes—he agreed with it in principle, and a part of him knew that the only way he could get into this shit without some trauma was if he eased in. Usually the deep end was much more his style, but maybe gradually upping the ante with this whole sex-thing was wild enough to work, right?

On the other hand—

“Mustang,” he said, making sure to hitch his hips against Roy’s for emphasis, which earned him another faint noise and a marvelous little eyelid-flutter. “You have no idea how long I’ve been fucking starving.”

Roy paused, and his hand settled—low on Ed’s abs, low enough to brush the waistband of his boxers, low enough to make his dick throb just a little harder at the miserable deprivation—and then he bent down again, and he kissed the bottom of Ed’s ribcage, right in the middle where the two wings joined.

“No,” he said. “I don’t.” He looked up, and his eyes were all soft, and his hair was all mussed, and Ed hated him, hated how he could steal all the oxygen from the room with a single goddamn motion like that—“But I do know that if we move too fast, there’s a good chance you’ll get hurt, and that’s not on the menu here.”

The words emerged sounding much more croak than voice, but Ed considered himself lucky it was comprehensible at all: “Is this your way of getting revenge for me complaining about the biting thing?”

Roy’s grin was worse than the smirk. Ed hated that, too.

“It is now,” he said. “I’m going to run this one into the ground.”

“Oh, God,” Ed said, letting his head fall back onto the bed and staring intently up at the ceiling. The ceiling wasn’t particularly interesting—white, with that possibly-intentional paint unevenness you saw everywhere—but he was hoping it got the point across. “Just my luck.”

“‘Luck’ is a social concept,” Roy said. “And probability is changeable.”

Ed opened his mouth to say something brilliant, but all that came out was a faint noise of breathless approval.
Fucking Roy, being such a damn nerd—exactly the kind of nerd Ed liked—

That really was just his luck. Or just his coincidence, to be more scientific.

Roy didn’t seem to be bothered by his incoherence, at least judging by the way he was kissing slowly and deliberately along the edge of the waistband of Ed’s boxers, which was making his jaw brush against Ed’s erection at intervals, which was absolutely fucking purgatorial and served as definitive proof that the universe was, in fact, actively unfair.

Ed kept trying to swallow, but his mouth seemed to insist on going dry or flooding with saliva at the most inconvenient intervals humanly possible, and he couldn’t get his throat to cooperate. Probably Roy had done permanent damage to it with the last onceover he’d given it with his gorgeous breath and his gorgeous lips and his gorgeous teeth, and now it wasn’t working properly anymore.

When Roy finally slid his hand inside Ed’s boxers, however, Ed realized that he didn’t need his throat anymore. He didn’t need anything except nerves and skin and his dick with Roy’s hand on it.

“Is that all right?” Roy murmured into the skin of his waist, as if Ed could answer when the only method of breathing that still seemed to work was gasping like a beached fish, complete with the involuntary urge to roll his body like he was trying to flip himself back into the waves.

“Stop—asking,” he choked out.

Roy had curled his fingers around the base of Ed’s cock and was pumping slowly, and nothing in the entire universe had ever summoned quite so many violent sparks in Ed’s vital systems all at once. Roy was watching Ed’s face, though, not what his hand was doing—and what his hand was doing was so damn amazing, Ed couldn’t fathom that he could continue to do it blindly. He looked completely serious for a long second, and then a tiny bit sad, and then he cleared it all away in favor of another one of those wicked little grins.

“At your service,” he said, and then he was employing both hands to haul the boxers down, which required maneuvering Ed’s dick out of them, which was a combination of pleasurable and uncomfortable sensations so acute that the world whitened out for a long second—

And then Roy shifted further away—right to the edge of the bed, tugging Ed’s boxers past his knees; he spread his left hand on Ed’s significantly more complete thigh and wrapped the other around Ed’s dick again, and then he—

Put—

His mouth—

Ed had died. That was the only explanation. He’d died, and science had a lot of explaining to do, because there might not have been a supreme deity, but there was definitely a fucking heaven, and blowjobs from Roy Mustang were it.

Roy pressed his tongue up against the underside, then dipped his head so low he had to be fucking gagging, but he didn’t stop; he didn’t slow down; he was sucking hard and fast and tight and so goddamn glorious that language couldn’t hope to encapsulate the sheer magnificence, so Ed could only hope that the helpless noises he kept making would do. Probably he sounded stupid. Probably he looked even worse—he’d squeezed his eyes shut and let his head fall back, and his hips kept jerking; and the boiling, raging cataclysm of shimmering feeling had risen to the verge of overwhelming him entirely, and—

He clenched both hands in the bedclothes and let his hips rise up off of them; Roy just moved with
him, like it was simple, like all of this was easy; he hadn’t stopped or even hesitated for a second—Ed forced one eye open enough to peek, and the way Roy’s cheeks had hollowed was absolutely fucking stunning, and his hair was in his face; he was smoothing his hand back and forth across Ed’s leg almost idly, like he was just enjoying fucking being here with Ed’s dick in his perfect mouth—

The next sound that left Ed was part moan, and part sob, and part sigh, and he wasn’t sure he could have held it back if someone had told him that his life was on the line. Roy—Roy—was settled there between his legs, doling out slick heat and inimitable pressure; every wet dream Ed had ever woken from with his heart pounding had fallen countless miles short of this—

The pulse in him had deepened, thickened, swelled; he couldn’t—he didn’t think—

“Roy,” he fought out. “Roy, d—you’re so—fucking—” You were supposed to say something; you couldn’t just fucking come in someone’s mouth without even—that was gross, right? People hated it, in addition to which it was just plain impolite—“I—”

Roy drew back; cold air swept in; Ed’s breath shuddered out of him.

Roy smirked.

And then he dragged his tongue extremely slowly up Ed’s dick, from base to tip, before sealing his lips around it securely again.

Ed’s heart flipped. His guts caught fire. The whole world coalesced dizzyingly fast; vertigo looked bleach-bright white and then a thousand colors, and the stars tasted just like rain—

The next breath lodged in his throat, and quavered, and then it burst, and his spine jerked, and his body tightened up around it, and then—

Oh—

God—

Oh—

Roy, coming into focus slowly as Ed’s brain reeled and tried to reassess the charitable universe. Roy, taking his time licking his lips and then delicately wiping either a smudge of Ed’s cum or a dot of saliva from beneath his mouth with one fingertip. Roy, running his hand up and down Ed’s side again, thumb circling Ed’s hipbone, palm so warm and gentle there that Ed’s skin tingled everywhere it tracked.

Attempting to breathe evenly again presented a significant challenge. Ed made the mistake of swiping the back of his hand across his forehead and smeared sweat into his own hair. He hadn’t planned for this—for any of it, obviously; for Roy’s irresistible smirking and his even more irresistible listening; for the ease of it or the heady, transcendent joy; for the possibility, which he wouldn’t have considered possible at all, of Roy sitting there between his knees with one hand on his skin, smiling at him, as he lay there wrecked and buck naked.

They didn’t exactly explain this part in high school sex ed. And even if they had, he’d ignored everything he could get away with, because it was all uncomfortably fascinating and immensely disappointing at once, given that he hadn’t figured he was ever going to need it. He hadn’t figured anyone was ever going to ask.

Plus practically all of it had been explained for the straight kids, anyway.
What were you supposed to do at this point? He hadn’t watched any porn as a kid either; he’d been so damn busy with school and Al and trying to scrape up extra money for medical bills, and he hadn’t wanted to tease himself; and with the whole world telling him he was incomplete, the last thing he needed was to admit to it or to himself or to the internet or to anyone that he was gay as all get-out, too.

Shit. What did you say?

“I—” he got out. That was a start. Subjects were good. “That was—that was really—”

Good? Hot? Life-changing? Put it this way, Mustang, you blew my mind, too, while you were at it was the only full sentence surfacing in an accessible part of Ed’s brain, and he would die before he gave voice to that.

Before he could hash out something marginally less insipid to dignify with speech, Roy moved again, fluidly—crawling up over him and darting in to smother the stammering with another kiss.

Shit, oh, God—that was—apparently—the taste of—

Jesus fucking Christ—

“You,” Roy said, panting a little, when he broke off long enough to meet Ed’s eyes again, “are remarkable.”

“Shut up,” Ed said. “You’re the one who just did—” He wasn’t sure what to gesture to; all of his options seemed sort of crude. Hopefully Roy would get the point even without illustrative hand-waving. “—that.”

“Mmm,” Roy said, dragging his mouth up the side of Ed’s jaw and his hand down over Ed’s ribs at the same time, at the same approximate rate, which was impressive multitasking as well as being unreasonably hot. “I suppose I am. And I would love to do it again.”

Ed worked his throat. Something clicked in his brain.

“Can you teach me how?” he asked.

Roy went still. “I—beg your pardon?”

The downside of blood circulating normally in Ed’s body again was that there was enough to spare now for some of it to rush to his face. “Um—y’know. How to—do that. ’Cause—I really—I wanna—return the favor. But I’ve never… done it before, so—I don’t wanna fuck it up.”

Roy pushed himself up on both arms, which would’ve also been hot except for the fact that he was only doing it so that he could stare at Ed like Ed had grown a third eye with an iris in a saturated shade of magenta.

Ed stared back. On second thought, maybe Roy was staring because Ed’s entire face was succumbing to the stupid flush. Were you not supposed to get embarrassed about this stuff? Was that a huge red flag that you weren’t mature enough to be doing this in the first place? Damn it. What the hell was he supposed to say to that?

“Sorry,” he said. It rarely failed as a fallback plan, at any rate. “I—”

“No,” Roy said. “No, God—don’t apologize.”
“Sorry,” Ed said. “I mean—shit, uh—”

Roy leaned down and kissed the tip of his nose, which was horrible and disgusting and generally unconscionable. It solitarily extended the scale for horrible, disgusting, lovey-dovey crap so far that Ed was pretty sure he’d need to see Roy do it again so that he could collect more data on how absolutely terrible it was.

“I’m just having some trouble believing,” Roy was saying in the meantime, “that you’re actually here, and this is actually happening.”

Ed frowned up at him. “Isn’t that my line?”

Roy smiled, but with his eyebrows high—the I still look great when I’m confused and vaguely incredulous face. Ed hated it, and him, and everything, and wanted so much more of all of it. “Is it?”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “You friggin’ materialize in the library in my hour of need and show me the way to really great Indian food, and then somehow we end up—I mean, you’re the hot TA who’s got no business being interested in the likes of my awkward, small-town, one-and-a-quarter-legged ass, and —”

“Alternatively,” Roy said, “sunshine incarnate appears like a vision as I’m staggering away from the evening’s toils, and he deigns to accompany me to dinner, continues to suffer me all the way home, then graces my couch, and my shower, and finally my bed—”

“The fuck?” Ed asked, but his brain had broken for good about ten minutes ago, so the circuitous vocabulary words just made him want to laugh. “I am the last person you should even—if you call me ‘Sunshine’ ever again, I’m gonna punch you out.”

“I can understand the objection,” Roy said. He had his Asshole Grin back on; he knew exactly what he was doing, the piece of shit. “But you’re looking at it purely from the colloquial tradition, rather than from an astronomical perspective. You don’t have to be peppy and cheerful to brighten up everything you’re part of, and the intensity of your focus could certainly burn me to a crisp if you put your mind to it, and—”

“No,” Ed said.

The Asshole Grin increased in width and unholy glee. “I suspect,” Roy said, “that whether or not you realize it, you’re one of those people that other people orbit, because you’re stable, and warm, and you sustain them all without ever noticing.”

“No,” Ed said. “Don’t you fucking start that war unless you’re prepared to l—”

“Don’t forget,” Roy said, leaning in to breathe against his throat, slow and hot so that his back arched, and a half-sigh stuttered out of him, “that the sun is the largest object in our solar system.”

Ed stared up at Roy’s ceiling, which really should have had Inhabitant Does Not Play Fair written on it in huge red letters so that you knew the second you walked in.

“Fuck,” he said.

Roy kissed his Adam’s apple and then chased it with that terrible, talented mouth as Ed swallowed.

“Wait,” Ed said. “Why are you distracting me from blowing you?” The nerve itch started up—slow and subtle for now, but even when it was just a prickle, you could almost smell the panic right
around the corner. “Isn’t—I mean, isn’t that supposed to be—good? I guess—I probably wouldn’t be great right off the bat, but—”

If Roy was always planning to kiss him to shut him up, Ed was fairly certain he could live with that.

“I don’t want you to feel obligated,” Roy said.

“I don’t,” Ed said, blinking up at him, and for once it was the goddamn truth. “I want to.”

“I’m not much of a teacher,” Roy said.

Ed blinked at him again, but with ninety percent more silent accusation this time.

There was, inconceivably enough, a touch of pink in Roy’s cheeks. “You know what I mean.”

“Look,” Ed said, getting his arms underneath himself—thank somebody or something that they still worked; it’d been touch and go with his joints for a while there—to sit up, which required Roy to sit up with him, which shifted the balance, which was exactly what Ed wanted. “I like to keep shit—equitable. When I can. Okay? I mean—all you gotta do is—tell me if stuff’s good or not. Like twenty questions. I’ll figure it out.”

He was semi-bluffing, but sometimes if you semi-bluffed with enough pigheaded force, you blasted right through your own bullshit and wound up looking competent by accident.

Roy was sitting between Ed’s knees, with both feet on the bed, and he’d settled his hands on Ed’s shoulders. He was still wearing his pants, which was a crime against humanity, nature, and Ed’s libido, the lattermost being perhaps the most vengeful of the three. He leaned forward again, and Ed was expecting more of the kissing—not that he had any objections to that—but instead what he got was a touch of foreheads, and Roy closing his eyes.

“You’re too good to be true,” Roy said.

“Linguistically, that’s great,” Ed said. “Logistically, it’s impossible.”

Roy opened his eyes, and amusement flickered in them like tiny fireworks, and it was just the orgasm—obviously. It was just the orgasm, and the high Ed had gotten off of it; it was just biological imperative that made him want to hold his heart out in both hands and say Go ahead and take it.

“A lot of things that I thought were impossible have happened to me nonetheless,” Roy said, and there was more underneath it—more to it than just the repartee—but there wasn’t time to investigate before he went on, which was typical. “Evidently, you’re one of them.”

“Oh,” Ed said, lifting his hands and extending them, because he wanted to touch Roy’s collarbones again, and damn it, just now, he was allowed. Wasn’t he? He was pretty sure that was how this whole sex gig worked. “So I’m a ‘thing’ now? Gee, that was fast.”

Roy grinned again. Ed should’ve counted how many of those he’d unleashed without warning; they’d need numbers when they wrote up the citation and slapped that bastard with a fine. “If you want me to objectify you, all you have to do is ask.”

“What I want,” Ed said, dragging his fingertips slowly down Roy’s chest, fighting the urge to writhe with delight at the sheer complicatedness of the contours of it; he was really doing this; “is for you to let me make you feel half as good as you just did for me.”

“God,” Roy said, half-voiced, biting down on his bottom lip and finding something in Ed’s eyes
extremely interesting. “I’m… not sure I could deny you anything.”

“You talk more than anybody I’ve ever met,” Ed said. “It’s a good damn thing your voice is so—”

Shit. That was definitely the orgasm messing with his brain.

The worst part was that Roy had caught him red-handed and knotted-tongued; this smirk was a full step up from all of the other recent iterations.

“So what?” Roy asked, sounding like he was trying not to sound unspeakably delighted.

“You know exactly what it fucking is,” Ed said.

When you were sitting on your hot TA’s bed, naked, more or less at his mercy, really your only option was to grab the situation by the horns and wrench it around until it cooperated—or that was what Ed assumed; it wasn’t like he’d ever friggin’ tried this before—so that was what he intended to do.

He pushed, albeit gently, until Roy got the hint, choked on a breath, and let Ed play-shove him backwards, down onto the bed. Roy settled on his elbows, and he was still biting his damn lip, and if anyone had ever looked more delicious lying on a bed in a pair of jeans, Ed had never seen it. Anybody that had had probably passed out on the spot.

“Just—tell me what you like,” Ed said, which was a hell of a lot better than not saying anything, even if it did sound stupid. He ducked and put his hands on Roy’s belt before he could see if Roy’s expression reflected any derision at the stupidity of it. That was a great solution, except for the obvious fact that it meant that he had his fingertips on Roy’s belt buckle, and the heels of his hands were just close enough to Roy’s dick to feel the heat of it through the denim.

“I like you,” Roy said, and in a weird way it sounded almost wistful. “So neither of us can really lose here.”

Nobody had ever gotten anywhere by sitting still and thinking about what they knew they ought to do—Ed had lived by that principle for years, and sure, every now and again, it got you hit by a minivan, but most of the time—

Hesitation was the courage-killer; he took the tail of Roy’s belt in one hand and the buckle in the other and drew the end through slowly and deliberately, and then he tugged sharply just once to pop the tongue free. Did they make clothing terminology a little bit hot on purpose, or was that just his ruined brain at work? His hands wouldn’t stay steady as he set one index finger on the button of Roy’s jeans; this was—really happening, wasn’t it? This wasn’t a dream; this wasn’t an extremely detailed fantasy; he wasn’t going to get to wake up and rewind. How come this felt so much more final than Roy taking his pants off? Maybe it was the endorphins; maybe—

He took a breath, squared his shoulders, twisted his head to try to throw his hair back out of his face—which failed, so abjectly that it was probably hilarious—and undid Roy’s fly as smoothly and pseudo-calmly as he was capable of. This was important; he owed this; he had to do this right; he—

Was sneaking a glance at Roy’s face as he curled his fingers into the pockets to give himself some leverage to pull, and the only word he could think of to describe it was rapture. Roy was ready to get beamed up into the heavens or whatever it was all those weirdos had thought was going to happen a couple of years back. Roy was prepared for Jesus to pat him on the shoulder and bring him home; Roy looked so absolutely, untouchably, indescribably content—so enormously grateful—

And that helped. Because even if Ed wasn’t perfect, even if he fucked it up a little bit here and there
as he fumbled through—that was not the face of a man who was about to get up and walk out. That was not even the face of a man who was going to criticize, most likely. That was, if Ed was not mistaken, the face of a man who was already well on his way to bliss before Ed had even put his mouth anywhere that didn’t get a tan.

Ed wasn’t sure Roy was the type to tan in any case—his skin was sort of an even ivory tone everywhere, which would’ve been supremely unfair if it didn’t imply that he’d burn crustacean colors in awful splotches if he wasn’t careful to keep it all uniformly safe.

That was all, of course, entirely beside the point, since the point was that Ed was kneeling naked in between Roy Mustang’s thighs, probably bleeding machine oil onto the white comforter, with his hands full of Roy’s pants and his head full of second guesses.

Roy made a soft noise, although soft might not have been the most appropriate possible adjective, considering that the noise in question qualified as both soft and extremely pornographic. The half-lidded eyes and the slow burn thing that he was doing with them was somehow even worse. “You don’t have t—”

“You can’t rush art,” Ed said.

Ed took it all back—pornographic noises followed by half-lidded eyes followed by the smirk of the century was the worst. Nothing could top this. “Is that what it is? In that case, by all means, Michaelangelo, take your t—”

“You teased me forever,” Ed said. “If you don’t like your own medicine, tough shit.”

“Spoken like someone who’s never abused cough syrup,” Roy said, stretching both arms over his head, the fucker, and— “I mean it, though,” he said, and now his whole face had gone soft—regular-soft, not pornographic-soft—and his voice had along with it. “Please don’t do anything you’re not eager to. I don’t mind. And even if I did, that’s not the point.”

Ed worked the spit around in his mouth for a second. At least his saliva had come back from wherever it’d disappeared to while he was the one on the receiving end of truly unreasonable amounts of pleasure all over Roy’s bed.

“I want to,” he said. “I just—not—knowing stuff—is—that’s the part that—”

“I know,” Roy said, and he reached out far enough to drag his fingers through one of the dangling segments of Ed’s hair, and that felt—nice. Both physically, and for what the gesture meant. “There’s no pressure from me. How’s that? None in any direction. Zero forces. We’re in a vacuum.”

“No, we’re not,” Ed said. “We’re in your bedroom.”

Roy grinned at him, dorkily, and Ed managed a slightly shaky smile back.

“All right,” Ed said. “I—yeah. I’ve never—”

He could have gone on to finish that sentence with backed down from a single thing that scared me in my entire life, and believe me, next to some of the shit I’ve had to do, in hospitals and in lawyer’s offices and in the alleys on the streets, none of this even really registers.

But one of the other things he’d learned over the years was that sometimes if you pushed yourself into the deep end of the pool before your brain could wonder whether it was cold, it was too late, and the water turned out to be fine.
So he adjusted his grip on Roy’s jeans to include Roy’s underwear, dragged all the fabric down and out of the way, and dove in to apply his tongue to Roy’s dick before his mind knew that there was anything that it might want to change itself about.

The first thing that was sort of bizarre was that it didn’t really taste like—anything. Apparently skin didn’t taste like much at all, or at least it didn’t when it was clean, or at least Roy’s didn’t, or…

Ed registered a faint note of surreal disappointment upon sealing his mouth around Roy’s cock and sucking experimentally, which was that he was never going to be able to look at popsicles the same way ever again. That sort of retroactively ruined a lot of summers on Winry’s back porch.

But on the upside, holy shit, Roy had just made a sound like he was being murdered in the best way possible, and his heels were sliding on the sheets, and—

And one of his hands had balled up the comforter in his fist, and the other had just buried itself in Ed’s hair.

“Oh, God,” Roy said, in a voice that was recognizably his, but so much—fainter, and hoarser, and throatier. “Oh… God, Ed—ah—mmm—” Ed wasn’t sure if that was a good sound, so he froze where he was, one hand braced on the bed, the other holding Roy’s pants down to clear his canvas. It was hard to see anything from this angle through his own bangs, on top of which Roy had thrown his head back, so the visual cues were pretty much nil at this point. The erection currently hot and heavy and throbbing in Ed’s mouth hadn’t ceased to be any of those things, however, so he figured that was a good sign. “Mm—you’re perfect; you’re perfect, just—careful of—your teeth.”

That made sense. Ed was pretty sure Roy’s hadn’t touched his dick. He definitely would have noticed; everything in the region had been so hyper-sensitive that he was relatively confident that he could describe the shape of Roy’s tonsils.

He tried to keep his lips between his teeth and Roy’s skin, which… must’ve looked kind of ridiculous, although he wasn’t sure Roy would have been able to see it anyway—and which also made it more difficult to maintain the right suction, and also his jaw was starting to ache in a way that was more fascinating than anything else thus far—

“Fuck,” Roy breathed, without an undertone of something akin to pain this time, and tragically Ed couldn’t pause to punch the air, or he’d almost definitely lose the mouth seal.

It wasn’t even—hot, exactly, although there was definitely something viscerally sexy about the ambient musk thing; it wasn’t that there was anything especially titillating about actively fellating, but—

But there was nothing in the fucking world as deeply, wholly, gut-tremblingly satisfying as listening to Roy whine helplessly in the back of his throat because of what you were doing with your mouth.

“Oh—God,” Roy said, and he was writhing now, and that was making it much harder to maintain a consistent rhythm, and the jaw soreness was no longer interesting; it just hurt.

But then Roy twisted his hand in Ed’s hair until Ed’s scalp tingled, and that—

Ed didn’t really care what else happened tonight, because that was fucking beautiful; that—

“Ed,” Roy said—gasped, really, and he pulled just a little harder, and sparks scattered in Ed’s brain—

And the vein on the underside of Roy’s dick pulsed against his tongue, and everyone had always
made it sound like cum tasted *nasty*, but it—didn’t, or Roy’s didn’t; it was sort of salty, and it obviously wasn’t as appealing as soda syrup or something, but—it wasn’t—*bad*, just… a little weird, and really warm, and… gooey.

Christ. Ed was such a fucking romantic.

But at least he’d fucking swallowed his first time up to bat. Wasn’t that supposed to be an accomplishment, or something?

Roy had released his hair, and he sat back, massaging at his jaw a little with the palm of his hand, and chanced a good look.

Roy had somehow already managed to sprawl semi-artfully across the pillows, wrapping his arm around one of them and laying his cheek on it, the better to gaze at Ed in a way that could only be described as adoring.

Ed’s cheeks caught fire again.

“What?” he said.

“Are you sure you haven’t done that before?” Roy asked.

Now that he no longer had a task at hand—or at mouth—Ed was becoming increasingly aware of just how fucking naked he was here. Roy, in typical style, was just sort of lying there with his hips half-turned, looking like an especially debauched ad—like one of the models on the walls of those overpriced shopping-mall fashion stores that didn’t know how to turn on their goddamn lights.

“Yeah,” Ed said. Was it saucy or provocative or something to lift up a hand and wipe his mouth with the back of it to clear off any stray spit? Oh, flippin’ well; it was going to bother him if he didn’t. A part of him wanted to say *How was it? I’ll let the guy with the blog know that even his vague advice kind of paid off*, but that sounded like an excruciatingly awkward post-coital conversation even by his standards.

Was it post-coital? They hadn’t—*done* that. Not really. How much did oral count? That was only third base, right?

Ed glanced around himself on the bed as subtly as he could manage, but his memory served him right: all his clothes were on the floor.

“Are you okay?” Roy asked.

“Yeah,” Ed said. He wasn’t sure yet whether it was true, but it would be eventually. “Just—got kinda cold.” He’d meant it as an excuse, but that *was* true, actually, now that he was thinking about it.

He slid to the edge of the bed and then carefully put his weight down on his right leg first, then the left, making sure they were both stable before he levered himself up. Roy had been doing all kinds of ridiculous and improbable shit to the organic knee lately. He didn’t know how much he could trust it to hold him right now, and the other one had been known to hurl him onto the floor if he wasn’t careful about how he put his weight on it, so better safe than sorry and bearing some facial bruises of the demarcations of the floor.

Hunting around for your crap was harder when you couldn’t rely on your own joints, which was how he ended up carefully bending double to pick up his abandoned pants, which earned him a long, slow, appreciative whistle from Roy.
“Oh, my God,” Ed said, and he was ninety percent sure that sixty percent of the blush was flattery, so it was beating out the embarrassment for now. “You don’t have to sweet-talk me. We’re past that part.”

“I’m not,” Roy said. “You have the most beautiful ass known to man, and the connoisseur in me can’t stay silent.”

If nothing else, that idiom fit, if you looked at it the right way. With the exception of family, basically-family, and a couple of nurses right after the premiere of Ed Versus Minivan, Round 1, there weren’t a whole lot of women who knew his ass.

Then again, with the same exceptions, there weren’t a whole lot of guys who had seen it before now. Ed had treated high school locker rooms much the same way as he treated college dorm showers, for all the same reasons.

“I don’t think that’s the connoisseur,” Ed said. “I think it’s just you.”

“I’ve been told before that I need to be gagged,” Roy said. “Sometimes in a good way, but usually not.”

Ed—


“Where the hell is my shirt?” he choked out instead of responding directly, as that would have set him firmly in the fast lane on the interstate towards certain death.

By the rustling, he guessed that Roy was refastening his pants—which was a bit of a relief, and a bit of a tragedy—and sliding over to the edge of the bed. “I swear I didn’t throw it. Or hide it. I like that shirt; it looks good on you. Although everything does.”

“Holy shit,” Ed said, turning towards him and—unsurprisingly—receiving a faceful of the spotlight grin. “You don’t have t—”

“I know I don’t have to,” Roy said. “But I want to, and it’s true.”

Ed glared.

The grin broadened.

“Here,” Roy said, which at least stopped him from beaming for a few seconds. He stood and started around the edge of the bed—touching Ed’s shoulders very gently, one hand on each, as he passed behind, for absolutely no reason whatsoever—towards a dresser Ed hadn’t paid any attention to before now. “Let me lend you one of mine. I suppose I should get my pajamas on in any case, unless of course you’d be interested in a reprise.”

He was holding out a small, folded red fabric thing. Ed took it. It was soft. But not porn-soft; this one was soft because it was a T-shirt. Christ, was he ever going to be able to think that word again without thinking about Roy being naked?

Well. There were worse things.

“Thank you,” he said. He paused, then raised the shirt. “Um. For.”
Roy leaned forward, one hand rising to cup Ed’s jaw, and then kissed his forehead, which—

Wasn’t there supposed to be—

A process, or something? Weren’t you supposed to work your way up to all that cutesy, personal, intimate-y stuff? You couldn’t just dive into the sap deep end on the first not-really-date-followed-by-reciprocal-oral, could you?

Evidently you could, but surely it was in the rules that you weren’t supposed to, or—

Or Ed had just… really seemed so goddamn repulsive to everyone who’d ever been near to him before that they’d rewritten the rules to avoid having to touch him.

That would have seemed immensely logical except for the fact that Roy, standing in front of him, had demonstrated himself to be, firstly, obnoxiously gorgeous; secondly, greatly experienced; and thirdly, relatively discerning. Roy was qualified to judge whether someone was repulsive or not, and if he thought Ed was, he was a damn fine actor who didn’t seem to care about being paid to perform.

“You’re very welcome,” Roy said, and then he sauntered off in the direction of the bathroom without saying another word about wanting to return to the sack and do other… things. That was what he’d meant, wasn’t it?

Jesus, Ed was so far out of his league here that they’d fired him from his previous position as a dugout janitor at this point.

He put his pants on, and then Roy’s shirt. It smelled like Roy. He hadn’t realized at the time that Roy had a smell—everyone did, of course, but the distinctions were subtle enough that until you were paying attention, it didn’t really register.

He sat down on the edge of the bed and folded his hands in his lap and looked down at the way his sweatpants folded into the grooves in his metal knee.

It wasn’t like anything had changed—not really. He’d just… undertaken a physical action that he hadn’t undertaken prior. It was like tying your shoe for the first time, except that your parents probably didn’t want pictures of this one to plaster all over your baby book. But it wasn’t—it didn’t matter. It just… was. Nothing that anyone else had ever done or expressed a desire to do between the sheets—or on top of them, or on the couch, or in the backseat of a car, or… wherever—had ever really bothered him, as long as they weren’t hurting anybody else. Or not hurting anybody else who didn’t want it and hadn’t agreed to it, in a reasoned and respectful way.

It wasn’t even that he felt dirty or something, exactly—just—slightly—altered. Slightly peeled-raw. A little bit vulnerable, and a little bit delicate, and a little bit new. And he didn’t have the faintest damn idea how to fix it, or even just to cover it up.

It didn’t mean anything. It didn’t reflect on him in any way. It didn’t change who he was, or what he was capable of, or anything like that. It didn’t really change anything at all.

But there was some part of him that needed an acknowledgement that it had happened, and he wasn’t precisely the same as he’d been two hours ago.

Was that stupid?

Probably.

Could he avoid it?
Probably not.

The bathroom door opened, and footsteps—footsteps much more even and elegant than Ed’s, not that he was keeping score, or anything—proceeded across the kitchen, and then Roy was in the doorway, and then…

Roy didn’t say *Shit* out loud, but he didn’t have to, because his expression said it for him, emphasizing every plosive.

“Hey,” he said instead, and practically instantly he’d crossed the room and sat down next to Ed—closer than friend-distance, but just far enough that their elbows didn’t touch. “Are you okay?”

Roy had really nice knees. Was Ed allowed to touch his thigh? He felt like he’d seen that in movies more than he had in real life—that sort of cat-paw pat, tapping and then retracting, for a moment’s reassurance. Did people actually do that, or was it one of those gestures that just happened to look good on-screen?

“Yeah,” he said, trying to mean it. “My brain’s just… doing a stupid thing.”

Roy’s nearer hand rose slowly, settled on Ed’s shoulder, and squeezed. “I find they’re notorious for that.”

Ed eyed him. “You don’t strike me as the stupid type.”

Roy smiled. He had a whole different face when he was being completely genuine. Ed really, really… liked that. It felt weirdly sort of—safe.

“I have a friend,” Roy said, “who would be lying on the floor, howling with laughter, if she’d heard you say that.”

“Everybody needs one of those friends,” Ed said. “If you’re really shit at the whole social interaction gig, that’s the only friend you really need.”

“You’re not shit at social interaction,” Roy said.

Ed stared at him.

“Ah,” Roy said. “What?”

“All this time,” Ed said. “All this time, I thought you were smart, but apparently you’re just *guessing*, and so far you—”

“Oh, hush,” Roy said.

Then Roy paused, head tilted just slightly to the side, and unveiled a completely new smile that Ed liked even more than any that had come before. There was a dose of mischief, and a pinch of tentative excitement, and the rest of it was just… cute. Eager and attentive and weirdly sort of sweet.

“Here,” he said. “Come on.”

Before Ed could ask what, exactly, was ‘here’, since Roy hadn’t indicated anything that hadn’t been present previously, Roy was scooting up towards the head of the bed, wrangling the comforter back far enough to crawl inside, and flopping down with his head on one of the pillows. He settled, and then he extended a hand.

“Come on,” he said again.
“Oh, hell, no,” Ed said.

“Oh, hell, yes,” Roy said, wriggling his fingers. “Dessert is the best part of the meal.”

“What?” Ed said.

“It sounded much more convincing in my head,” Roy said. He gestured again, beckoning this time. “Come on. Please?”

Bastard knew all of Ed’s weak points. Then again, staggeringly attractive man in a bed and politeness were pretty standard weaknesses, so maybe it wasn’t a targeted assault so much as a reliable strategy.

Dragging one’s ass up the mattress with a metal knee was even more awkward in practice than most people probably would have guessed, so instead Ed stood up from the bed and moved around it and then climbed in next to Roy like he was getting in for the first time.

Which—on further reflection—he was. He’d just—climbed into Roy’s bed. Like it was normal; like it was his own bed; like he was planning to sleep here. He was, wasn’t he? Unless Roy changed his mind very suddenly, in which case it was back to the drawing board, and most likely back to not-Santiago. But surely this was the kind of monumental milestone that had to be commemorated with a moment of silence, if not a parade; surely—

Roy shifted in closer to him and started stroking his hair back from his face.

“Talk to me,” he said.

“About what?” Ed asked.

“I don’t know,” Roy said. “Anything.” He followed the momentum of his hand and drew a fingertip down Ed’s temple to his jaw, and then around it, and then settled his palm against Ed’s chest. “Tell me about your family.”

“Well, you got the rundown on Al,” Ed said. “I mean—more or less. I fucked up his childhood, and he’s brilliant and amazing, and he loves cats.”

“You must not have fucked it up,” Roy said, “or he wouldn’t be brilliant and amazing. Besides which—how much older are you? You said your parents—”

“Especially kittens,” Ed said.

Roy looked at him for a long second, clearly chewing on a few things that he was considering saying, and then… turned the corners of his mouth up instead of saying any of them. “Are dogs okay too?”

“I think if it’s small and fuzzy,” Ed said, “it’s worth cooing over.”

“Bunnies?” Roy asked. At Ed’s nod, he pursed his lips. “Chinchillas?”

“Definitely,” Ed said.

Roy’s smile split into a grin again. What an asshole. “You?”

Ed fumbled for some faint semblance of wit. He might’ve had an iota of that stuff once, somewhere; maybe he’d shoved it into a back corner, or it’d fallen off the edge of something else that he’d balanced it on; if he could just find it— “Wh—y—Mustang—I’m not even—I’m not fuzzy—”
Roy reached up to muss his hair, which was even fucking worse. “I beg to differ.”

“You can beg all you want,” Ed said, infusing his voice with as much of a growl as he could while remaining comprehensible. “I’m still gonna kick your ass.”

Roy fired off another one of those winning expressions. Ed couldn’t believe this asshole talked about having friends like they were long-term; how could anyone put up with this at length without imploding under the sheer force of his stupid charm? “How about you save it until after we’ve talked about your brother some more?”

“All right,” Ed said. “I’ll make it quick, so there’s still time to kill you and grind your bones up into cornmeal. He wanted to be a zookeeper for a while, but lately he’s been talking about being a veterinarian instead, because he likes medicine and biology almost as much as he likes animals. He’d be an amazing doctor—just ’cause he’s so smart and compassionate and good at knowing what people need, emotionally, plus what they need to hear. He inherited all my people skills—y’know, one of those. Anyway, I worry that it’d wear on him, though, because he’s a perfectionist, and he’s so invested in people, and… I mean, even the best doctor’s gonna lose a patient eventually. Probably lots of the time. And whether he was dealing with people or pets, I think that’d eat him alive. Winry’n I’ve been trying to steer him towards stuff that involves less… stress, but I dunno. Nobody ever realizes that he’s actually the stubborn one, because he seems so much more composed and calm and stuff than I am on the surface, but he’s got a will like iron when he knows what he wants.”

“Coming from you,” Roy said, and he was playing with Ed’s hair again, which almost made the bullshit thing he’d said redeemable, “that’s an extremely high compliment.”

“All my compliments are high compliments,” Ed said. He glared. “If you get my drift.”


“Right,” Ed said. “Anyway—I’m hoping maybe we can nudge him enough that he’ll at least consider some alternatives. But if he knows we’re doing it, he’s gonna do the opposite just to spite us.”

“I didn’t realize that was hereditary,” Roy said.

Ed poked him in the middle of the chest. “I’m gonna tack an extra minute onto your ass-kicking for that.”

“Good,” Roy said. “I should hate to put you to the trouble but not leave you enough time to do it thoroughly. So how does Winry fit into all of this, exactly? You said she’s—a childhood friend? Is that it?”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “Only she stayed a friend the whole way through, so it’s way more than that now. I really—she’s basically like my sister. I guess her grandma and my fuckoff dad were friends way back in the day, and we lived next door as kids, and after Winry’s parents died and my dad disappeared into the goddamn ether, we all sorta leaned on each other a lot. I guess small families kinda have to merge like that sometimes, just so they’re big enough to sustain themselves. I dunno. Don’t have any data on that that’s not anecdotal, but—anyway. She’s the fucking best. When Al was real sick, she was bringing me my homework at the hospital every single night, and even though hers was different, she’d make copies of mine and sit down and do them with me so that I’d have to keep up. And when he was getting real bad right before the transplant, like—just weak and miserable all the time, and he got pneumonia, and we thought… I mean, it was bad—she’d drive me to the hospital after school every day, ’cause I was too upset to get in a car and not wreck my ass. I
mean—he’s practically her brother, too, but she was so fucking strong the whole way through it. She saved my life. I’d fistfight a fucking grizzly bear for that girl.”

“That’s wonderful,” Roy said, and he looked sincere about it. “I’m glad. I’m glad you had someone like that. I’m glad she was there for you.”

Ed had to rub his face with both hands to try to scrub some of the chagrin off. Too late he remembered where those hands had been recently. “She’s so much fucking better than I deserve,” he said.

He could hear Roy frowning. “That’s not—”

“I mean it,” Ed said. “I’m not being self-deprecating or whatever. I actually—for a while there, I was sleeping at the hospital half the time and just walking back and forth to school. It was rough, and… there was a day where she was forcing me to write an essay that was due that week, and I cracked and just—screamed at her. I knew it was shitty, but—I was just so damn tired, and I said—I said, y’know, ‘What the fuck does any of this matter if my brother is gonna die? What the fuck is the point of any of it then?’ and she just said ‘We don’t know if he is. And we do know that you’re not. You have the hard job. You have to keep going. We can’t help with the living or dying part, but if you don’t do this, and you mess up your grade, and you can’t get into the schools you want, and all this is for nothing—is that doing right by him either way? You don’t get to quit. Not yet.’”

Roy was quiet for a long time—a suspiciously long time.

Ed peeked at him, and then poked at him. The smile this time was slightly distracted, and slightly strained.

“I was just thinking,” Roy said, “that I should really introduce her to Riza. And then I remembered that I don’t want to die.”

Ed raised his eyebrows. “’Cause they’d obliterate the entire world, or because they’d get along?’

“I think it would be both,” Roy said, “but in the opposite order. I’m ‘Drama King’ with the crown emoji in Riza’s phone. She once fell through a collapsing theater stage and almost impaled herself on a shard of the metal frame, and the only thing she said while she was bleeding everywhere was ‘Well, that’s the second biggest pain in my ass today,’ and looked right at me.”

There was so much delightful information in that sentence that Ed didn’t know where to start.

Well, yeah. He did. “Theater? You were in theater? Holy shit, of course you were.”

“Well of course I was,” Roy said. “She started hanging around to humor me and ended up becoming the best stage manager anyone had ever seen. The teachers who sponsored us had nightmares about disappointing her.” He sighed. “I was also in speech and debate, and on the newspaper, and the president of the French Club.”

Involuntarily, Ed made a face. Even more involuntarily, he said, “I would’ve hated you,” and then had to follow up hastily with, “Not—personally, y’know, but—in principle.”

“I hated me, too,” Roy said. “Both ways. But if I stayed busy enough, and made everyone else’s business mine, I could almost forget that there was a giant, gaping void-pit that I was trying to fill.”

Ed winced, and then he leaned forward and leaned his head against Roy’s in a way he was hoping seemed sympathetic. It was. Or it was meant to be. Gestures were just really hard, was all.
Roy kissed his forehead again, which probably meant that Ed had succeeded, and also that he needed to have a talk with Roy about the boundary line between gross-but-cute and just-gross. He was definitely going to do that. Tomorrow. Or the day after. Next week at the latest. It was urgent and catastrophic and all that shit.

“I had such a spectacular arc that I should have gone into aeronautics,” Roy said. “I tried to keep it up as an undergraduate—only worse, I suppose; I was trying to run a theater company where the proceeds went to charity, and although at least I dropped a few of the other things, I more or less stopped sleeping. I was in love with my best friend, who I happened to live with; I thought it was the romance of the century, but apparently he thought we were both just experimenting. I didn’t realize that until he turned up totally over the moon one day and told me he was in love with a girl, and by the way, we should probably stop sleeping together, though it had been really very fun.”

Ed cringed so violently that his cheeks hurt. “Oh. Oh. Shit.”

His comprehension of this situation was complicated by the fact that it was nearly impossible to imagine anybody not wanting Roy. Sure, he was a bit of a surface-level asshole, but he was magnetic, and five minutes with him drew you in close enough that you were pretty sure the asshole surface was porous, and there was another layer beneath, and who was he really under there—?

“It wasn’t his fault,” Roy said. “I wasn’t especially clear about expectations, and I ignored a lot of red flags that I shouldn’t have. I was under the impression that if you just cared about someone hard enough, some of your feelings would bleed over, and they’d have no choice but to care the same way back. So I gave him as close as I could to two hundred percent, which… honestly probably made it worse. Me. The relationship. All of it.”

Ed wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to know, because other people’s pain always lit up special little sad neurons in his brain, but the obligations of conversation were forcing his hand. Or his mouth, as it were. “What happened?”

“They dated,” Roy said. “She was every bit as enamored of him as he was of her—which I can’t blame her for. I spent two weeks on the razor-edge of a nervous breakdown, and Riza told me during a rehearsal that my blocking was shit, and I stood on the stage and cried in front of all of my mortified actors, and afterwards she got the whole story out of me. She threatened me with sending me to a professional if I didn’t dial back my commitments, then did it anyway even after I caved. She showed up at my door and personally escorted me to every appointment until they were no longer so excruciating that I would have thrown myself off a building to avoid them.” He smiled, ruefully this time—a thousand-secrets, hundred-thousand-small-regrets sort of smile. “I started cooking for her to try to make up some fraction of the debt. She’s remarkably adept at everything else she’s ever tried, but the instant she gets near an oven, everyone and everything in the vicinity tastes like charcoal.”

“Ouch,” Ed said. “Also, relatable.”

“Hashtag too-real, winking emoji,” Roy said, perfectly calmly, and it was so unheralded and so incongruous that Ed didn’t have time to process it and laugh before Roy was moving on. “Long story short, I stayed in love with him; he got married; they had a beautiful daughter; Riza took to greeting me with the words ‘To hell with that, you’re magnificent,’ and making me repeat it until it started to sound true.” He paused. “And then Maes died in a car accident during his commute back from his wonderful, fulfilling job.”

“Holy fuck,” Ed said.

“And that’s my life story,” Roy said, trying to reshape his grimace into something else and not really
succeeding. He reached up with a single fingertip and tapped the end of Ed’s nose, which—fucking motherfucker was losing sympathy points at an alarming rate now. “Thank you for listening.”

“You put up with mine,” Ed said. “S’reciprocity or some shit.”

Except that his had been three times longer, and Roy had jumped into his in the middle, without saying anything about his family or his childhood or where he was from. But you couldn’t really push about something like that, could you? Not when you were lying in bed with somebody.

“I liked yours,” Roy said.

“That makes one of us,” Ed said.

At least the corners of the grin were back. “Touché.”

“Easy for you to say,” Ed said, “Monsieur President of the flippin’ French Club.”

Roy laughed—loud and bright and genuine, hard enough to shake the bed.

That felt good. That felt way too good. Being able to haul him out of the slow-sucking quicksand of unkind memories and coax real joy out of him, even just for a second, was disproportionately gratifying. What the hell was even going on here?

“I’ll regale you with those stories another time,” Roy said. “They need a novel chapter of their own.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Ed said. “Meanwhile, let me go pee.”

“A fine idea,” Roy said.

“Not as fine as you,” Ed said, and it was a good damn thing he was halfway to the edge of the mattress when it came out of his mouth, because his face lit like a forest fire again, and Roy didn’t need to know that Ed couldn’t even flirt without blushing to the roots of his hair.

He kind of liked Roy’s bathroom, though. That was a weird thing to observe, wasn’t it? The features and condition of somebody’s bathroom weren’t really grounds for an assessment of an individual, were they? If you started down that road, you had to start interpreting every single detail of someone’s life as a choice, conscious or otherwise, that reflected back on…

Actually, that… made a lot of sense.

Ed liked Roy’s bathroom. Ed liked Roy. Ed could not fucking believe that this was happening to him—this, to him—and was planning to do his damnedest to ride this as far as it would take him without looking the gift horse in the mouth.

Horse jokes: he had to pick up the pace on those. Roy was going to kill him, and it was going to be worth it.

If Roy didn’t kill him, Winry would. He’d gotten action before she had despite being by far the more obnoxious of the two of them, and she was six times prettier than he was, and she’d been trying to find someone. It wasn’t like either of them had ever had the luxury of believing that life was fair, but this was still going to be kind of a kick in the teeth for her, wasn’t it? She’d be happy for him, because she was amazing like that, but—it’d hurt. He knew it would. How could he go about explaining it to make it hurt as little as possible? He’d have to think on that.
When he came back to the bed, Roy was curled up, watching him walk through the doorway, smiling like it was a present, or a privilege. Ed’s stomach dropped, and then it twisted up and turned all warm. Shit. With his luck, that almost had to mean that he was dying.

He was assuming that they were eventually going to, y’know, *sleep*, so this time, when he sat down, he took his left leg in both hands so that he could reposition it in a way that would hopefully be inconspicuous later on. He’d gotten some pretty good practice with this whole gig since moving into the dorms, but some nights it insisted on being finicky, and with his luck—

“Is it uncomfortable?” Roy asked, drawing Ed’s eyes to him.

Ed, ever an emblem of uncompromising wit, managed, “Huh?”

“The—prosthetic,” Roy said, gesturing vaguely. “Is it uncomfortable to sleep in?”

Ed wasn’t sure what direction this conversation was headed, and the safest solution in a situation like that was to hedge your bets with a noncommittal answer: “Kind of, I guess.”

“You can take it off,” Roy said, blinking at him. “I mean—if you want to, and if it’d…” Apparently the awkwardness had reached a critical threshold for him, which confirmed years of evidence that Ed’s limit was miles higher than ordinary people’s. Roy grinned and winked, and the awkwardness packed its bags and took off, and Ed had to admit to a bit of awe. “You can take it all off, baby.”

Ed wrinkled his nose. “Has that ever, in your entire life, actually worked on someone?”

“No,” Roy said. “But there’s a first time for everything.”

“That is the dumbest damn overused platitude in the long-ass list,” Ed said. “Of *course* there is. That’s—it’s part of the definition of a thing; it’s…” He swallowed, took a deep breath, and looked down at his knee. “I—just—don’t want it to get—weird.”

“I promise to be no weirder than usual,” Roy said—but softly, kind of.

Ed took another deep breath, and then a third one, and then decided he should probably stop counting before this got embarrassing. More embarrassing. Whatever.

“Okay,” he said. It wasn’t, but occasionally if you just pushed ahead anyway—

He shifted to put both legs over the side of the bed and rolled his left sweatpants leg up high enough to pop-slide-pull the casing and the lining free from where they hugged the paltry remnants of his thigh. He didn’t really like looking at it; he didn’t really like *other* people looking at it; the whole thing was just—

Bad. Bad memories; bad news.

His heart was pounding a little bit again. He wouldn’t normally have shown this to anyone who wasn’t family, let alone someone he’d never spent any significant amount of time with before today. But something in him really *wanted* to. That was the scary part.

When you threw yourself into something wholehearted from the get-go, you always ended up leaving pieces of yourself behind. Wasn’t there some oldies song about how only fools rush in, or something? And the story Roy had just told him would have spelled it out as a caveat even if his own life hadn’t taught him the lesson over and over and over again. He knew that. He knew better.

And yet, here he was, leaning his leg up against the nightstand, holding his hand two inches back for
a second to see if it was stable, tugging his sweatpants leg back down, letting it trail past the nothing-part, and climbing back into Roy Mustang’s obscenely cozy fucking bed.

He settled down. He was obviously not curled up as close to the edge as possible to put the maximum amount of space between them. He was obviously not clutching the pillow a little from the underside with one hand and carefully using the other to draw the bedclothes up in an attempt to eliminate any possibility that Roy would stare at the nothing-part and change his mind about all of this.

He set his jaw and chanced a glance. Roy was watching him, but it didn’t look like staring—at least not yet. Just… regular watching. Whatever that was supposed to look like.

When their eyes met, Roy smiled, gently. Nothing big or cheesy or overstated. No It’s okay! You’re still great! I’m a decent enough person to proclaim, loudly, that I accept you exactly the way you are!

“Hey,” Roy said. “Move in a little bit?”

He was patting the mattress about midway between his body and where Ed had settled, which was a dangerous prospect in and of itself. At what point in a relationship was it permissible to share body heat like that?

Roy had to know better than he did, and trusting—albeit cautiously—in Roy’s instructions on that basis hadn’t messed Ed up too much so far.

One of the things that the rugged, reckless amputee life taught you early was how to manipulate your own body weight with fewer points of leverage, and Ed had mastered that one so easily that he’d entertained the idea of past lives for a moment or two the first time he’d thought about it—it just felt so much like muscle memory; so much like something he already knew.

“How’s that?” he asked once he’d shifted, which sounded really stupid out loud, but Roy’d been so specific about the spot—

“Perfect,” Roy said, darting in to kiss the bridge of his nose this time, which was also awful and disgusting; the man was a menace and needed to be stopped. “Roll over?”

Maybe Ed had been right to worry. Maybe Roy was changing his mind; maybe it was too much for him; maybe he didn’t want to see it; maybe—

Maybe he was going to wriggle in and conform his body to Ed’s back the moment that Ed complied, and then fold one arm between them and snake the other one over across Ed’s torso, burying his face in Ed’s hair.

“How’s that?” he asked, like it could possibly be anything other than fucking sublime.

“It’s—” Couldn’t say that. “—nice.” Shit. That was a cop-out word these days, and everybody knew it. “Really—nice.”

That was, of course, understating it so heinously that the Lie Police probably should have busted through the door that instant and clapped Ed in irons and hauled him away.

It was everything he’d wanted.

It was everything he’d tried not to dream about; everything he never would have dared to ask for—
Just—this. Just lying still in a warm bed with someone’s soft breathing in his ear, their head leaned against his, their cheek nestled in against the back of his shoulder, body wrapped around him, unassuming, unapologetic, utterly comfortable and so staggeringly safe.

He heard himself make a very small sound in the back of his throat—something like approval; something like submission; something like choking on the sheer disbelief. This was everything—

“Mmm.” Roy murmuring against the back of his head was too good. Was this happening? He was almost too shocked by the prospect of it to appreciate it, but it would have been impossible not to sink in and revel even if he’d known for a fact that it wasn’t real. “Have you ever spooned before?”

“Is that what it’s called?” Ed forced out, and his voice only trembled towards the end. “S’a stupid name for it.”

“Conceded,” Roy said. “Much better all around than the association with silverware would imply.”

“Never liked a spoon ’s much as I like this,” Ed’s dumbass mouth said, without filing a request with his intellect like it knew it was supposed to. “And I ate a lot of canned soup as a kid.”

“Me, too,” Roy said.

That was an odd thing to bond about, wasn’t it?

He brought both arms up and hugged Roy’s to himself a little. God, fuck, that just felt so—

Right.

“Comfortable?” Roy asked.

“Yeah,” Ed said, which… the Lie Police were so hot on his trail he could almost hear the sirens. “What kind’f soup?”

“Campbell’s chicken noodle,” Roy said. “It was on a lower shelf.”

Ed was too soothed and too sleepy to laugh very hard, but he mustered an attempt. “Tryin’ to imagine that mattering to you.”

“I got patted on the head quite a lot in my youth,” Roy said. “I was always secretly hoping I’d wind up being six-foot-two and built like a monster truck so that no one could ever patronize me about it again.”

Ed was struck dumb for a long second.

Roy kissed his ear.

“You’ve made it yours,” he said. “And you haven’t let it slow you down. Those are the important things, aren’t they?”

“Easy for you to say,” Ed said.

He could feel Roy smiling against his ear, which was an absolutely surreal and not-at-all unpleasant sensation. “Fair point.” He squeezed gently with the arm curled around Ed. “Times like this, though, I have to say that I think you’re the perfect size.”

“You have such nice teeth,” Ed mumbled into the pillow. “It’ll be a pity when I have to knock ’em out.”
Roy breathed a laugh. “Is cheesiness a punching offense? I’m in trouble.”


“Interesting,” Roy said. “My philosophy has always been ‘If someone looks good, try to hit that.’”

Ed… snorted.

Which was real cute and shit. He’d probably just fired snot into Roy’s sheets at supersonic speeds.

Except that Roy laughed again, more fully this time, and hugged him a little closer, and… and hell, this couldn’t be happening. This couldn’t be real. Stuff like this—stuff that people like Roy would call *fortuitous*, probably in the middle of a sentence packed with other SAT words—didn’t exist in Ed’s universe. The world kicked his ass, smacked him in the throat, and sucker-punched him in the kidneys when he went into a wheezing fetal position on the pavement. And he waited, and spat the blood out of his mouth, and dragged himself upright using anything he could grab onto. He was envisioning a parking lot brawl here, so probably he’d be grabbing onto a car. And probably the car alarm would go off, and then the store’s security might come out looking for him, and he’d have to hobble off towards the street trying to look inconspicuous with blood smeared on his chin.

…the point was that he didn’t know how to deal with things going right. And thus far, Roy fell so squarely into that category that he didn’t have the descriptive powers to explain any of it. Roy was doing and saying and *being* things that he would never have even known to ask for. It was uncanny. It was so much better and so much more specific than anything he could have dreamed.

Something was going to get fucked.

He knew it. He knew it in his blood; in his bones; in his gut; in his heart of hearts—he knew. You couldn’t fight gravity, you couldn’t fight entropy, and you couldn’t fight the essence of who you were. They could be managed, and resisted, but you’d never win. Not ever. The universe bent to them.

Nothing good had ever happened to Ed that didn’t have another thing coming. He’d never fired off any kind of good luck that didn’t have a recoil; he’d never had a single bite of ambrosia without an aftertaste. That was how it worked. That was who he was.

But maybe, if he played his cards carefully, he could have this for tonight.

Was that too much to ask?

“I can move when you actually want to go to sleep,” Roy said for some reason. “I just felt that this was a mandatory item on the roster of first-time experiences.”

“Yeah,” Ed said. His brain had finally stopped spinning through several different levels of adrenaline, and now the delayed exhaustion was hauling on him, trying to drag him down into the soft embrace of the sheets. “Good call.”

Roy’s arm, threaded between the two of his, shifted enough to stroke at a lock of his hair trailing down over his shoulder, smoothing it against his chest. That felt *so* damn good. Oh, God, he was hosed.

“Alternatively,” Roy said, “as long as neither of us is losing circulation to any extremities we’ll want to use later…”
Ed said something like “Mm ngh.” That was closer to language than he had any right to get at this point, really.

Roy withdrew his arm enough to collect all of Ed’s hair and guide it back behind his ear, complete with enough ongoing unnecessary stroking to make Ed’s scalp ripple with the sheer transcendence of it. Then he scooped it out of the way enough to kiss the nape of Ed’s neck, very softly, and again Ed could feel him smiling, and—fuck.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Roy said.

He laid his arm over Ed’s waist again, settling in close, and let out a long, slow breath that sounded so contented that Ed couldn’t help believing in it.

Just for now.

Just for tonight.

“Hell,” he said with the last of the intellect he still held above the dark. “Me, too.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

As barely previously mentioned, you may not want to read this one if you would prefer to enjoy the schmoopy goodness of the last bit. ^^ I'm hoping to get another pile of this out tomorrow, and this one is MUCH shorter than any of the others, so it may be better to save it!

The dream was familiar: a maze that was changing as he moved through it; cobblestones that fell out from beneath his feet and left him with a latticework of mortar to navigate by jumping over all the holes. He knew that Al was at the end. He knew that Al was dying. He knew that time was running out.

The bed he woke to with slightly crusty eyes and tangled hair half in his face was not familiar at all—at least not until he swallowed, laboredly, and blinked, and cast back through his brain for a snatch of a memory, and—

And he rolled partway over. Roy was lying there, head propped up on one elbow, smiling like he’d never stopped.

“‘Morning, Sunshine,” Roy said.

“Why’re you watching me sleep?” Ed said.

“Because you’re lovely,” Roy said. “And, evidently, a die-hard romantic.”

It was too early for this. Well—it might not have been, strictly speaking, but it felt like it.

“‘M supposed to hit you for callin’ me Sunshine,” Ed said. It was the only coherent thought in his head at the moment.

“You are,” Roy said. “Which brings the total of punches you owe me up to two, by my count. Can I get you anything?”

Ed tried to access some of the rational portions of his brain.

“Coffee,” he said. Instinct kicked in: “Please.” He squeezed his eyes shut, opened them, blinked, and cleared his throat, which helped shake some of the cobwebs loose. “Please tell me you have coffee, you… tea-drinking… maniac.”

“I’ve heard ‘maniac’ before,” Roy said, cheerfully, “but the adjective is new.” He made a thoughtful sort of humming noise that resonated in his chest, and it was beautiful, and Ed hated fucking everything, but this the most. “I think… Is instant okay?”

“Guess it’ll have to be,” Ed said. He thought it over. “…you monster.”

Roy laughed, but not too loud, and this was impossible. This was a movie-moment; this was a life led by someone else; how had Ed dropped into somebody else’s consciousness and started reaping all their good luck?
“You can just have enough to tide you over,” Roy said, “and then we can go out in search of more.”

He paused, and then he smiled, and then he leaned in, eyes slipping shut, and grazed his lips over Ed’s. His eyelashes rose slowly as he drew back, and the corners of his mouth curled upward even slower.

“Good morning,” he said.

Ed tried to choke out something clever, but what he got was: “So I heard.”

“It bears repeating,” Roy said, and then he was climbing off of the bed and padding around it towards the kitchenette.

Ed rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling for a long second. Then he rubbed at his eyes, hard enough to rouse the little sparkly stars, with the heel of his left hand for a second before he stared some more.

He had somehow actually pulled this off.

He had somehow turned a night of doing Ling a favor that the dipshit didn’t really deserve into the biggest coup in the history of his sad excuse for a social life. He had left the dorm single and a virgin and woken up with a boyfriend whose tongue had recently been all over his dick.

Not that the second part was as important—it wasn’t. If he’d planned this, he would’ve paced it a hell of a lot slower, honestly. But it was the least-believable part of the whole escapade, so it needed to be heavily featured in the analysis here.

That was what Roy had said, right? At some point? Last night was blurry; he’d been reeling from all of the chemicals boiling in his brain—but boyfriend was the word, wasn’t it? They were boyfriends. They were together. It was a thing. It had to be a little bit on the down-low, but not like it had been the last time—not that come closer so I can push you away shit. Not for the same reasons. Out of circumspection, not out of shame. And only until the end of the semester. And Roy liked him; Roy laughed at the stupid crap he said that passed for jokes and kept kissing parts of his face that weren’t even his mouth and was going to make him instant coffee just because it was a nice thing to do.

Christ. Knowing that—recognizing that, acknowledging that, accepting that—felt like eating a flashbomb. Just this huge swell of blinding heat in the center of him, warming him out to his fingertips, lighting up all the crevices of his bones and his tired little soul—

Wow.

He sat up, shoved his mess-pile of hair back out of his face as much as he could, and slid to the edge of the bed. It was really too bad he had to leave it, like, ever; this bed was a bed-Ferrari next to the jalopy in his dorm room, and he could’ve happily stayed here for an entire year if someone had brought him food.

He put his leg on, and then his socks. No need to make Roy look at his fake foot any more than boyfriendy politeness required. Was that a thing? It sounded like a thing. It sounded like a specific level of putting-up-with-stuff.

He was still wearing Roy’s shirt. It wasn’t big enough on him to drape off of one shoulder, but it was pretty close; he was probably flashing an unseemly amount of collarbone. Was that cute? He felt like on someone else—someone who knew how to work it; someone with a modicum of confidence and a shred of experience—that could be extremely provocative, and it’d be attractive
whether they took advantage of it or not.

Well, there was one relatively scientific way to find out, so he headed over into the kitchen to see if Roy would react.

Roy was reaching cups down from one of the cabinets over the stovetop, which meant that his shirt had pulled up enough to display a strip of waist that made Ed’s mouth water, which distracted him enough that he stopped moving about halfway across the space. Roy turned around with a mug in each hand—one gray, and a little taller; one low and bowl-shaped in a pale, pale blue—and froze every bit as immediately as Ed had. His eyes fixed just below Ed’s face, where the collar of the borrowed T-shirt would have been framing half of Ed’s shoulder and a little dip of his chest.

So that answered that.

This was the part that Ed couldn’t believe—not that they’d had sex; sure, that was brain-explodey to a certain extent, but the fact that Roy had wanted to. The fact that Roy wanted him. The fact that, suddenly, without any sort of preamble, he had power here. The fact that he was smokin’ hot right now, in the way that other people usually were to him—in the way that could make your throat stick and your joints lock up and your guts tremble. The fact that he was sexy for the first time in his life, entirely because someone like Roy thought he was.

Relative perspective was an amazing thing.

“Um,” he said. “I’m gonna…” He gestured in the direction of the bathroom. Actual sex machine Edward Elric; that was the ticket. He gestured towards the burbling electric kettle for good measure. Al had always mooned over those when they’d holed up in home goods stores on cold nights to have something to do. When the employees side-eyed them, they’d always started fake-arguing about what they were going to get for Mom’s birthday. “I—thanks.”

“Don’t thank me until I find the coffee,” Roy said. “If I find the coffee. It’s elusive.”

“That’s okay,” Ed said, which was not completely true. “I’ll live.” He was hoping that that was.

Roy grinned. He looked sleep-tousled and slightly bleary and utterly amazing. Accidentally winding up with a boyfriend was one thing; accidentally winding up with an indescribably gorgeous one was another. How in the hell had Ed pulled this off?

“I’ll see what I can do,” Roy said.

By the time Ed had reemerged from the bathroom, slightly fresher, and with his hair at least a little bit tamed, the kettle was off, and a gently-steaming gray mug was sitting on the counter next to it. Ed had collected his towel during the three seconds that he’d remembered that was a good idea, so he rolled it up and shoved it into his backpack.

Roy had vanished, although not into thin air, as Ed would have half-expected—just back into the bedroom, the better to curl up in the oversized armchair next to the big window. Roy had a gift, apparently, for creating extremely picturesque little scenes even in an apartment of such a modest size; the upholstery was off-white, but without a tea stain anywhere, and he was sitting with his body angled towards the window so that the light bathed his face, and he had his mug cradled loosely in both hands, raised just far enough for the steam to curl delicately around his jawline…

Ed couldn’t stop looking at the wide, round mouth of Roy’s mug. It just—it rang a bell he hadn’t known he’d been listening for, and even the impossibly thick churn of shy uncertainty and the low boil of anticipatory embarrassment couldn’t drown out the sound.
“Where’d you get that?” he heard himself asking.

Roy glanced up—or Ed assumed that was what the dimly-visible motion was; his eyes were still fixed firmly on the mug.

“This?” Roy asked. “Ah… you know, I’m afraid I can’t remember. Did you find the coffee? I’m not sure how old it is; I’m concerned it might be a bit off, but I’d be happy to make you a cup of consolatory tea instead.”

“Okay,” Ed said. His brain on autopilot was an incredible thing. And a caffeine traitor, apparently. “S’just—it looks familiar; I dunno wh—”

Roy curled his hands, cupping them around the rim of the mug, and started to raise it to his lips, and the image clicked into place.

“Holy shit,” Ed said.

He still couldn’t see Roy’s face around his focus on the mug, but Roy’s body definitely startled. “I—what’s wro—”

“You’re him,” Ed said.

He managed to tear his gaze away from the damning ceramic long enough to meet Roy’s eyes, and it made sense; it made so much fucking sense—the themes and the sass and the amateur poetry and the gooey romance and the steamy sex and the cadence of the sentences that was always trying to lull Ed into a half-sleep for suckers—

And it had worked—

“You’re Casanova,” Ed said. “You write the blog.”

Ed’s heart leapt to his throat, and then it undertook a dizzyingly swift descent towards the pit of his stomach, dragging the rest of his organs and large tracts of his skin along with it.

He could hear that he was still breathing, which was something of a shock. He wasn’t sure that he could feel his hands.

Roy was looking at him so fucking intently that it fell just on the unsettling side of obscenely hot. He focused on you like nobody else Ed had ever met.

And now Ed knew why.

Ed must’ve gone—what? Silent and unreadable, or something; canvas-blank, as the roaring hurricane in his head tore everything he’d wanted to believe in off of the walls of his skull and shredded it, so that the hope-snow filled his ribcage with a rain of little fragments of everything he’d been fool enough to yearn for until now.

Was Roy trying to gauge his reaction? Surely he had an answer for everything. Surely he was trying to identify Ed’s feelings so that he could either suavely take credit or smoothly swoop in for damage control. That was what he wanted, wasn’t it? Credit. Control. Profit. Fame.

“A lot of it,” Roy said, in a tone so cautiously neutral that Ed knew he was right, “is invented. If not… made up, definitely embellished past recognition, I would say.” His throat worked. “I… didn’t know you read it.”
That explained everything.
That explained all of it.

There were plenty of blonds on campus, and there were plenty of guys a hell of a lot cuter than Ed.

But there weren’t a whole shit-ton of blond guys who were amputees.

There weren’t too many pale-haired male virgins stumping around on prosthetics, with a chip on the opposite shoulder to balance it out.

And Ed had believed him. Ed had believed that it mattered; that it had meaning; that it was supposed to be the start of something. Ed had believed that Roy wanted him—wanted to touch him, hold him, kiss him; meet him halfway, skin-to-skin, and get to know him somewhere in the middle—

Ed had believed that Roy wanted him.

What Roy wanted was a notch in Casanova’s bedpost.

They would love it. Wouldn’t they? They would eat this shit up. There was something just a little bit titillating about it, because society was full of shit, and the whole amputee thing was just taboo enough to be a little bit appealing and a little bit Well, glad it wasn’t me all at once. Ed was unique as far as that went; no two ways about it.

And the thought of being described as a curiosity in that same old font face, with just enough lyrical tact to make thousands of readers shiver and giggle and cringe—

Made him want to throw up. And cry. Maybe not both at once.

His heart stuck halfway up his throat, but he swallowed, hard, until he’d budged it enough to speak.

“Don’t—” he said.

But he couldn’t, could he? Thoughts were free; words were free; press was, too, until it was demonstrably destructive. Roy probably wasn’t even trying to hurt him, exactly. Roy was trying to garner a couple of page views and maybe turn a dollar on the ads. Ed was just collateral damage. That wasn’t even the intent.

Even if it had been, he couldn’t tell somewhat what to write or what not to write; he couldn’t order an almost-stranger not to do something. He couldn’t even handle his own fucking life most days.

He swallowed again. And again. Subtle muscles were shifting in Roy’s face; slowly, the bastard set one hand on the arm of his chair, balancing the mug of tea in the other, and started to rise from the seat.

“I’d appreciate it,” Ed said instead, biting the words out one bitter syllable at a fucking time, trying to candy-coat them in civility as he pushed them through his teeth, “if you didn’t—if you don’t—write about—that.” He hitched a jackknife breath in, held it for a half-second, and let it out. “About—me.”

Roy blinked, and then his eyes narrowed a little, and that—

Of course Ed had no fucking right to tell him what to do, how to be, which parts of his own experiences he could and couldn’t write about and share with strangers on the fucking internet; who the hell did he think he was even asking that? You couldn’t make the rules for someone else’s life.
Humiliation rode through his whole body, such a familiar flood of heat—speeding, foaming, frothing everywhere underneath his skin, scalding his face from the inside, boiling his heart—

“Look, I gotta go,” he said, and turned, refusing to let his right leg wobble, and started for the bedroom door; it wasn’t that far. He shoved his feet into his shoes, snatched his bag up from the floor; it wasn’t that far from here to the stairs, either, and if he made it out—

Maybe Roy would be unspecific enough that no one would know.

Maybe no one would turn to him in class and say *Oh, it’s you! You’re the one he pity-fucked to find out what it’s like!*

“Ed,” Roy said; there were footsteps. “What’s—what’s wrong? I wo—”

“I don’t feel good,” Ed said, which was not a lie in the slightest. “S’fine,” he added, which was egregiously false.

He was halfway down the hall to the door, but his right knee kept quavering, so he couldn’t walk too fast, and he could hear Roy jogging after him—

“Ed, wait, what—it’s not—”

“I don’t want to do this,” Ed said, and the words quavered, too, and he reached for the doorknob and reminded his diaphragm how to breathe.

He didn’t really know what *this* was. It was *be your new clickbait*, at least—he knew that much. But it was a lot of other things, too—shades of them, swirling in like different colored dyes, and all of it was muddling together.

*I don’t want my feelings laid out on display for uncounted strangers to laugh about. I don’t want all that shit I shared with you in confidence—all the stupid things I said, and felt, and did, and was when I was with you—to turn into a sideshow for your fans.*

*I trusted you with that.*

*I don’t want to have to stand here and think about how fucking stupid that was.*

He remembered this part. He remembered the way the startlingly physical hurt lodged right behind his sternum for a long second, throbbing, and then spilled out into the rest of him as a rush of heat. Like a blush gone sour. Like a fast-motion fever, and then it started clawing its way up his throat.

Roy’s footsteps stopped a little ways away. Further than arm’s reach. Half a hallway; something like a chasm. Something like a void.

“All right,” Roy said, so quietly that the pound of Ed’s pulse in his ears very nearly drowned it out. “I—understand.”

Like hell he did.

Like *hell* did someone like Roy—Roy, Casanova, the friendly neighborhood sex fiend, all of the above—understand how it felt to be tried on and thrown out. Like hell did someone like Roy understand how it felt to have your naïve little hopes and stupid little dreams coddled just long enough to let your guard down, and then to have your face ground into the gravel all over again.

That was just Ed’s fucking luck, wasn’t it? Just his fucking style. It was hilarious, if you looked at it
the right way around—the whole time, he’d been waiting; he’d been holding back; he’d been glancing over at the universe expecting the impact any second, and then the instant that he’d slowly, slowly, carefully relaxed—

What else was new?

Ed opened the door, and stepped out, and pulled it shut behind him without looking back.

It wouldn’t burn like this forever. The edge went off the sting after a couple days. He knew that; he knew he’d drag himself back upright, and dust himself off; eventually he’d heal. Even if Roy used this to skyrocket the both of them to unprecedented heights of internet notoriety, and half the modern world knew how pathetic he was, he’d weather that, too.

He was fine. He’d always been fine. He always found a way.

Like an idiot—or at least like someone with other shit on his mind, he supposed, to give himself a smidge of credit—he texted Ling from the lobby of their dorm building asking if the coast was clear. The string of emojis he received in response seemed positive, so he hit the button for the elevator and leaned against the wall while he waited.

It was still early enough that there wasn’t a whole lot of activity. The R.A. who was supposed to be manning the front desk was asleep, and had snorted but not stirred when Ed came through the door. Apparently eight o’clock in the morning counted as the middle of the night by college standards.

It would have been later, but he’d sort of… run… for parts of it. It didn’t count as a walk of shame if you weren’t walking, right? The power of semantics and all that. The mapping app on his phone had kept up, even when he took a semi-legal shortcut involving a fire escape and the building it was attached to so that he could cut off a corner.

When he let himself into the room, he hadn’t even managed to withdraw his keys from the lock before he had two arms full of Ling Yao.

“You are,” Ling said, in a dangerously tear-bordering voice, “the best friend anyone could possibly ask for, and I owe you a steak dinner and probably my first-born child. Whose existence your generosity has secured, it should be noted. You’re the second-best thing that ever happened to me, Ed! And it’s been a lively competition, believe me—”

Gingerly, Ed patted Ling’s back. There was some nuzzling going on. He wasn’t sure he liked this.

Oh, God, was Ling going to be able to smell Roy on h—

“Hey,” Ling said, leaning back, hands on Ed’s shoulders. “Nice shirt.”

“Thanks,” Ed said, stupidly. It was Roy’s shirt; it was Roy’s shirt; having to find a reasonable time to give it back to him would be only slightly less absurd than walking home bare-chested would have been. “I… take it everything went—”

“Splendidly,” Ling said, following up with a huge, happy sigh. He clapped Ed’s shoulders and then moved back far enough for Ed to extract his keys and drag himself and his shit into the room. “She’s taking a shower. What happened to your hair?”
“Huh?” Ed said. “Oh. Uh. It was—windy. And it—dried funny.” He sat down on his bed and tried very, very hard not to notice how inferior it was to another one he’d perched on the edge of recently. He pulled out his phone and tapped over into his message log. “Hey, if you and Lan Fan wanna… keep… whatever, it’s totally cool; I’m gonna go get something to eat with Winry.”

The depth of the pause made him glance up.

“Isn’t that where you just came from?” Ling asked.

Ed’s heart beat very loudly in his ears.

“Well, yeah,” he said. “But I didn’t bring a whole lotta clothes, and we spilled on some of my stuff at dinner last night, and… yeah.”

Ling blinked.

Then he beamed.

“Gotcha!” he said. “Let me know if the place you go is good—we’ve been looking for a nice breakfast spot. The bigger the portions, the better, of course!”

“Yeah,” Ed said, trying for a grin as he typed help me please i need food and COFFEE and also not to be trapped in a room with ling right now into a text to Win. “Of course.”

Crap. If he didn’t want to change right in front of Ling, he was going to have to retreat to the bathroom, where he’d probably run into Lan Fan and have to find something to say other than “Hope your makeup sex was better than my prelude-to-disaster sex—let me know if he ever pulls some shit again, and you want help kicking his ass.”

It’s so early, what are you doing up, Winry sent back. And what the heck are you talking about. You want to check out that little French place we were talking about in half an hour?

Ed took a breath, let it out, and texted YES

So at least he had that going for him.

“You look like crap” was the first thing Winry said on seeing him, followed by “What happened? Are you okay?”

Ed had turned up uncharacteristically early—really only so that he could get out of Ling’s and Lan Fan’s makeshift love-nest, but it still counted. He’d picked a quiet outdoor table and acquired a coffee to nurse while he waited, so at the very least, he was feeling eighty percent more human than he had previously.

“You first,” he said, gesturing towards the smudges of what had to be yesterday’s eyeliner with his cup. “Rough night?”

“Great night,” Winry said, sitting down across from him and kicking one foot up onto the chair between them. “Late night, though, and then your text woke me up.”

Ed hoped his cringe looked less hideous than it felt, because he’d been wearing it a hell of a lot
lately. “Sorry.”

She waved a hand. “It’s probably a good thing—I would’ve slept ’til noon, and we would’ve eaten so late it would’ve spoiled dinner, plus I wouldn’t have been able to get to sleep tonight and get up for class tomorrow.”

“If it wasn’t for Al,” Ed said, “I’d say you’re the most glass-half-full person I’ve ever met in my life.”

“Thanks,” Winry said brightly, which sort of proved the point.

“So what were you up to?” he asked.

“Let me get a latte before I dive in,” she said.

“I bought you one,” he said. “Asked ’em to bring it out when you said you’d get here. Should be done any minute now.”

She looked at him for a long second, and then she smiled so warmly that a part of him wanted to squirm.

“You’re the sweetest, Ed,” she said.

“Eew,” he said. “Just tell your story already.”

“It’s not much of a story,” she said. “I was hanging out with Catherine, and she was introducing me to a bunch of people—there’s this girl Paninya that I think you’ll get along with; she’s obsessed with trying to blow stuff up.”

“I like her already,” Ed said.

“She’s doing some sort of degree that’s supposed to be good for getting you a job in demolition,” Winry said.

“I like her even more,” Ed said.

“I don’t think you guys should ever hang out,” Winry said. “I’m not sure any major buildings would make it out alive.”

“Buildings are inanimate,” Ed said.

“You know what I mean,” Winry said. “I need that latte, okay?”

“Fair,” Ed said. “Let me go check on i—”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Winry said. She slung her other leg up to cross it over the first one at the ankle, somehow managing to push the chair in the same motion so that it caged him in. “What’d you do last night?”

“What?” Ed got out, albeit slightly faintly, since his breath had just left him in a rush.

“You look like you got hit by a truck,” Winry said, “and you were up at the crack of dawn, trying to get away from your roommate as fast as possible. What gives?”

There he went with the cringing again.

“Nothing,” he said. “Uh—”
“Edward Elric,” Winry said, “you filthy damn liar; you are the most evasive person on the planet when something goes wrong, which is a pain in the ass, because you know I’m going to have your back either way, but when you’re deliberately concealing what I need to have your back for, it makes me want to kick the crap out of you until you learn a thing or two ab—oh, thank you!”

The girl delivering the latte set it gingerly down on the table and backed away holding the serving tray up between herself and Winry like a shield. “You’re… welcome.”

Winry turned the laser eyes back on Ed and raised one eyebrow slowly.

“Jeez,” he said, resisting the urge to hold both hands up just in case she came right at him. “Okay, um. Just… shit. Okay.” It wasn’t okay, though. It was hard, and it was getting worse by the second. “You know—Roy?”

“No,” Winry said, eyebrows dropping into harsh flat lines in unison. Impressive range she had there. “I forgot about the existence of your dreamboat TA that you have incredible chemistry with.”

The cringe returned. That should have been a series of horror movies. *The Cringe*, followed by *The Cringe Returns*, followed by *Cringe: The Reckoning*. And then they’d run out of ideas and end up with something boring like *Cringe 4*.

“Yeah,” Ed said, helplessly. “Well—not… anymore. We—uh. Shit. I—guess—I mean, we kinda —”

“Spit it out, Ed,” Winry said.

“We hooked up,” Ed said.

Fuck.

It sounded even worse set out like that.

On the upside, Winry’s face was a masterpiece of shock and alarm.

“I mean,” Ed said, probably too quickly, “not—I mean, it wasn’t sex-sex. It was just—oral. Does that count? What do you even call it if—? Well—anyway—it—it’s not—a thing. It was—it was going to be a thing, but it’s—not. Not anymore. So it doesn’t matter. So you can forget about him now.”

“Oh, my God, Ed,” Winry said, more softly than he expected. “What the heck does that mean? ‘It was going to be a thing’? What—”


Carefully, well-aware that hot liquids actively enjoyed making his life more miserable when it was already on a downturn, he picked up his coffee and took a long, long swig.

He set it down.

“Okay,” he said. “So there’s…”

“Sex?” Winry said. “I mean—oral, yeah, but—you—oral?”

“It was—it just happened,” Ed said. “Heat of the moment. Last night I was chilling in the library, ’cause I was trying to keep the coast clear for Ling to do—stuff, and then Roy walked in, a—”
“You had oral sex in the library?” Winry asked.

The waiter who had been starting to approach the table to take their order turned sharply on his heel and strode right back into the restaurant.

Ed hoped this place’s food wasn’t especially good, because he was never going to be able to come back here again.

“No,” he said. “Oh, my God, no. Would you just—”

“Okay, okay,” Winry said. “Sorry. I panicked. Tell me the whole thing.”

“I was in the library,” Ed said.

“I got that part,” Winry said.

“I know,” Ed said. “I’m contextualizing. Anyway—he was leaving, and he asked if I wanted to go get something to eat, and I mentioned at some point that I wasn’t gonna be able to go back to the dorm because I was trying to help stupid Ling get some, and we had Indian food, and he offered to let me sleep on his couch.”

Which he named, Ed did not add. Which he named, like a dork, and we laughed so much, Win; I’ve never felt so light and fucking open and fucking happy with somebody that fast—

“In a euphemism way?” Winry asked.

“Not originally,” Ed said. “Or at least—” Fuck. Everything seemed different in retrospect now; all of it was tainted by the prospect that Roy must have done all of it with the intent of getting one thing out of Ed—a damn good blog post. “Well, maybe it—was. But—whatever. Anyway. It… we… stuff… happened.”

“Stuff,” Winry said. “Oral stuff.”

“Christ,” Ed said. “Yes, okay? Don’t tell Al.”

Winry cackled, which would have been a bad sign under any circumstances, and which was, at the moment, an omen tantamount to a massive flock of crows settling on your car. And shitting all over the windshield, probably.

“Oh, man,” she said. “How dead would I be if I told him?”

“Super dead,” Ed said. “Mega-ultra-extra dead.”

“Man,” Winry said. “Okay. I’m fine. I’m calm. Okay. How was he?”

“What?” Ed asked.

“At oral,” Winry said. “He has a really nice mouth.”

“The fuck, Win?” Ed asked.

“Well, he does,” Winry said.

“God,” Ed said, which was ironic, since it was becoming increasingly obvious that there was none, and there had never been anything even close. “How the hell should I know, anyway?”
“Was he really bad?” Winry asked. “Is that why you’re upset? After all that trouble, and all the flirting, and all th—”

“No,” Ed said. “He was great. Or it was great. It—felt great.” Oh, good, his face was on fire again. At least his heart wouldn’t be lonely. “I don’t have any other data points; I can’t put it on a comparative scale. But the damn point is—”

“Then what’d he do?” Winry asked. “What happened?”

“There’s this—” No way around it. Shit. He toyed with the peeling corner of the cardboard sleeve around his coffee cup. “There’s this—blog. Where this guy writes about all of his stupid sexploits, and talks a really big game, and makes it all sound really wild and exciting a—”

“You mean Campus Casanova?” Winry asked.

A part of Ed died and went to hell. It went directly to hell. It did not pass Go, and it did not collect two hundred dollars, which was a pity, because he could have used the cash.

“You read it?” he managed with the paltry remnants of his fractured soul.

“Yeah,” Winry said. “Everybody does. Well—practically everybody I know. Catherine got me started on it. Apparently there’s this big conspiracy theory about who Casanova really is, because every now and again he posts pictures of stuff that really looks like it’s on this campus, or he mentions a street name, so lots of people’ve been…”

Her eyes widened so fast and so immensely that it would have been funny as hell in any other situation.

Ed put his head down on the table and closed his eyes. He was not going to cry. There were things in life worth crying about, and this wasn’t one of them, and he wasn’t going to dignify it with tears.

But goddamn, did the humiliation hurt.

“You,” Winry said, very slowly, and he could picture her eyes somehow expanding even further, so he didn’t have to look; “got oral from Campus Casanova?”

“It wasn’t a fucking raffle prize,” Ed said. “And I didn’t—I was—never mind.”

“Holy bejesus,” Winry said. “Holy bejesus; you—so what the heck is the problem? Was he a big disappointment? Oh, my God, I can’t believe you found Casanova in the library, and he let you sleep in his… He did let you sleep in his bed, didn’t he?”

Ed gathered every last wisp of willpower he had in him and sat upright. He took a sip of his coffee, and then he folded his hands on the table and looked her in the awestruck eyes.

“Winry,” he said, “what part of this story makes you think that someone like Campus Casanova was ever, at any point, interested in anything about me other than my potential to help him check ‘amputee’ off of his to-do list?”

“Points for the wordplay,” Winry said. “Did he say that? That you were a… I dunno, conquest. Did he say that?”

Ed eyed her. She was trying to be nice. She was trying to encourage him. The problem was that she didn’t realize that false hope dragged you back over the coals you’d just crawled through. “You’re the one who always tells me I wouldn’t be able to take a hint if it hit me like a freight train.
No, he didn’t *say* it. Not in so many words. I fucking figured it out.”

Winry opened her mouth, and then shut it, and then pursed her lips, watching him. He hated it when she did that—she was too smart by half, and she knew him too well, and that combination of factors gave her a terrifying amount of power over him sometimes.

“You should give it a chance,” she said. “Maybe—maybe you were overreacting. You know, just this once. Roy always seemed sensitive to me, and part of what makes Casanova so pants-meltingly charming is that there’s this little hint of… I dunno, loneliness or something underneath all of the smut. You should at least talk to him. Especially if he really does give good head.”

The waitress who had brought the latte had come out with her shield-tray again. She had just come close enough to hear that, because of course she had.

“Hi,” Ed said before the poor thing could make a break for it. “Sorry. Uh—can I get something with bacon and eggs, please? I don’t care what. Surprise me. What do you want, Win?”

“A waffle, please,” Winry said. “With whipped cream. And… fruit on it. That makes it healthy. Surprise me, too.”

The waitress looked like she regretted all of her life decisions beginning with birth. Ed sympathized. “Um… okay. Thank you.”

She scurried off before Ed could return the sentiment, and then Winry was reaching across the table to grab his arm in order to get his attention. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Couldn’t avoid it,” Ed said. “I think you’re missing a fundamental point in this whole thing.”

Her eyebrows went up, but at least she tagged his wrist with a finger-bruise and released it into the wild. “Which is?”

“That I’m me,” Ed said. “You’re the only person I don’t share blood with who’s put up with me for longer than a couple of months if they weren’t somehow obligated.”

“What about Russell?” Winry said. “Whatever happened to him, anyway?”

Ed’s throat stuck. Not now; not… not right now. “That tool? Oh, I killed him.”

“And didn’t ask for my help hiding the body?” Winry said. “I’m hurt, Ed. I thought we were friends.”

“We are,” Ed said. “That’s why I didn’t want to implicate you.”

“You’re so thoughtful,” Winry said. “But—”

“But nothing,” Ed said. At least they were veering back onto the Pain Track he’d been expecting. That was… well, it still sucked, but at least it sucked in a way he was slightly more prepared for. “It doesn’t matter. It’s—whatever. It’s not like I have time for any of that shit anyway. The world’s falling apart, and life is short and stupid and meaningless, and I have homework.”

Winry offered up the saddest smile he’d ever seen grace the expression of another human being.

“Yeah,” she said. “But it’s going to continue to be terrible whether you’re lonely or not. You might as well reach out to someone.”

“Not someone who only wanted to get into my pants so he could fetishize my fucking pain,” Ed
Winry made a face. “You don’t—”

Then she saw his face.

And she stopped.

And she sighed.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay. I’m with you. I’m on your side.”

He stared at her, and she shrugged.

“I’m not going to play devil’s advocate at the cost of having your back,” she said. “I mean, I’m going to keep an eye out for signs that it’s not as bad as you think, but—what you feel’s important. And I care about it. So… Okay. I got you. We’ll move on.”

“You’re kind of amazing,” Ed said. “You know that?”

“Yes,” Winry said, grin gradual but utterly unrepentant. “But you should keep telling me just in case.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I've been sitting here for at least five minutes trying to think of something clever to write in this box. I think it's time to give up. X'D

Not making eye contact with Roy for the duration of lecture on Tuesday was easy. In general, Ed was much more proficient at *not* making eye contact than he was at just about anything else that had to do with human interaction, so if you looked at it the right way, he was leveraging his strengths here.

Ed could feel him, though—like all of a sudden, infrared vision had kicked in, and Roy was a swelling, searing signal in his peripheral vision, white-hot in the center, bleeding light.

Good thing he was so damn good at pointedly ignoring things he didn’t want to see.

He kept his head down and his eyes forward and his brain as close to the numbers as he could without scraping himself on variables. He couldn’t get his shoulders to relax, but except for the tension headache, he made it through unscathed.

Of course he did. He’d suffered worse than this. Pretending that something that hadn’t left visible evidence simply *hadn’t happened* was a hell of a lot easier than pushing past some of the things he’d had to blunder through.

It wasn’t like he’d been bullshitting Winry, either. He had enough to do—enough to deal with—without making this whole stupid self-imposed tangle of a problem any bigger or tanglier than it already was. He was working just about every spare minute this week, and the problem sets were piling up, and he needed to start thinking about finals so that he could pretend like he was going to study properly and then cram at the last minute like always. Maybe he’d start cramming at the second-to-last minute. That’d be nice for a change. And it’d make Al happy, probably.

Speaking of Al, not having to moon over stupid assholes who wrote stupid blogs would free up more time for checking in on him and sending him cat memes and stuff. Ed had been neglecting the fuzzy animal photos a little bit lately because of midterms and everything, so it’d be good to get back into the swing of prompting giant emotional emoticon journeys from Al with every message.

So it was good. Overall, it was a good thing. He just had to remember that.

Easy.

---

Not checking the stupid fucking blog to see what kind of *I never imagined going down on an amputee could be so—gasp—normal!* drivel Roy had penned for the masses was… less-easy. Leasy, even. Leasy like sleazy; leasy like Ed’s lease on his own patience was running out at dangerous speeds. He wasn’t sure what happened when your lease was up. Presumably they took
away all of your chill, and you were anxious and irritable and shaky *all* the time, instead of just at intervals.

“What’s eating you?” Winry asked during Wednesday’s precious coffee hour—after she’d reveled in the first sip of her latte, so at least her priorities were still in order. Ed didn’t understand why she didn’t pick flavors for the damn things, though, unless it was pumpkin spice season at their local green-logo place. She could’ve mixed it up and run the whole gamut of the Monins they had like a bar shelf behind the counter. Or assigned a different one for each day of the week. Or asked the barista to pick for her every time. Or…

“Life is eating me,” Ed said. “Macroscale phagocytosis.”

“You’re a nerd,” Winry said. “And I’m not sure that holds up as a figure of speech in th—”

“You’re the one critiquing my improv,” Ed said. “What’s eating *you*?”

“The fact that something’s eating you,” Winry said. She paused. “Also, to some extent, the fact that I still can’t get any action, and apparently you can get it on accident, followed by an avalanche of drama.”

“I don’t know about an avalanche,” Ed said. “Maybe a metric ass-load. But avalanche is a bit steep.”

Her eyes narrowed, which meant she’d recognized the pun but didn’t want to dignify it with a verbal observation. “Is it because I have resting bitch face?”

“You don’t have resting bitch face,” Ed said. “You have a nice face. People trust you. They trust you too much, and they tell you their secrets, and then they have to stay friends with you forever so that they can slowly dig up enough dirt on you to guarantee your silence.”

“Thank you,” Winry said. She’d always had a talent for disregarding half of what he said, which was probably for the best, given that three-quarters of it was usually bullshit. “Is it because I have active bitch personality?”

“You don’t have that either,” Ed said. “You’re a tiny bit aggressive because you’ve had it demonstrated to you so many times how short life is, and so you know not to waste time quibbling about what you want.”


“I don’t know why I even try to be nice to you,” Ed said.

“Me neither,” Winry said cheerfully. She swilled her latte, and her expression changed. “He hasn’t posted anything, you know.”

Funny how some days felt like another stage of an endless siege on a well-defended castle keep. Ed was stuck with so many arrows this week that he must have looked like a porcupine.

That one in particular had lodged right under his shoulder-blade. It wedged itself in a little deeper every time he breathed.

“Huh,” he said.

He wasn’t sure what else to say, because he wasn’t quite sure what he *thought*. Was that a good
thing? Obviously, it was a good thing insofar as a graphic description of the contours of his ass hadn’t ended up on the broader internet just yet, but was it a good thing overall? That news could have meant a lot of different stuff. It could have meant that Roy was working on a bloggy magnum opus—some several-thousand-word tell-all about the sordid details, followed by a tirade about Ed’s flagrant ingratitude. Anyone else would have been on their solitary knee, begging for another chance to fling themselves down on that beautiful bed to glory in pleasures that the faceless audience would shiver over secondhand. That was how Casanova operated, wasn’t it?

…wasn’t it?

There wasn’t—there couldn’t possibly be a chance—there was no damn way in any hell, let alone the one they all currently inhabited, that Roy could have—

—meant it.

Was there?

Him not writing about it, if that was indeed going to be a permanent state of affairs, wasn’t proof of any sort of sincerity. It demonstrated—would demonstrate, that was, if it held true—that he was a decent enough human being to respect Ed’s request not to have the whole thing publicized. That was it. It didn’t change what had happened, or why it had, or what anyone had felt or intended at the time.

While Ed had been sorting through the pile of tattered half-thoughts in his head, Winry’s eyes had lit up in a way he didn’t like.

“I could send him an anonymous message,” she said. “Stir things up a little. Find out where he stands.”


“Just a nudge,” Winry said. “I could be very subtle—just to sound him out. He’d never know what hit him.”

“Think about it,” Ed said. “As far as he knows, he and I are the only people on the planet aware of what happened. If there’s anything suspicious at all, he’d have to assume it was me coming to his blog and starting shit.” He shoved a hand up into his hair and started attempting to push his fingers back through his bangs. They were sort of a mess—the bangs, not the fingers, although honestly the fingers probably weren’t great. Whatever the case, he’d never exactly been a champ in the personal grooming department, but the combination of the extra stupid thoughts and the sheer lack of free time lately definitely wasn’t helping. “I still have to show up in section with him six or seven more times, don’t forget.”

“Oh, yeah,” Winry said. “That does kind of change things.”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “Kind of.”

“Well, just ignore him,” Winry said. “Focus really hard on your lab work and tell anybody who asks that you’re determined to make the Dean’s List.”

“I am determined to make the Dean’s List,” Ed said.

“Exactly,” Winry said.

“I have to turn in my homework and stuff,” Ed said. “I can’t ignore him for that.”
“Play it cool,” Winry said. “Someone’s going to have to show their hand—make him do it. He owes you that much, doesn’t he?”

“He doesn’t owe me shit,” Ed said. “He didn’t make me any promises.”

“Still,” Winry said. “He’s your TA, so he’s supposed to be the older, wiser one, which means it’s on him that he put both of you in a tight spot.” Ed did not point out that that was something of a poor choice of words. “Don’t give him anything to go on. If he wants to… whatever, apologize, or fix things, or try to make it work, or whatever—then he’ll come to you.”

“Right,” Ed said. “‘Here’s my problem set, Roy, although it doesn’t include my biggest problem, which is your stupid face, so why don’t you illuminate that for me in front of the whole class?’”

Winry rolled her eyes. “You have a gift for extremity.”

“Thanks,” Ed said.

There was another element to it—chemistry pun, for once, not even remotely intended—but he didn’t want to air any more dirty laundry in front of Winry.

The laundry pun was intentional.

Despite a great deal of digging his heels into Wednesday night—aided by the backlog of homework, all of which was shaded by several layers of sheer exhaustion—Thursday inevitably dawned, and Ed inevitably found himself squaring his shoulders and walking into lab.

Lecture had been relatively merciful again, but this… he expected to be different. There were distractions, sure, but the whole point of the exercise was that Roy was supervising everybody in this room, which necessarily meant that his attention would intermittently be on Ed.

Or, apparently, to cut right to the chase and right to the bone, there was a possibility that Roy would be standing three feet inside the door, holding his hand out for the problem set with a completely neutral little smile.

“Hey,” Roy said as Ed stepped through. “Homework?”

Ed’s throat almost spat out an automatic Fuck you that would have been inappropriate on more levels than he could tabulate right now. He swallowed, and it rankled, and he tried to make his mouth do anything other than twist up in agony, and he choked out, “Oh. Yeah. Sure.”

Roy knew he had it. And now Roy probably knew he was a pathetic fucking wreck, no matter how brave a face he’d tried to put on it, because his hands were shaking while he dug through his bag to reach the folder-pocket in his notebook for this class. It just hurt. It just fucking hurt; there was nothing he could do about it; no amount of rationalizing pep talks could numb the razor edge of it against his jugular.

He’d just wanted it so fucking bad—naked craving, raw-nerved yearning, like a kid pining after a pet.

For a couple of precious fucking hours, he’d let himself believe he could actually have it.
And it hurt. It just hurt. He’d let the hope worm its way in too damn deep, and having it stripped out all at once had left him bleeding from so many places, and Roy was just asking for his fucking homework like none of it had even—

“Here,” Ed said when the paper surfaced. His arm stretched itself out towards Roy, and the traitorous asshole of a sheet rattled softly with the trembling of his stupid, stupid hand.

“Thanks,” Roy said, and he couldn’t have missed it, but his expression didn’t change, and he didn’t say anything, and Ed just—slung his backpack up onto his shoulder and kept walking.

Sometimes that was about all you could fucking do—keep walking. Just go.

It was only going to be a couple weeks more of this, and it’d get better with time; scar tissue was good for that, and there wasn’t anywhere it didn’t wriggle across your skin eventually. It was only a couple more weeks, and he’d been through a hell of a lot worse, and he’d get through this, too.

It was just—

Did it always have to be such a struggle? Was he going to have to fight for every single day for the rest of his life? Was that all it ever amounted to? Was life ever going to feel like anything other than an industrial cheese grater pressed against his face, fucking waiting for the next bump in the road?

“Ed,” Rosé said, voice hushed, as soon as Roy had sauntered back up to the head of the room and let them all get started, “are you okay?”

“Peachy,” he said. “Sorry. Been—having trouble sleeping. Getting tired of it. Pun intended.” He was really on today, for someone who otherwise felt like a petulant zombie.

“Oh,” Rosé said, as he’d known she would. “Gosh, I’m sorry. Roommate trouble, or just too much to do, or...?”

Ed had discovered in middle school that I’m tired was like a get-out-of-jail-free card when you had problems you didn’t want to talk about. People just assumed that that was the full and factual explanation for any uncharacteristic or antisocial behavior, because exhaustion was relatable, and simple, and a whole hell of a lot easier to express sympathy for than My entire life is a shambles despite the fact that I’m not even twenty-one.

“Little bit of everything,” he said.

She made a commiserating face, and then they moved on.

Practice made perfect, after all.

He had to pack up his crap excruciatingly slowly to ensure that he was the last person in the lab other than the indomitable asshole that he needed to see. The whole process was even more ridiculous given that he then had to unpack part of his bag again when the other stragglers had finally asked all of their annoying questions and wandered out.

When the last other student was moseying towards the door, he gathered up his courage and his backpack, taking the plastic bag in one hand. It felt a hell of a lot heavier than it should have as he
carried it up to the front of the room and set it down on Roy’s desk.

He had to make eye contact, didn’t he? It would have been weird and way too rude not to—too deliberately avoidant. A breach of social etiquette like that always came off hostile, even if it was done in self-defense.

Roy’s face remained about as revelatory as a brick wall.

Ed hated him for that, too—for being able to keep his cards so close to his chest that Ed didn’t even know what game they were playing. For the billionth time in his sad little life, Winry had had more faith in him than he’d deserved.

“Hey,” he ground out around the gravel in his esophagus. “Here’s—your shirt back. Sorry it took so long. I wanted to wash it.”

That was a Schrödinger’s lie, since it was true and untrue simultaneously—he’d felt, from the perspective of the manners that his mother taught him, that he was absolutely obligated to clean borrowed clothes before returning them. At the same time, he’d been irrationally terrified that if he washed it with his own clothes, the scent of Roy would permeate everything else in the laundry machine.

In the end, his pride hadn’t been worth an extra four bucks to wash and dry it in a separate load, so he’d flung everything in together and crossed his fingers. As far as he could tell from a safe distance—like hell was he about to bury his face in Roy’s shirt right about now, no matter how curious he was—if anything had changed in the fundamental smells involved in the articles of raiment, it was just that Roy’s shirt bore a little more of a whiff of Ed’s laundry detergent than it had before.

Served him right, or… something.

“Oh,” Roy said. A flicker of surprise sabotaged his imperturbable calm, but then it was gone again. “That’s right. Thank you.”

Ed held out the bag. Roy reached towards it. Their hands brushed, of fucking course, and they both pulled back like they’d been scalded.

“Fuck, sorry,” Ed said—it burst out of him too quickly for him to modulate the profanity; he would have minced the hell out of that oath if he’d had a second’s notice to wrangle with it, but—

“No, no,” Roy said, nearly as fast. “My fault; sorry—”

Ed’s stupid mouth apparently wasn’t finished: “No, it’s—”

He swallowed the rest of that by force. It went down like a bramble through strep, but it went. Roy blinked at him.

He blinked back.

He set the bag on the desktop and pushed it gingerly from behind to scoot it across.

“Here,” he said. “Sorry I—walked off with it.”

“Perfectly all right,” Roy said, as if anything about that morning had been either of those things. “I’m afraid I haven’t found yours.”

How the hell had Ed forgotten the reason he’d been wearing Roy’s shirt? At least he hadn’t
particularly liked that one. “Oh. Weird. Well—mysteries of the universe and shit. No big deal.”

“I’ll keep looking,” Roy said.

Ed choked down another spiked seedpod. “Okay.”

He looked at the bag so that he wouldn’t have to look at Roy. Which was probably more awkward, all things considered. Well, fuck that. Roy could put up with some awkward. He’d earned it.

“Thanks,” Ed said. He wasn’t quite sure what for, but he felt compelled to come out with it—sometimes it was the only quasi-graceful way to end a conversation. Plus it was ambiguous, in this case; he could’ve been thanking Roy for continuing the one-person manhunt for his inexplicably evasive clothing, or he could’ve been thanking Roy for not having posted anything that exposed him and a number of well-kept secrets about his life and feelings to the entire internet.

“Of course,” Roy said. Damn, he was good at this game.

“See you around,” Ed said, and he’d turned on his heel and started for the door before—

“Ed,” Roy said.

He paused.

He didn’t look back, because he wasn’t sure he had it in him, but he did go still and wait.

“Sorry,” Roy said. That word was starting to sound clumsy, and hollow, and stale. “I—never mind. See you in class.”

“’Bye,” Ed said, and booked it.

That night, he made a sub-folder in the photo album app on his phone for cat pictures so that he could text them to Al in batches, rather than having to search, save, and send individually. It seemed a lot more efficient.

Lan Fan and Ling had collaborated to create a large and improbably flexible tangle of limbs on Ling’s bed while they studied. Ed was not envious of the position in the slightest, but he would have been lying to himself and to the universe if he tried to claim that he wouldn’t begrudge that kind of closeness. The universe always knew when you were full of shit.

“Alas,” Ling said after some span of time that Ed had spent scrolling glazedly through thumbnails of kittens, “I have to pee.”

“’Kay,” Lan Fan said, contorting fluidly to free him, and sometimes Ed could not make sense of other human beings to save his life.

The instant the door shut behind Ling, though, she sat up straight and looked at him.

“Hey,” she said. “He said you were the one who walked in on him before it got worse, and the one who blackmailed him into telling me. So—thanks.”

Ed’s heart flung itself through an epic death spiral and plunged into the pit of his stomach.
“Shit,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

He was also sorry that he had to say sorry again for the millionth time over the course of this stupid—or, if one preferred, sorry—excuse for a day, but he elected not to mention that part.

“Me, too,” she said, pulling one knee up to her chest and wrapping her arm around it, the better to set her chin down on it and look at the curtains instead of at him. “It’s… I mean, I know he didn’t go into it thinking ‘This is really going to hurt her and our whole relationship,’ but that’s part of what makes it scarier, in a way. Like—if he never even thought about it, at all, then—what’s stopping it from happening again? Guilt is great and everything, sure, but how long is that going to last? And if I try to let it go and forgive and everything, does that look like condoning it to some part of his brain? And…”

She blew out a breath that sent her bangs flying everywhere, shook her head, and smiled, grimly.

“Well,” she said, “anyway—I’m—glad you pushed him. I really appreciate that. It’s shitty to know, but it’d be even shittier not to.”

“That was sort of what I was thinking,” Ed said. There wasn’t much of anything else to say. “He’s… I’m not saying it’s not fucked up, because it is, but—he really… cares. About it, and about you. He does.”

“I know,” Lan Fan said. “Which also kind of makes it worse. He’s just—he just—wants things, sometimes; he doesn’t think about it; it’s this weird strain of just… greed, or…” She shook her head and forced something that had probably been intended as a laugh out past the grimace. “I don’t know. It’s hard. Like—I don’t want to lose him. But is that worth the critical hit to my dignity, and the paranoia, and the possibility that it’s not paranoia, and—?”

A key ground in the lock.

Lan Fan bit down hard on her bottom lip and shrugged.


“Yeah,” Ed said. “Guess so.”

“You guys,” Ling said, stepping in, “there is a spider the size of Arkansas in the sink.”

“You’ve never been to Arkansas,” Lan Fan said.

“I’m estimating,” Ling said.

Ed let them go at it while he added a few additional cat pictures to his collection. The prospect of making Al smile was more important than his homework for the next five minutes. It just was.

His phone buzzed with a text the next morning while he was in class, which always jacked up his blood pressure enough that he had to coax it out of his pocket and peek at the sender and the preview before he could think about anything else again. He really didn’t endorse the whole… going-to-class-but-not-being-in-class thing that people were so into around here; if they wanted to surf around on Facebook, they could’ve done that at home in their pajamas instead of doing it in the classroom.
and distracting everybody in the rows behind them with the videos and flashy ads and whatnot.

But when it came to unheralded texts—

It was just that they were, in his experience, so often the bearers of terrible news that he always agonized until he found out for sure. He figured it was less detrimental to his overall university experience if he blew the first three seconds after he got a text than the entire time between whenever it arrived and the end of the lecture. If that was slightly disrespectful, then… well, shit. Apparently he was slightly disrespectful. Not much for it.

This time, fortunately, the spike of adrenaline was unfounded: it was Al, responding to the cat photos with a long string of exclamation points, followed by a block of emojis, followed by *Do you have time to talk on the phone later today?? Just let me know!*

Ed let out a deep breath. He was working until close tonight, but that was actually perfect—he could grab something for dinner on his way out, and talk to Al while he ate it, which would be a super-efficient use of that time. Al probably wouldn’t even notice that he was chewing; he was so used to Ed bolting down food while they had conversations that he’d probably long since tuned out every nom-related frequency that Ed produced.

There. That was something to look forward to. That was something really great. Nothing said ‘success’ quite like a Friday night spent scarfing comped food from your crap job and trying not to bitch about your classes to your baby brother.

Maybe if Ed saved a few more cat pictures, he could send them *during* the call and distract himself from the desire to whine. If Ling was out, he could put Al on speakerphone again and accomplish all kinds of shit.

Solid.

“I’m fine,” Al said almost before Ed had finished with hellos. “Granny’s fine. Den is fine. She’s great, actually; someone new just moved in next door, and they have a little terrier, and they like to talk through the fence. I asked Mrs. Morrison if I could take her dog on a walk for her yesterday, so that Fitzi—that’s the dog, not Mrs. Morrison—and Den could hang out together for a while. She insisted on paying me. I don’t think she understood that I was doing it for Den’s benefit, but—oh, well. I’m going to buy her treats with it. Den, not Mrs. Morrison.”

“It’s not your fault,” Ed said. “You’re the most adorable person on Earth.”

“I don’t think there’s enough data to support that superlative,” Al said, “but thank you. She’s very sweet. You’ll like her—Fitzi, not Mrs. Morrison. Although Mrs. Morrison is nice, too.”

“You sound like a Monty Python sketch tonight,” Ed said.

“Sorry,” Al said. “I’m a little bit high on cough medicine.”

“Shit,” Ed said. “You sound kinda scratchy, but I thought it was just the line. Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Al said. “I think it’s the weather. You know how it is, when it starts to get rainy.”
“It hasn’t started to get rainy,” Ed said.

“But it would have,” Al said, “if we had a climate.”

“We have a climate,” Ed said, suddenly feeling unprecedentedly defensive of the year-round bird-of-paradise flowers and bleached shingles that defined this whole region.

“If we had a real climate,” Al said. “With weather patterns.”

If they had had a real climate with weather patterns, all of Al’s respiratory symptoms would have oscillated to significantly worse extremes than they already did. That was most of the reason that they hadn’t been to the snow since Ed was seven.

It also had a lot to do with Dad fucking off and money and whatnot, but Ed and Winry and Granny Pinako had semi-silently become co-presidents of the Al’s Lungs Protection Squad, and vacations were one of their mortal enemies.

“Right,” Ed said. “Well—”

Al tried to turn away from the phone, but he didn’t get far enough to hide the dulcet opening strains of a wet, heavy cough.

“Al,” Ed said, which was impressive, given that his heart had started beating so loud that he could barely hear himself, “are you—”

“Fine, Brother,” Al said, somehow managing to sound cheerleader-sanguine and hoarser than an old sailor at the same time. “Perfectly fine. Told you—it’s just the weather.”

“Okay,” Ed said, about as grudgingly as anyone had ever said anything. “Well—how’s school?”

“Good!” Al said. “I think I’ve upped my teacher’s pet game even since last year. I’m pretty unparalleled.”

“I know you are,” Ed said. “Good for you.”

Said to anyone else, that would have been sarcastic, but Al was an impeccable student partly because he cared so much about the work, and partly because he cared so much about the teachers as human beings, which set him apart from most of his peers from the get-go. He busted his ass on a regular basis, and he deserved to be rewarded, even if the n00bs he shared the classrooms with were too busy getting high out by the Dumpsters behind the theater building to understand the brilliance of his approach.

“So what’s going on with you?” Al asked.

“Nothing,” Ed said. “Just… work, and homework, and… workhome. Is that a thing?”

“No,” Al said calmly. “And don’t lie to me.”

Ed had made the mistake of parking in his desk chair, rather than on the bed, and he almost fell off of it. “What?”

“You sent me two dozen kitten pictures yesterday,” Al said. “Really good ones, which means you spent a long time picking them out, which means you were really desperate to do something nice for somebody else, which means you were feeling like crap. So what’s going on?”

Ed stared at the ceiling. It was a hideous monstrosity of old concrete crossbar-things, but he didn’t
have much else to stare at. “Did Winry tell you?”

“No,” Al said. “Tell me what?”

“Nothing,” Ed said.

“You are amazing,” Al said.

“I try,” Ed said.

“Tell me,” Al said.

“No,” Ed said. “You’ll think I’m a piece of shit. I am a piece of shit. And it doesn’t matter. It was a closed-loop fuckup. It happened, and then it finished itself, and now it’s over and done with, so nobody has to talk about it ever again.”

There was a pause.

“Considering your accomplishments,” Al said, “it is remarkable that you don’t have the slightest idea how the world works.”

“What accomplishments?” Ed asked.

“Don’t do that,” Al said.

“Do what?” Ed asked.

“The reckless self-deprecation thing,” Al said. “It’s silly, because you’re wonderful, and either way it’s not going to distract me from the thing you’re not telling me about.”

Ed dropped his head into one hand. Al couldn’t see it, obviously, but he’d know. “You ever considered becoming a police detective so you can get paid for interrogating people like this?”

“That’s ridiculous,” Al said. “They’d never be able to cast me as anything other than the good cop, so I’d never be allowed to use the full extent of my skill. Come on. Tell me.”

Ed went back to staring at the ceiling. It still looked like crap, but at least it wasn’t judging him. “I really—you really don’t want to hear it. I mean that. It’s all stupid shit. It’s stupid shit that I did to myself.”

“Knowing you,” Al said calmly, “I’m not sure that I believe that.”

“You have to believe me,” Ed said. “I’m your big brother.”

“That’s a very nice thought,” Al said. “It’s also very wrong. Ed—”

“I mean it,” Ed said. “I just—I’m not really—at the point of—wanting to talk about it a whole lot yet. It’s not even a week old; it’s… yeah. I—will. Tell you. I promise I will. But—just—not right now. Is that okay?”

“Why are you asking me?” Al asked, and his voice had softened by a factor of ten. “Of course it’s okay.”

“Great!” Al said. “The only downside is that I think walking two dogs is even worse than one for scaring away the neighborhood cats. You know that one D’Artagnan who lives a couple blocks down? I’ve been seeing him a lot, but Fitzi’s a bit of a yapper, so he was nowhere to be found when I was out with both of them. I mean, I guess it makes sense if you sort of have to pick which kind of pet you’re investing in on any given day, but…”

Ed slowly, slowly, slowly let himself relax and appreciate the Al rant. For now, at least, it looked like he was safe.

Winry texted him halfway through his shift at work on Saturday. *One of the frats is doing a barbecue tonight and it's free and you HAVE to come with me!!!!*

He called her on his break.

“I don’t have to do anything,” he said.

“Yes, you do,” she said. “I can’t go by myself.”

That was true, but— “What about your other friends?”

“What other friends?” she asked.

“You’ve made, like, twelve,” Ed said. “Catherine, and Paninya, and—”

“Yeah,” Winry said, “but they said they’d meet us there. And it starts after the sun goes down, so—”

Ed was exhausted, so he only managed to stifle the latter half of the sigh.

“You nerd,” Winry said. “The last one was great.”

“Was it?” Ed asked. “Somehow I’m remembering a shitshow from start to finish, but—”

“That’s funny,” Winry said. “Because I remember you making out with a hot guy in a hallway, and me hanging out with Catherine a lot. I’d say it was pretty great.”

Ed opened his mouth and then shut it. Now was not the time to sell Ling out and most likely ensure that Winry never spoke to him—or spoke his name—ever again.

“Right,” he managed. “Well—”

“Come on,” Winry said. “We only get to do this college thing once. Live a little with me.”

“All right,” Ed said. “All right.”

Half an hour into this week’s iteration of ‘party’-shaped nightmare, Winry had disappeared, and Ed
had still not seen any evidence of barbecue, which was especially crap because he was starving. He’d somehow wound up with another bottle of cider in his hand before Winry had vanished into the ether, and he was just sort of… loitering at the edge of the living room waiting for this thing to end. There was only one thing he knew for damn sure, which was that he wasn’t going anywhere dark and secluded this time around.

There was a redhead draped across an armchair just by the stairs, chattering at one of her friends. She was wearing a low-cut purple shirt, so either she intentionally wanted to look a little bit like Ariel from The Little Mermaid, or it was a happy coincidence. She reminded him of Sara either way. Were all these parties the same—like mistranslated RNA, and the only difference was the tiny accidental glitches? Or was it just that all people were the same?

A guy strolled by and picked up the plastic cup sitting on the end table by the redheaded girl’s elbow and ghosted off. Ed was a bit jealous of his jacket; it was all black except for a little dark red stripe on the sleeve cuff, and it looked baller as hell.

He sipped from his cider and resisted the urge to make a face. Literally standing in the corner, literally leaning against a wall, at a party on a Saturday night—that was his style in a nutshell, wasn’t it? Christ, no wonder he had no friends except the ones he’d basically been born with; no wonder he wasn’t good enough to land any boyfriend who wasn’t in it for the pageviews—

Oh, right. He was not going to think about that. Not ever, ever again. Definitely not at a time when he was starting to get tipsy, and the melodrama would probably drown him if he let it start to rise.

Enviable-jacket guy swept back through and—weirdly—put the cup right back down where he’d grabbed it from, and—

Wait a fucking second, was… What?

The girl laughed a little too loud, and then she reached for it again, and Ed—

Couldn’t help himself. Never had a choice.

He bolted across the room as fast as his fake leg would carry him, blurting out “Don’t drink that!” as she raised the cup to her cherry-colored lips.

She startled—almost hard enough to spill the contents—and blinked at him. “What?” she said. “Who… do I know you?”

“No,” Ed said. “But—don’t drink—”

Her eyes narrowed, and her distractingly bright bottom lip pushed out. “What? Why not?”

“I just saw a bug land in it,” he said. He held a hand out. “I’ll dump it for you.”

The girl’s pout cracked right into a smile again, and she passed it over, turning to her friend. “See? Told you chivalry’s not dead.”

Ed resisted the urge to say You don’t know the half of it.

He’d wanted to suggest that she come with him and watch him pour her a new drink, but she didn’t look like she’d be amenable to getting out of the chair, and he knew he didn’t have the manipulating-people skills required to suggest it in such a way that she thought it was her own idea. She might’ve been too tipsy to pick up on the point anyway, consciously or otherwise, so maybe it wouldn’t have helped.
“What were you drinking?” he asked. “I’ll get you another one.”

“Rum and Coke!” she said. “Makes me feel like a pirate.” She straight-up batted her eyelashes at him. “In search of… booty.”

Ed was standing in a crowded room, holding a cider bottle in one hand and an almost-definitely-spiked mixed drink in the other, getting hit on by a straight girl using pirate puns.

What the fucking hell was college?

“Nice,” he said, helplessly, because otherwise his dumbfounded silence would’ve gotten even more awkward than a lousy response would be. “I’ll be right back.”

He set his shoulders, then his jaw, then relaxed the jaw by force, and then strode through the place trying to look composed—trying to look like he belonged here and knew exactly what he was doing. Eventually, he wound up in the kitchen, where there were bottles strewn all over the countertops. This was like the thing in the Matrix movies when the programming skipped back and repeated itself.

He poured the girl a rum and Coke with about a teaspoon’s worth of rum in it. Hopefully the caffeine would help sober her up instead. Hopefully she hadn’t wanted Diet Coke. Hopefully Winry would get bored of this whole party gig, like, now and never ask him to go to one ever again.

“Here you go,” he said when he handed the cup off to the girl. “Shiver some timbers.”

She blinked at him. Had she already forgotten her own joke? Figured. Ed’s societal-failure vibes were so strong they radiated out to other people when he stayed in one place too long.

She smiled broadly regardless, though. “Thanks!” she said. “You’re a doll.”

Her friend was eyeing him in a way he wasn’t sure he liked—whether it was suspicion or interest didn’t really matter, since he didn’t want either of them—so he said something so noncommittal that he instantly forgot what it was and then sidled out of the room.

He retreated out to the front lawn—which sounded stupid in so many words, because obviously you would never want to back your army up on open space, but it was quieter out there, despite the cadre of bros who had set up a volleyball net on the grass. A part of Ed wanted to join them, and a part of him wanted to objectify them. He’d been pretty good at sports, once. He hadn’t possessed anything that anybody would have called ‘talent’, exactly, and he usually fell down—sometimes literally—when it came to the parts that required intense precision, but his reflexes were so good that he’d frequently cleaned up on their graces alone.

But not lately. Not in a while. Not in a long time now, thinking about it. The current moved so damn fast that it was hard to tell one segment of bank from another, and after a while you forgot how long you’d been fighting to keep your head up above the surface.

He collapsed—carefully—into one of the conveniently-angled deck chairs on the lawn and swirled the last of his cider around in the bottle. If the cops turned up, he was going to drop this and run straight through that side-alley, hop the fence, slip out past the frat house that backed against this one, and start strolling calmly around whatever buildings were on the other side. They’d never even know he’d been here.

That was a lie. He’d go find Winry, and he’d go down with her, if it came to that.

At least he had some brickhead beefcakes to enjoy in the meantime.
Except that…

Yeah, a few of them had stripped their shirts off, even though it was pretty damn cold, all things considered; and yeah, they looked appetizing, but…

He just wanted one of them—or, hell, all of them—to be Roy.

It wasn’t like Roy was an underwear model or something, or even like he was built better than anybody else Ed had ever laid eyes on; it… it was just that he looked—right. Something about him. He was balanced in a way that was difficult to describe—Ed suspected it almost had more to do with the confidence and the way he carried himself than the actual proportions, but something about it just worked so absolutely flawlessly that everybody else Ed looked at seemed to fall…

…insufficient. Yeah. That was the phrase.

But damn. Damn, if Roy had been there—if Roy had been running around amidst the dudebros, raising their collective classiness by a power of ten. Damn, if Roy had been laughing openly at all the trash-talking; if he’d been lifting up his shirt to wipe his face and then peeling it off and tossing it to the grass and rolling his shoulders and stretching his back—

Ed swung one leg up over the other and tried to drown the rest of that train of thought in cider before this escalated any further.

“Yo!” an unfamiliar voice said, and an unfamiliar person—a black girl with her hair in pigtails, wearing a tight tank top and loose cargo pants—plopped into the empty chair next to him. “How’s it going?”

“Uh,” Ed said. The cider bubbles in his brain were not conducive to quick, efficient bullshit. “Okay.” That was… well, too late. “You?”

“Great,” the girl said. “Hey, I hope this isn’t too personal, but… are you on the team?”

He stared at her. That could’ve meant about six billion things, and it was probably his fault that he didn’t even know what direction to start in. “What… team?”

The girl grinned at him, leaned down, and drew the leg of her pants up just enough to flash two inches of intricate steel ankle.

“The Amputeam,” she said.

Ed stared again, although the feeling was completely different this time.

“Oh, my God,” he said. “If I was straight, I’d ask you out right this fucking second.”

She winked at him and raised her drink. “If I was straight, I’d say ‘yes’.” She moved her drink into her left hand so that she could offer him the right. “Paninya.”

“Oh, holy shit,” he said, shaking. “I mean—Ed, but—Winry’s going to be so damn smug. She said—she told me you and me would probably get along like a house on fire.”

He really needed to eat in advance again the next time Winry dragged him to one of these stupid things. Not that there would be a next time, since he was never, ever doing this again. But the cider had gone right the hell to his head, and it was making him even more embarrassing than usual—sentences just kept slipping through his fingers every time he tried to pin them down, and the words rippled when he tried to read them.
“Huh,” Paninya said, smirking. “So she’s psychic in addition to being smart as hell and totally gorgeous. Figures.”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “It blows my mind that she can’t find a boyfriend. They should be falling all over themselves trying to kiss her feet.”

“She might be barking up the wrong tree here,” Paninya said, gesturing to the two dudebros who had just headbutted each other in a way that was… possibly meant to convey affection. “If you ask a frat guy to describe the features of his ideal woman, I don’t think ‘assertive with a ferocious intellect’ is gonna be high on the list.”

“Because they’re tools,” Ed said.

“Yeah,” Paninya said. “Straight-up hoes.”

Ed was in platonic-love with her. Was it too early to know that?

Strangely, the garden implements in question were setting the ball down by the net, gathering up their abandoned shirts, and scurrying off towards something else, all as more or less a single entity. Maybe someone had finally fired up the damn barbecue, and they were off to have a completely innocent and emblematically heterosexual hot-dog-eating contest.

“Hey,” Paninya said. “You wanna play volleyball? One on one?”

“My knee is an asshole for stuff like that,” Ed said.

“Me, too,” Paninya said. “Both of ’em.”

“Well, shit,” Ed said, levering himself up out of his chair. “You’re on.”

When they’d worn themselves out enough that Ed actually *wanted* a drink for the first time in his brief but annoyingly eventful partying career—although anything cold would’ve done just fine—they set the ball in the same place the frat boys had left it and then staggered inside.

“I’m gonna see if there’s food,” Paninya said. Was it possible to adopt someone into your family when they were over eighteen?

“Good idea,” he said. “I’ll see if I can find Winry.”

He realized—too late, way too late, *always* too late, as Paninya moved off in the direction of the backyard, sniffing for charcoal smoke—that he never should have left it this long.

Yes, Winry was a strong, independent woman who didn’t need a man, or her parents, or just about anyone. Yes, she could have killed someone in self-defense with a Koosh ball and her cardigan. But life didn’t always give you a Koosh ball to work with, and they were at a party where Ed had pretty reasonable suspicion that a guy was going around spiking girls’ drinks, and—

What the fuck was wrong with him? How much had he had that he hadn’t been able to make the connection *instantly* between ‘someone drugging people’ and ‘make sure Win’s okay’?

He was fired as a friend. He was fired from humanity. He was fired from school and life and
happiness, and he deserved whatever he got; and he just really, really hoped he didn’t take Winry
down with him—God, please, let the universe not fuck her over just because he was such an
irredeemable piece of shit—

But where was she likely to be?

He had to be systematic. If she was outdoors in the back, Paninya would run into her; he’d start on
the first floor of this place and do a room-by-room sweep; if that failed, he’d start asking people if
they’d seen her.

She had to be okay. Winry was so damn smart, and so damn self-aware—even if she had been
drinking a little too much, she wouldn’t leave her cup unattended, and she was probably hanging out
with Catherine and a bunch of other nice girls anyway, so that if something did happen, they’d be
there to look after her, and—

She wasn’t in the living room. She wasn’t in the rec room—was that what it was called? It was just
like another living room with slightly different shit in it. Who the hell kept designing houses with all
those unnecessary rooms, anyway? She wasn’t in the kitchen; he peeked into the downstairs
bathroom; someone had started a really bad dance party in the foyer, and she wasn’t there either—

He was working his way up into a proper heart-racing, mouth-frothing, head-spinning panic by the
time he reached the stairs. Halfway up, on the landing where the staircase took a sharp turn, a figure
was sitting curled up with its head leaned back against the wall. The figure in question was feminine
and very, very blonde.

It also looked up with bleary blue eyes as he crept closer.

“Oh, shit,” he said, topping the last stair and crouching carefully down next to her. “Hey—Win.
Winry. You okay?”

She blinked up at him, and then she slumped against the wall and sighed deeply.

“No,” she said. “Catherine and I were playing Jenga with this other girl, and these two guys came
up and started hitting on them, and—what’s wrong with me, Ed?”

“Nothing,” he said, grabbing his left knee with one hand to reposition it so that he could sit down.
“You’re amazing.”

“It’s not like I want to care what they think,” Winry said. “It’s not like I—I mean, fuck that! Fuck
what stupid college boys are attracted to! It should be like a compliment if they don’t like me! But
it’s just—when that’s the standard everybody uses—and there’s nothing else to go by—and the
whole world’s screaming at you all the time that if you’re not desirable enough for someone to come
chasing after you, you’re a total waste of space—”

“Winry,” Ed said. “I know it’s—it gets really discouraging, but—Jesus, you have so much going for
you—probably they’re all just intimidated, you know?”

“So what?” she asked. “That ends up being the same damn thing—ends in the same damn thing,
which is me being alone, and unwanted, and un-good enough, and I just wish that for one
Valentine’s Day, somebody other than you and Al would send me flowers, just once—”

She extracted a very sizable bottle of vodka from the corner behind her, but her hand wasn’t steady
enough to unscrew the cap.

“Here,” Ed said. “Let me.”
She handed it over, and he set it down on the other side of himself, where she couldn’t see it and
would hopefully forget its existence altogether.

“Listen,” he said. “I know how you feel—I do. Not... I mean, probably not quite as bad, because I
don’t get the same kinds of pressures that you do as a girl, but—but I get it. I get feeling like that.
And it sucks. It sucks, and it hurts, and it’s valid, but you know what?”

She eyed him, darkly. At least she seemed to have lost track of the vodka. “What?”

“We’re going to get through it,” he said. “Together. Same way we’ve gotten through everything
else.”

She reached out, and he shuffled his ass in close enough for her to wrap both arms around him and
bury her face in his shoulder. He patted her back. Stroking her hair would probably be too m—

“I just wish you were straight,” Winry said.

Yeah. Definitely too much.

“Not—I mean—God, not because—” She clung a little tighter. “Not ’cause—I don’t want to change
you; I don’t care; I just—you’re—I trust you. And I just—if you were, it’d—we could—it’d be so
easy, Ed, and just—does it always have to be so hard?”

His mom had had a personal platitude for that: “Everything worth having is hard to get.”

Winry curled her fist into his shirt. “Life is stupid.”

“You’re telling me,” Ed said. “Hey, can you walk? Are you okay to go home?”

“S’not home,” Winry said into his shoulder. “S’a crappy dorm.”

“That’s true,” Ed said. “But that takes longer to say.”

“I don’t care,” Winry said.

“Okay,” Ed said. “Are you okay to go back to the crappy dorm?”

This sigh was even deeper and more dramatic than the last.

“I guess so,” Winry said.

“Cool,” Ed said. “Let’s go find Paninya. She’s probably incapacitated some frat boys and taken
their food by now.”

“Oh,” Winry said. “You met her?”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “She’s great. C’mon.” He disentangled her arms from around him, braced one
hand on the wall, and cautiously worked himself upright. Once he was sure he was stable on both
feet, he offered her his hands. “We’ll figure it out, okay?”

“Oh,” Winry said, grabbing on.

Paninya came into the kitchen from the yard as soon as Ed got Winry around the bottom of the stairs.

This apparently entailed packing several foil-wrapped, hamburger-shaped items into her canvas shoulder bag and then marching over to slide her arm under Winry’s shoulder on the opposite side from Ed.

“Let’s do this shit,” she said. “You know where she lives?”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “Not in a creepy way, but—”

“I was so worried,” Paninya said, rolling her eyes.

“You know what I mean,” Ed said as they made their ungainly way out of the frat house and started across the lawn.

“Yeah,” Paninya said. “I know. Winry—hey, Bright Eyes—you feeling okay so far?”

“No,” Winry said miserably.

“Hang in there,” Paninya said.

“It’s down the hill,” Ed said.

Paninya sighed. “At least that’s something.”

Just once, Ed would have liked to have left a party not dragging someone he cared about who had imbibed way too much. At least Winry hadn’t had a chance to make any poor life decisions while she was under the influence. Well—not any that Ed knew about. Not any that Ed knew about yet.

“Boy,” Paninya said. “I guess it’s not the first time I’ve had a handbag full of hamburgers, and it probably won’t be the last.”

“Somehow I like you more all the time,” Ed said.


“Same,” Ed said.

“I knew it,” Winry croaked. “I knew you guys would…” She hung her head, and her hair fluttered everywhere, though she managed to keep stumbling along the sidewalk as they towed her on both sides. “Eugh.”

Ed and Paninya both patted their respective sides of her back.

“Do you want one?” Paninya asked. “Or would food make it worse?”

“Dunno,” Winry said. “I feel like crap. Ed, will you promise to kill me first if I ever try to do that again?”

“No,” Ed said. “But I can do a really strongly-worded reprimand if you want.”

“One like Al’d do,” Winry said.

“Yup,” Ed said.

“Perfect,” Winry said. And then she said, “OhmyGodstop—”

And then they were, collectively, staggering over to the bushes next to the sidewalk; and then Winry
was, singularly, dropping to her knees and retching. Paninya squeaked, “Hair!” and Ed fumbled to sweep it all out of the way and hold it back with both of his hands to the best of his ability, and segments of it kept trying to escape, and Winry was either sobbing or throwing up real hard or both, and Paninya was stroking her back and making little soothing noises, and…

And Ed was never, ever going to a party again. Not ever.

---

He and Paninya ended up staying at Winry’s dorm for a little over two hours—after they’d finally managed to finish the plodding procession to the building, and then figured out which of her keys to use to let them in. Winry had been returning to herself just enough to remember her dorm room’s number, which was pretty critical given the circumstances. Her roommate had just sort of shrugged when Paninya—thank goodness she was there and kept calmly fielding the super-awkward pitches so that Ed didn’t have to—asked if they could hang around for a while.

It looked like Winry had gotten the worst of it over with during the whole puking-in-the-streetside-foliage episode, so that was something. Fortunately, she had a bottom bunk, so once they’d helped her clean up a little—which included such delightful tasks as checking her hair for stray barf, coaxing her into brushing her teeth one and a half times, and gently washing some of her eyeliner off—they tucked her in under her peach-colored comforter, and she passed out like an overstimulated toddler.

Ed and Paninya sat on the floor leaned against the edge of her bed for a while, making sure she was breathing clearly and whatnot. In the meantime, they picked up each other’s social media accounts, compared app games, and then spent a wonderful few minutes just resting with their eyes closed.

“Hey,” the roommate said after some indeterminate span of time. “Are you guys just gonna…?”

They both opened their eyes and blinked up at her.

“It’s cool,” the roommate said before either of them could answer. “I’ll check on her. We’re not really supposed to have a ton of people in here. It’s a fire code thing.”

Ed opened his mouth to say Well, this is a ‘my best friend might choke on her own vomit in the middle of the night and die’ thing, but Paninya was faster, and she was laboriously pulling herself up to her feet.

“All right,” she said. “Let me give you our numbers—can you text us in the morning and let us know she’s okay?”

“Sure,” the roommate said.

So that was… that. Good. Something.

---

It wasn’t even that late—considering—by the time he made it back to his dorm room. He and Paninya had given all of the hamburgers but one to Winry’s roommate as a thank-you-slash-apology gesture, and they’d split the last one while walking back. Neither of them was feeling especially
starved after watching Winry blow chunks all over the local shrubbery, but neither of them had really had dinner, either, so... so.

Paninya asked him, too, whether he’d checked out the Disability Service Office at all. He hadn’t. He could have said he hadn’t had time, but it was more than that, and she probably knew that whole sob story inside and out. Apparently they were pretty great, though. Apparently everybody there was cool, and it was worth a look.

Ling hadn’t even made it back yet by the time Ed wandered in, so evidently he was partying even harder than they had, but that made it the perfect time for Ed to hop in the shower while no one would be scrutinizing his feet.

Or so he thought. Just after he’d gotten his hair lathered up—which was no small task in and of itself—the door creaked, and there were footsteps, and... he just had to keep going and hope for the best. Wasn’t that about all that life was?

He tried to time the end of his shower with the faint noises emanating from the direction of the sink; maybe if he procrastinated a little, the guy would finish brushing his teeth and leave, right? Probably he was so wrapped up in shaving or whatever the hell that noise was that he hadn’t even noticed that one of the appendages shoved into Ed’s flip-flops was constructed primarily of plastic and steel. Probably it was going to be fine; probably Ed was paranoid; probably—well, what the hell was someone even going to say, anyway? What was he so worried about? This wasn’t gradeschool. You couldn’t point at some other kid and say You’re a weirdo and get away with it anymore.

He had to play it cool. That was all. He just had to stay even-keeled and try not to care. It seemed like there was an awfully long list of things he was trying not to care about lately. Was that a good sign or a really bad one?

When he’d stalled—shower stall pun unintentional, but good enough for finger guns, so he’d take it—about as long as he thought he could justify without looking like he was in the business of causing droughts, he dried off, dressed, rolled up the legs of his pajama pants just far enough to keep them off of the wet floor, slung his towel over his shoulder and laid his hair on top of it, and stepped out. He managed not to brace himself too obviously, or at least he hoped so, or at least—

The guy at the sink, who had been at said sink for at least ten uninterrupted minutes—doing frick knew what, although he sure had a lot of tubes and tools and things spread out all over the counter, so maybe he was taking a detailed inventory of his toiletries—turned to look the instant Ed emerged from the stall.

He looked down.

His gaze fixed on Ed’s left foot—or, if you wanted to get extremely technical, lack thereof.

He made a face.

It wasn’t a good face. It wasn’t even a surprised face, which Ed supposed he probably could have understood, even if it wasn’t especially nice.

The face was difficult to describe, because it incorporated several different emotions—chief among them, scandalization, bewilderment, and disgust.

It shouldn’t have mattered.

It shouldn’t have made a goddamn difference; he was just some guy who took too long in the bathroom; he was some stranger, and his judgment was, at least heretofore, completely
unsubstantiated, which made it irrelevant, which—

It shouldn’t have mattered—

But Ed’s heart dropped directly to the pit of his stomach, cold and hard and solid like a frozen stone—like somebody’d chipped Cap out of the glacier and hurled him right into the middle of Ed’s guts.

“Hey,” he said, and his voice stuck, straining, twisting. He sounded exactly like he felt—small. Reduced. Incomplete.

“Hi,” the guy said, flatly, without taking his eyes off of Ed’s foot.

Motherfucking son of a bitch, it shouldn’t have mattered. It shouldn’t have hurt.

All it really meant was that this guy was an immature asshole. All it really meant was that getting into a good college was no indication whatsoever that somebody had expanded their emotional horizons since elementary school.

Ed turned on his more reliable heel and made a beeline for the door. He wasn’t doing this. Not right now. He was going back to the room and going the hell to sleep. It was going to be great; he’d really fucking earned that shuteye. Tomorrow he’d call Winry as early as he could stand to wake her up as vengeance for accidentally enlisting him as a babysitter tonight. It was fine. It was all just fucking fine.

Ling still wasn’t back. Ed hung up his towel, tossed himself down on the bed, dragged the covers up, and rolled onto his side so that he was staring at the wall.

Now would’ve been a great time to have a nice, relaxing blog post to distract himself with.

Damn and double-damn.

The vibration of his phone under his pillow—because leaving it on his desk was a menace, because the wood magnified the buzzing by a power of ten, and he liked Ling marginally more than that—woke him at a truly unreasonable hour for a Sunday after a stupid party.

He cracked an eye open and tugged on the corner of the damn thing until the screen moved into the narrow window of his vision.

It was Winry.

Hey guys, Tess said I had to text you to let you know I was alive. I probably wouldn’t be if it wasn’t for my guardian angels. Love you guys. Thank you xx

Before Ed could collect enough brain cells to type out so by xoxo logic is the :o face eating a hug or what, Paninya had responded with the sparkle emoji, the angel emoji, and the double-heart emoji, which left him only one choice:

by guardian angels do you mean shoulder angels, he wrote. i think paninya is the shoulder angel and i’m the shoulder devil, how does that sound

Paninya sent HA YES PERFECT
Winry sent Go back to sleep, Ed x

It was Sunday, after all, and he didn’t have to work today, and it’d been a hell of a night, so he tucked his phone back under his pillow and did.

Ed went into Thursday’s section that week feeling… well, not exactly resolute, but—bolstered. Which helped, at least a little.

Pretending not to care about things—at this rate, pretending not to care about anything—was turning out to be fucking exhausting, but he’d realized, while he was counting the remaining class meetings during which he’d have to share a room with Roy, that they were going to miss a lab section for Thanksgiving. For once—for once—the universe had straight-up, unequivocally, without any sign of impending recrimination, given him a freebie. It was a Christmas miracle. A really early one. Or maybe a late Halloween miracle, to make up for the night he’d had then. Or—

He didn’t even care what it was. He just cared that there was a bright spot in his sightline, although with the way things were going, he probably should have pretended not to care about that, either.

It seemed like some part of that internal philosophical war had made itself apparent on his face, because Rosé leaned forward and whispered, for the umpteenth time, “Are you okay?”

“Of course,” he said.

That was probably not a small-talk-approved answer, was it?

Oops.

“I’m good,” he said, which was a lot closer to the script. “Thanks, though. Really. How are you?”

She warmed up at that, which was just another piece of evidence in the extremely large file indicating that the best thing to do in any social situation that was getting weird was to pretend that you were Al and say whatever he probably would have said.

Ed would die before telling him that, obviously, but it was a damn good plan most of the time.

Was it arrogant to think he could feel Roy’s eyes on his back? Maybe not his back. Maybe the back of his head. It had seemed like Roy had genuinely enjoyed playing with his hair, all the rest of it aside. Was that a thing? There were ‘ass guys’ and ‘breast guys’ and ‘hair guys’? Maybe the second category should have been ‘chest guys’, since he was pretty sure that non-heterosexual guys paid attention to pectorals more than they should have, too. Humans were weird. Muscle groups were weird. This was something to think about other than whether it was self-aggrandizing to wonder if Roy actually wanted anything about him after all.

When he and Winry had been coffee-ing Tuesday afternoon, he must’ve been moping enough to make it clear that he’d just slogged through another class hour of staunchly ignoring Roy, because
she’d fake-casually mentioned that Roy had updated, but he should probably read it. He’d dithered, and made excuses, and lollygagged a little for good measure, and then… that night he’d given in.

It was a really small update, anyway. Someone had sent him a message that said: It’s been real quiet here, you ok?

And Roy—Casanova—Casanova-Roy—whoever—had written back:

Sorry about that – I am vigilantly aware of how many days have passed since the last compelling episode of my life story. Or my sex life story. Or whatever it is, precisely, which I think is partly up to you insofar as what you get out of it, but the authorial intent discussion is a rather large digression from your point.

And to your point: I’m all right. Thank you; it’s very kind of you to phrase it that way. I will confess to some trepidation when checking my messages of late, for a variety of reasons, among them the likelihood of a ‘HOLY SHIT YOU HACK, UPDATE ALREADY, WOULD YOU? IF YOU CAN’T EVEN PRODUCE MEDIocre SOFTCORE EROTICA CONSISTENTLY, HOW THE HELL DO YOU EXPECT TO AMOUNT TO ANYTHING IN THE REST OF YOUR LIFE?’, but fortunately that one has stayed… well, not where it belongs, exactly, but inside my head, at any rate.

In any case, a few things happened recently which have given me much more cause to think deeply than to write poorly, so I’ve been dedicating some time to the former. I’m afraid that all vigorous introspection and no extracurriculars makes Casanova an exceedingly dull boy, but there we are.

At this moment, I’m hoping I’ll be climbing back up on the metaphorical horse in the relatively near future, but I have learned over time that it’s wise never to make any promises as such. Life has a way of snatching them out from under you and burning your fingertips if you try to grab them back. I am very grateful for your patience thus far and hope I won’t have to tax it too much further.

At your service, as always,

Casanova

Ed didn’t know what any of that meant, past the fact that Roy had respected his demand-request on his way out the door.

He also knew that Roy Mustang thought in beautiful ways, and it was a terrible, torturous, ugly shame that this had imploded before Ed had had the chance to explore that mind a little more. He wouldn’t have begrudged a bit more physical exploration, too, of course; there was some territory he’d dreamed more than once about charting, for starters; some major cartographical expeditions were probably in order, and—

And he needed to not think like that in class, with Roy’s eyes maybe-following him. He needed not to think like that any of the time, because life was short and sad and precious, and he was wasting it pining over someone he had pushed away. He’d done it for a good damn reason, and he wasn’t about to take it back, but—

But if Roy had just not been the type of person who described personal experiences that he shared with other people—

If he just hadn’t been the one behind the blog—

Despite the fact that Ed shouldn’t have been wondering anything, he couldn’t help asking himself half a million hypothetical questions that didn’t make a damn sight of difference, since he wasn’t going to budge. Foremost among them was the question of what would have happened if they’d
got in deeper before Ed had realized what Roy wrote and who that made him. If he hadn’t found out until they’d been established—until there had been much more history in place, and much more at stake, and much more to lose—would he still have left the room, and the building, and the something-like-a-relationship? If they’d been dating for a long time, and it had remained even half as damn idyllic as that first night, would he have been able to bring himself to throw it away over a stupid sexy blog?

What a dumbass question—told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing, so on and so forth to the absolute ends of the dumbass Earth.

It didn’t matter.

It didn’t matter, because it hadn’t happened, and it couldn’t happen, and he didn’t have the time to care.

So he did what he’d always done: he bent his head to the work and ignored everything else as much as he was capable of. It hadn’t failed him yet.

Thirty seconds after the lab hour ended, as he was shoving his notebook into his backpack to jet out of here before any awkward conversations could sneak up and garrote him from behind, his phone buzzed in his pocket.

It was just like Al to wait until the instant he was technically out of class to send him something; the thought brought a ghost of a smile to his face despite him. Good old Al. Or good young Al, really, who should’ve listened to his big brother, because big brothers knew everything except when they didn’t.

He drew his phone out of his pocket, and—

It wasn’t Al.

It was Pinako.

*Hi Ed, Al was having trouble breathing today so we took him in and there is a lot of fluid in his lungs. He will have gone into surgery by the time you get this. They said it is a pretty small procedure but there are some complication risks as always so if you want to come down let me know and I will tell you room # etc. Take care*

It would have been melodramatic to say his heart stopped—it didn’t. Of course it didn’t. If it had, he would be dead.

But it did feel like he’d been socked in the chest with twenty pounds of lead.

Rosé had chirped a goodbye and run off like usual, because she had another class. That was good. There was nobody to notice him sitting there starting to shake, because he knew this part—he knew this part like the backs of his own hands; like the insides of his wrists and his eyelids—

Things always went bad.

They *always* went bad.
He laid one hand down on the benchtop and used the leverage to push himself backwards on the stool, because of course his feet didn’t quite reach the ground, because they built these things for monstrously oversized people with stretched-out legs. He kept his hand flat on the bench as he eased himself to the floor.

The second he tried to stand, his right knee gave way.

His hand slid off of the table, and he managed to bang his knuckles against the edge on the way down, but it did slow his descent a bit, so that at least he hit the floor with slightly less momentum than he would have had otherwise. His left leg just sort of splayed itself out, halfway-bent, and the right one crumpled underneath him, and all of the air rushed out of his lungs at once and left him gasping.

“Holy shit,” Roy’s voice said, barely audible over the concurrent sound of footfalls on the linoleum. “Ed—are you—”

“Fine!” Ed said. Autopilot was a beautiful thing, or at least an impressive one. He grabbed blindly for the edge of the stool; the world was very distant and very blurry, but once he had a handhold, he could start to haul his weight upward enough that he could work his right foot underneath himself, and from there he could get the fuck out of the way and stop bothering other people with his bullshit. “Sorry—thank you—sorry. Fine. Just—had a—thing.”

The room wavered into focus enough for him to see Roy standing just about four feet away, hands halfway extended, palms out, expression bewildered and… concerned? Or was it judgment? Hard to tell.

“Are you sure?” Roy was asking while Ed contemplated the nuances of his facial features, which was—as it had been from the very beginning—a mistake. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Ed said, and then the effort of dragging himself upright with the stool sapped the last reserves of his energy, and the autopilot function made a loud whining noise, shuddered hard, and completely failed. “I—it’s—my brother—Al’s—he—I gotta get to the hospital, so—”


“Dunno yet,” Ed said. He had bested the stool; that was a start. His vision was clearing up. He could hear his heartbeat in his ears, so apparently his cardiac rhythms had been restored. The white-buzzing whole-universe-roaring-around-him feeling had started to dissipate. “I…it’s—my brother—Al’s—he—I gotta get to the hospital, so—”

“How far is it?” Roy said.

“About two hours,” Ed said. He was looking at his feet to try to make sure they would stay where they were put. He wasn’t sure which of the two he trusted less right now. “Fuck. It’s four now, right? Probably—worse with traffic, maybe two and a half or three, depending, but—”

“I’ll drive you,” Roy said.

Ed was no longer looking at his feet, because he couldn’t look at his feet and stare slack-jawed at Roy at the same time, and the latter took precedence. “What? You—no, it—”

“This was my last class today,” Roy said, “and my PI won’t mind, and taking an Uber that far would cost a fortune.”

Ed opened his mouth to release a long list of objections, regarding all of the important things Roy
probably had to do, or perhaps the fact that there was no way he could accept that kind of charity, or very likely just something irredeemable about what had happened the last time Roy had given him a ride.

Nothing came out.

“Honestly,” Roy said. “I’d be happy to. My car’s just in the lot by the gym—I could take you by your dorm first if you want to get some things together. Are you going to be there the whole weekend?”

“It’s Thursday,” Ed said. Stupidly, of course, but identifying his own stupidity was somewhat redundant in his case lately. “I—yeah. Probably. Unless—I mean, unless it’s—not a big thing, and it turns out he’s okay, but—”

“Then let’s go,” Roy said. “The sooner we get out of here, the better chance we have of beating some of the traffic. Which dorm are you in?”

“You can’t drive me,” Ed said. He lifted one hand to push his hair back from his forehead, but then he had to lower it again so that he could use it to pick up his phone. He seemed to be employing the other hand to hold himself up against the stool, although he was fairly sure his legs were working again.

Roy paused. That was probably a bad sign, with someone like Roy. Ed wondered how many times in his life he’d been absolutely speechless. “Why not?”

“I can’t put you out like that,” Ed said. He tried stepping away from the stool and didn’t immediately wind up facedown on the floor, so that was progress. He trained his eyes on the door and started towards it, taking little steps. “It wouldn’t be—” Fair. Right. Survivable. “I don’t—it’s fine. I’ll—manage. Or whatever. It’s—”

“Please,” Roy said, so softly that Ed stopped in his admittedly extremely slow-ass tracks and looked back. “I don’t mind. It’ll be a lot easier for you. It’ll get you to your brother faster, and safer.”

Ed swallowed. Bastard had a point—a couple of points, and some of them were sharp enough to pierce through even Ed’s equally formidable, frequently simultaneous talents for pigheadedness and cognitive dissonance.

His comfort—or dignity, or pride, or whatever combination of those things it was—came second. Al came first. Roy was right. He had to get to Al, and this was the most efficient way to do it.

He took a deep breath and ironed the last of the wobbly, trembly things out of himself. He would get there, more or less in one piece, because he had to—for Al. He’d be willing to do a hell of a lot more than this.

“You sure it’s safer?” he asked. “How well do you drive?”

“Very well,” Roy said. “Impeccably. Like a driving instructor. Like the kind of driving instructor that doesn’t make the kid take him to the dry-cleaners and then through the drive-through of a Jack-in-the-Box, like mine did.”

“All right,” Ed said. “Prove it.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Here he is. Enjoy. ♥

The walk to the car was awkward, but at least it was awkwardly silent. Ed didn’t know how long that quasi-blessing was liable to last.

He deserved it, didn’t he? He deserved it for going out and having fun—well, “fun”—when Al couldn’t, and maybe never would. He deserved it for being so damn reckless and self-serving and…

And this was getting real Catholic, real fast.

Maybe if it got Catholic enough, a semi-benevolent God would be Catholicked into being, and then said deity would have no choice but to look at Al, cry a little, and make all of this bullshit go away, because Al was the kind of person that bad things just shouldn’t fucking happen to, and the fact that they always did was incontrovertible proof that—

Well.

Anyway.

The problem was that the divine retribution part of religion made a hell—so to speak—of a lot of sense. For instance, when Roy had reached into his laptop bag and taken out a pair of sunglasses and slipped them on, he had raised his movie-star-hotness index from an eight and a half to a twelve, and Ed had earned all of these punishments. He had been a piece of shit, and he was going to have to suffer for it in every conceivable way. That seemed dangerously linear as far as logic was concerned.

So he followed Roy—fucking gorgeous fucking Roy—in silence, but for the occasional murmured “This way” at a turn or an intersection where Ed was just sort of letting the breeze blow him in a direction rather than picking up Roy’s physical cues. They sojourned all the way up to the third floor of the giant beige parking garage next to the big gym—not the one with the magical rowing machine—and then Roy led them up to a really old, really banged-up Toyota Corolla and stopped.

Some part of Ed had expected him to drive a fancier car or… something. The sunglasses sure looked designer, but Ed was about as astute a judge of fashion as the average dog, so it was a distinct possibility that it was Roy making the sunglasses look good, rather than the other way around.

Ed had never gotten the full story on Roy—that was part of it. He was used to most people having more resources than he did, familiarily- and monetarily-speaking, so he usually assumed that that was the case unless he had a pretty clear reason to guess otherwise, such as someone else having to work the same crappy side-job he was. There were a lot of grad students who didn’t live off of teaching stipends alone, after all; there were a lot who drove fancy-ass convertibles and dressed up for class, because their parents could have donated enough to the university to get them in anywhere.

Apparently Roy wasn’t one of them.

The average dog probably had Ed beat on judging cars, too, but he could tell that this one was pretty
fucking old, because Roy had to unlock it manually instead of hitting a little button on one of those key fob things.

“Hop in,” Roy said, and then he paused, and Ed had to race for the door before Roy decided that that had been an insensitive thing to say to somebody with one foot and got guilty about it or something. Was Roy the type of person to do that? It was hard to tell sometimes who cared so much about tiptoeing around the issue that they’d freak out at the smallest sign of a faux pas, and who didn’t give a single shit whether they offended you or not. Ed had occasionally met people who oscillated back and forth.

“You really don’t have to do this,” Ed said once he’d settled in a passenger seat that had seen better days. To be fair, he’d seen better days. When he was, like, eight. “You can—just drop me off at the dorm. I can take the bus to the train, actually, and then that’ll get me most of the way, a—”

“Ed,” Roy said, demonstrating that this jalopy did, indeed, fire up, “I want to. I know people don’t help you very often, and you’re not in the habit of accepting charity—” That stung like a motherfucker, incidentally, but once Roy got going, you couldn’t sneak a word in edgewise. “—but I promise you that this is something that I want to do. Please let me. Honestly, it will be much more difficult for me if you don’t let me help, and I have to sit at home twiddling my thumbs all night, imagining you stranding yourself in the middle of nowhere or… something suitably melodramatic.” He cleared his throat. “It’s fine.”

It wasn’t fine.

“Okay,” Ed said anyway. “But if you don’t let me pay you for the gas, I’m going to kick your ass.”

“That’s fair,” Roy said. He paused. “Also, it rhymes, so extra points for that.”

“Oh, my God,” Ed said. He couldn’t even bury his face in his hands, because if he did that, the panic flitting at the corners of his vision and breathing frigidly down the back of his neck would catch him, and he’d cry. He tilted his head back instead. Naturally, the headrest on this seat was set up way too high. “It’s Foster. The dorm. You can park in the loading zone on the street; I’ll be quick.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Roy said, backing out of his space and spinning the wheel.

It was going to be a long, long, long two hours. And then it was going to be an even longer night. And after that—

He couldn’t think that far. He couldn’t let himself. He was going to get through this, just like he’d gotten through everything that had come before it, and that was all that mattered.

Right?

Roy still hadn’t said anything by the time they’d forged out onto the highway. Or he had, but it had all been things like “You have a turn signal, you twit”, “You are a danger to yourself and others”, and “What did I ever do to you?”, none of which were directed at Ed, for a change.

“Hey,” Ed said after a few minutes of silence except for the road noise. At least there wasn’t a sea of tail-lights foaming in the distance yet. “How long have you had this car?”
“Five years,” Roy said. “It was my graduation present. To… myself.”

“Five years,” Ed said, “and no one has thought to replace the little T on the back with an R so that it’s a Royota?”

Roy grinned. That and the sunglasses just—

Fuck.

Ed fortified himself with a deep breath and stared straight ahead at the road.


Roy worked his mouth for a second before he put it to use. “Get… what over with?”

“Whatever you’re going to say,” Ed said. “Whatever you need to get off your chest after—y’know, what—happened, and—shit. About how I shouldn’t’ve—assumed shit about you, or—something. Or—I dunno. Whatever you want to say.”

This silence was thick and taut and… prickly. Like a frosted-over windowpane, and if you left your fingertips against it too long, they stuck to it as the ice bit in.

“There isn’t anything I want to say,” Roy said.

“Bullshit,” Ed said. “You’re a talker. There’s always something you want to say.”

Roy paused. His jaw moved, like he was eating the silence instead of just waiting it out. “Setting the…” He cleared his throat. He had such a gorgeous goddamn throat; it was unreal. “Setting that aside—I don’t… blame you.”

Maybe Ed had fallen harder than he’d thought back in the lab and fucked up some critical components of his ears. That would explain the balance problems, too, come to think of it.

Roy glanced at him, but not for long enough that Ed started to worry they were going to die in a fiery wreck.

“I don’t,” Roy said. “I… I knew that this whole… blog… project would have consequences when I started it. I should have expected that they would eventually manifest this way. I suppose I never thought… I didn’t plan on actually wanting anything other than what I’d advertised there, so—”

“Wait,” Ed said.

“But it’s a bit of a challenge,” Roy said, “to find a convenient place to segue into ‘By the way, I run a semi-explicit online chronicle of raunchy stories of varying degrees of veracity.’”

Ed stared the side of Roy’s face, and then at the road, and then at the side of Roy’s face again.

“Did you practice that?” he asked.

“Yes,” Roy said. “But not very much, because I didn’t think I’d have the opportunity to say it.”

Ed drew and released a few deep breaths in succession, counting them out as he went. Al had taught him how to do that when they were kids. He had no idea where the hell Al had picked it up—maybe it just came natural when you were the kind of person who had that nurturing impulse built into the core of your being. Ed had never been like that. Ed had always felt the heart-wrenching pull of the desire to help people, any way he could, any way he knew, but he’d never had the right
instincts, or the right ideas, or the right tools.

Point was—he was completely fucking lost right now, and Al had always coaxed him into breathing really slowly when it felt like the entire world was collapsing around him, and bricks and mortar were raining from the sky.

“Never mind,” Roy said after about twenty truly horrible seconds of Ed gazing in amazement at the road, because how could the world possibly still be there when it felt like he was freewheeling in a void, and—? “We don’t have to talk about it. I—just don’t want you to think I… hold it against you. Your reaction, I mean. I think if our positions had been reversed, I… well. It’s impossible to know that. But I understand where you’re coming from, and I’m not going to hold a grudge.”

“Ethics committee pay you extra to say that?” Ed croaked out.

“Hardly,” Roy said, with the faintest trace of a smile. He kept sneaking glances sideways. Bastard needed to keep his eyes on the road. “But I mean it. It—I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t—it didn’t affect me, or that I was prepared for it, or something cute like that, but… I understand. It’s not your fault. I put myself in this situation. I put both of us in this situation, actually.”


“All the same,” Roy said, “I think in every respect I have to take the bulk of the responsibility.” Ed started to protest, but before he’d gotten more than half a sound out, Roy was shaking his head. “I’m not trying to be a martyr; I mean it—it was my idea in the first place; I dragged you all the way back to my apartment; and in all of it, I knew better, and I had both of us to protect by holding back. I failed at that. Which is why it’s all the more important to me that I don’t let this affect our professional—or academic, I suppose, in this case—relationship in the least.”

Ed swallowed. He wasn’t sure what he was swallowing, exactly, this time, but it was bitter, and big.

“You practice that, too?” he asked.

“A bit,” Roy said. “Maybe it’s a good thing I don’t have any pets; I’d probably rehearse at them until they tried to escape.”

“Winry’s grandma used to make me practice all my speeches for school to their dog,” Ed said. “She was a pretty good audience except for the time she fell asleep while I was talking.”

Roy smiled.

And then he stopped smiling.

And then he glanced over again, for long enough this time that Ed found his hand creeping towards the armrest to cling on for dear life until Roy returned his attention to the highway ahead.


It sounded familiar—not the words, exactly, but the tone, the tempo, the timbre. The French thing—the je-ne-sais-quoi. Something nebulous but undeniable about the whole situation, beating just out of time with Ed’s blood—an echo of his pulse, lingering in the shadows all around his heart.

A different voice; the same damn questions.
Well, shit—think about it from my point of view, would you? Put yourself in my shoes for a second here. What the hell do you want me to say?

Ed hadn’t wanted—didn’t want—anyone to say anything.

He just wanted to be worth fighting for. He wanted to be worth the trouble, and the danger, and the possibility of pain. He wanted to be worth getting fucked up over.

It would’ve seemed equivalent, was all. He’d gotten fucked up six ways from Sunday over them; he’d turned himself inside-out over it; he’d let himself care so much—

But you couldn’t make things matter to people. You couldn’t make yourself matter.

There was nothing he could do about that.

So he trotted out the same line he’d used before.

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s fine. I get you. It’s okay.”

To his credit—maybe; people were puzzles in the dark most days, to Ed—Roy was quiet for a lot longer than the previous recipient of those words, and in a different way. There was something loaded about it, like there was more in it, wrapped up, and if one of them would just hack through the gauzy layers on the outside, it’d all come pouring out.

Probably what was in it was a mummified corpse.

Today was going to be a bad enough fucking day without any more of that shit.

“Okay, then,” Roy said, softly. “Do you… would you prefer to talk to pass the time, or would you like me to leave you the hell alone? Or there’s the radio, although I’m afraid my taste in music leaves something to be desired. Or everything to be desired, depending on who you ask.”

“Talking’s fine,” Ed said. It was, or would be, as long as it didn’t… as long as it stayed… away from them. Right? “You have any pets as a kid?”

“I was the family pet,” Roy said.

The first thing Ed’s dumbass brain wanted to ask was whether Roy had worn a collar, because Ed’s brain was a piece of shit that hated him, apparently. He caught himself, rewound, and managed, “You’re gonna have to explain that one” instead.

“Well,” Roy said, “my mother—my paternal aunt, actually, but she ended up becoming my foster mother—had a bit of an adoption addiction. I was the youngest, but not the last, in the collection, and I was the only boy, and apparently I have the perfect face for practicing makeup on.”

This time, Ed’s brain wanted to supply I can testify to the perfect face part.

“Huh,” he said instead. “Did they feed you weird shit? I tried to feed Al some weird shit when we were little.”

If the edge of Roy’s grin was always going to make his heart squeeze up like that, he was just going to have to gouge out his own eyes. There was no other option.

“There were dog biscuits,” Roy said. “And dirt. And a combination of no less than nine different
juices and sodas left over in the fridge.”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “My mom wouldn’t let us drink soda, but we tried to do the dare-you-to-drink-it thing a couple times with whatever we could find.”

“So did we,” Roy said. “Which was a problem after I learned to pick locks, because my mother also owns a bar.”

Ed… was staring. But how could he not? All of a sudden, Roy was just—unfurling his entire past in a couple of pithy, breezily-delivered anecdotes—

Casanova had always talked in concepts, not specifics—feelings, thoughts, overarching ideas. Never too closely autobiographical; never nailing anything down. And Ed was still having to work double-time trying to reconcile all of the things he knew about Casanova with all of the things he’d learned about Roy. Roy hadn’t gone back this far last time, and he hadn’t gone this deep. Maybe Ed just hadn’t given him the chance to, but—still.

Still.

“Sorry,” Roy said, for some reason. “Surprised?”

“I guess,” Ed said. “But in a way it makes a lot of sense. In a lot of ways it makes a lot of sense. Making cocktails is kinda like chemistry, too, right?”

“A bit,” Roy said. “And, perhaps more importantly, tips go a long way towards tuition.”

“My dumb ass worked retail,” Ed said. “Most of the suffering; none of the perks.”

“I’m betting your customer story collection is formidable, though,” Roy said.

“Sure,” Ed said, “but you’ve got drunk customer stories.”

Roy grimaced. “Does that count in the suffering or the perks?”

“You tell me,” Ed said.

It was a pain in the ass that talking to him was still… nice. Enjoyable. Pleasant. He was a really good conversationalist; he was funny as hell without being obtrusive and demanding about it, and he had a knack for hitting exactly the right tone, and…

And it really helped to keep Ed’s mind off of the image of Al laid out on an operating table, sliced open down the middle for them to do whatever terrifying shit with swabs and scalpels was required today.

So he eyed the clock, and told a couple of customer stories and then a couple of stories about Den defending her title as Best Dog in the Known Universe, and reveled in the slight schadenfreude of a couple of Demon-Sister Squad stories from Roy, and tried to keep his brain here in the car, not in the half-lit halls of the hospital at the end of this road.

The sun went down. Roy flicked his headlights on. He’d put the radio on to the classical music station but kept the volume low so that they could talk over it when they wanted to.

This was the weirdest punishment Ed had ever gotten for his assorted crimes against human decency, but somehow it felt… fitting. Somehow it felt overdue.
“You can just drop me off at the front,” Ed said as they drew into the hospital parking lot. “Right on the red curb there is fine. Just book it if you hear sirens. Otherwise, they don’t care.”

“I’m coming with you,” Roy said.

Ed turned to stare at him. It was significantly more difficult to do in just the faint light spilling out of the windows of the hospital lobby as they rolled on by.

“Ah,” Roy said, much more delicately, “if—you don’t mind, that is. I’d… I want to make sure you meet up with your family okay, and…” He attempted at the usual dazzling grin, which fell very flat in the combination of the thin light and Ed’s whole body going haywire with the overtures of panic. “Also I have to pee.”

“Okay,” Ed said, more to get him to park the damn car and let them the hell out of it than anything else. “S’fine. Anywhere’s good; they’re all… as long as it’s not one of the ‘Physician Only’ or the accessible permit spaces, they don’t police this place at all.”

“It would be pretty heinous to give someone a ticket in a hospital parking lot,” Roy murmured, and then he pulled into the next open spot and killed the engine.

Ed bit down on the inside of his lip, trying to distract himself from the ubiquity of his own heartbeat—it was in his ears and his head and his throat and his fingertips. In his chest, unsurprisingly, perhaps, it was rattling against his ribs like a metal cup clattering on the bars of a cell. He wasn’t sure he wanted Roy to be here—to be here at all, in the first place, seeing him like this; let alone continuing to be here, and following him, and being present when…

When he, in a few brief minutes, would walk into the ICU room and find Al sitting up, complaining about the food, healthier by the minute and ready to start fights about feline rights. Obviously. There wasn’t any other fucking option for what was going to happen up there; there just wasn’t.

The point was—he wasn’t sure he wanted to let Roy into all of this.

But he couldn’t really stomach the thought of Roy just taking off and leaving, either. He’d done this alone so many times; he’d done so many of the hardest things in his life with nothing but the empty air behind him, serenaded by his own voice’s *Just keep it together* running through his head.

Well, the only way to find out if it was worth the potential awkwardness was to square his shoulders and start walking.

He wanted to force the shoulders to relax a little when the automatic doors parted, and he saw the counter, but they wouldn’t budge. “Hey, Latoya,” he said.

“Hey, sweetie,” Latoya said. She reached up and picked a little pink post-it note off of the edge of her computer monitor, holding it out to him as he walked by. “Main ICU. I think this room’s just around the corner once you go in. Come by and say hi later, okay?”

“Yeah,” he said, glancing down at the loopy writing—3114. “Good to see you.” He raised the note and waved it a little. “Thank you.”

Roy followed wordlessly as Ed led the way through the double-doors and then hit the elevator button. He was chewing on his bottom lip harder by the minute; the little darts of pain were a welcome distraction from the way his brain just kept conjuring up images of what could’ve
happened, what *might’ve* happened, in the time it took to get here—

Pinako would have told him, wouldn’t she? She would have reached out; she would have let him know *immediately*, no matter what it took—she wouldn’t have let him get all the way here to find out that Al was dead.

She wouldn’t have.

Even if she was so possessed with grief, she would have found it in herself to send the text or make the call or—

And they wouldn’t have a *room*; they wouldn’t put him in a room; the worst it could be was the edge of death, or he wouldn’t be in the ICU at all, and—

The elevator *dinged*. It was sort of a muted sound compared to some that Ed had heard in other types of buildings. He wondered if that was deliberate, or if it was just a nice coincidence.

When they stepped out, he could feel the change in the atmosphere as Roy hesitated—which Ed didn’t blame him for; being faced with a big solid-wall-style door with an intercom on the side was intimidating the first time. Maybe the first couple of times. Ed couldn’t remember.

He pretended not to notice Roy’s discomfort as he went right up and pressed the button, though, because that seemed like the courteous thing to do.

“Hi,” he said into the mic. “We’re here to visit Alphonse Elric.”

“Okay,” someone said, slightly scratchily, on the other side. “Come on in.”

The door made the *click-thunk* noise, and Ed sidestepped over to turn the handle and push it open, glancing back over his shoulder to make sure he hadn’t lost Roy. It was almost eerie—had Roy Mustang ever been this quiet in his entire life? Certainly not for this long at a stretch.

“Here,” Ed said, more or less just to fill the silence. “C’mon.”

There was no way to act natural in a hospital even if it was one you’d been in a dozen—was it several dozen now?—times before. There was nothing normal about hospitals, and very little good. Sure, good things happened, but when they did, it was more a matter of relief than of *joy*, exactly. Maybe the maternity ward was different, but Ed had only ever hung out in recovery rooms and ICUs. He associated this whole damn building with the gut-dropping, skin-tingling feeling he always got when the pillars of the world started to shake around him, because something had gone seriously wrong. Happiness didn’t exist here. So far, at least, the *worst* possibilities hadn’t unfolded under the too-bright lights gleaming off the scrubbed-down linoleum tiles, but he had never walked any of these hallways unafraid.

It was probably way weirder for Roy than it was for him, though. He was assuming Roy wasn’t accustomed to just sort of striding purposefully around places like this, only glancing at the nurses or the doctors to see if he recognized them; never pausing to acknowledge flashes of frenetic movement or snippets of conversation or swells of palpable emotion emanating from any of the rooms en route.

Ed also had an advantage, in a sick sense of the word—all of this was background noise to him. Everything in the entire universe was secondary, tertiary, *negligible* compared to Al. Nothing between his feet and room 3114 mattered in the goddamn least.

He took the corner maybe a little too fast, but he’d made himself listen for Roy’s footsteps, and they were still following; the placards on the white walls read 3108, 3110—
Just around the edge of the curtain in the next-next room, he could see Pinako sitting in one of the black-plastic-and-shiny-steel chairs. His throat stretched to accommodate the impossibly urgent wriggling lump that was his heart, and it was probably a blessing that he couldn’t breathe in around it, because the breath would have come back out all choked-up with panic, and—

But Pinako was just sitting—reading something; she had a book; she—

They walled the ICU rooms off from the hallway with glass, hence the curtains and shit. They were open on one side, though, and Ed grabbed onto the frame so that his momentum wouldn’t send him sprawling, put his head around it to look in, and—

Al had a tube shoved up his nose and a couple of needles buried in his arm. The circles under his eyes were deep, and the hollows under his cheekbones were even deeper.

But he smiled.

He smiled like the sun coming out—like a whole fucking universe of constellations; like a thousand systems spinning in the night, bleeding starlight out into the dark. He smiled like the meaning of it. He smiled like life and love and warmth and every single beautiful thing growing somewhere in the frigid world, refusing to give up.

“Hi, Brother!” he said.

“Hey, kid,” Ed forced out. The cartilage in his knee did another remarkably fine Jell-O impression, so for the moment, he continued clinging to the frame instead of trying to make it to one of the chairs. “Everything go okay?”

“Guess so,” Al said. He looked to Pinako, wrinkling his nose a little, and it wasn’t fair; it wasn’t fucking fair that someone like Al had to suffer so much just to survive—

It wasn’t fair that anyone did. It wasn’t fair that a lot of people didn’t survive at all. Nothing was fucking fair; the world didn’t work that way.

But did it always have to be like this?

Christ.

“Did they say it went okay?” Al was asking.

“As much as they ever say anything in plain English,” Pinako said, which was pretty funny given the fact that she could have talked circles made of pure jargon around just about anyone in the field of biorobotics, but whatever. Pinako leaned sideways in the chair to look past Ed at…

Oh.

“Who’s this?” she asked.

“Uh,” Ed said. His mind went viciously, ferociously, irrevocably blank. “…Roy.”

There was an expectant silence.

He couldn’t exactly say My almost- and then immediately ex-almost-boyfriend, could he? What the hell did they want from him?

Roy cleared his throat in that muted, self-conscious way that people did when they were trying to minimize the sound of it but really needed the comfort of the gesture.
“I’m his TA,” Roy said. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

Pinako looked at Roy for a long second, and then at Ed, for a slightly briefer one.

“That’s a two-hour drive,” she said.

Roy looked at Ed. Ed could feel that Al was looking at him, too, and wasn’t there anything more interesting in this room to stare at? Like the EKG display, or the IV bag, or the wall, or something?

“I’m gonna pay for gas,” Ed said.

Pinako raised an eyebrow. “That wasn’t what I—”

“Nice to meet you, too, Roy,” Al said brightly. Ed loved him more in that moment than he had the moment before, which was pretty amazing given how much he loved Al all the time. Every time he thought he’d reached a terminal maximum of affection, Al gave him another reason to dig up some more. “It was really nice of you to drive Brother all that way, especially since he can be a total pill when he’s antsy.” …never mind. “What do you teach?”

“Chemistry,” Roy said.

“Uh huh,” Pinako said.

She was evil. She was evil, and if Ed blushed, this whole jig was up, and they would never escape the death spiral of this conversation, which had taken the focus away from Al, who was the important person here, in case anyone had forgotten.

“Why don’t you sit down and stay a while?” Pinako asked.

“Oh,” Roy said. “I’d—thank you, but I do need to be getting back, but… Ed, can I get you a coffee or something?”

At least it was Ed’s turn to stare at someone else. “No. You just did me a huge-ass favor. You hit your favor quota for, like, the next five years.”

Roy blinked, and then he pointed, somewhat gingerly, to the sign on the wall outside. “It says you can’t have more than two visitors in the room at any given time, so I thought I might as well make myself useful.”

“It’s cool,” Ed said. “They know us here.”

Pinako’s grin was positively diabolical, and the lines of inheritance pointing towards Winry were painfully clear. “You wanna get me a coffee, Roy?”

Roy blinked a little more. It was probably a good thing; his eyes had to be pretty dry after the drive. “Oh—I’d be happy to, if you’d like.”

Ed could not say Ix-nay on the evil-hay one-cray ots-play. He was just going to have to stand here and let this happen. “Well—shit, fine, okay.” He freed one hand from the doorframe to rummage for his wallet. “Coffee’d be—really great.” He had a slightly crumpled ten-dollar bill, which would probably cover two drinks even at hospital cafeteria prices, so he held it out. “Thanks. Really. Thank you.”

Roy was giving him the gentle smile, with the soft eyes. There was something else in it, though—something fragile, and something a little bit sad. It wasn’t quite pity. Which was good, because Ed
would’ve kicked his sorry ass for pity, but—

This was almost worse.

“Not at all,” Roy said, and at least he took the money. “I’ll be right back.”

Pinako managed to restrain herself until Roy had taken a grand total of about ten steps down the hall. In a place with less chaos than a hospital, Ed wasn’t even sure Roy would have been out of earshot.

“Well?” Pinako said. “I’d say there’s some chemistry there. None of my TAs would’ve driven me two hours to see my sick brother, I’ll tell you that.”

“You didn’t go to college,” Ed said. It was tough to sustain an argument when you were still hanging off of the doorframe, but he was damn well going to try.

“Fine,” Pinako said. “But if I had, you bet your ass none of my TAs—”

“Take it easy on him,” Al said. “He’s probably had a long day. I told Granny not to text you until you were out of class.”

“He’s a little tyrant even when he’s hacking up blood and phlegm and sputum,” Pinako said, adoringly. “I admire that.”

“Yeah,” Ed said. This was not helping his knee situation. “Me too. And—she didn’t, but… it happened to be his class I was getting out of. So he offered. It was really nice of him, and everything, but it’s—not a big deal. It’s not a… thing.”

Something occurred to him—belated, but staggeringly distinct.

“Wait,” he said. “How do you—how do you even know I’m… into guys?”

Al and Pinako looked at him for a long second, and then at each other, and then back at him. He was getting real tired of all of this staring game bullshit.

“I’ve known that since you were six, Brother,” Al said.

“I’d say ten, for me,” Pinako said.

A small but extremely potent bomb had gone off in Ed’s brain. Tiny shreds of gray matter cascaded from the clouds. “…the fuck?”

“Watch your language,” Pinako said.

“It’s okay, Brother,” Al said. “It’s not like it’s a big deal.”

“The fuck,” Ed said, more emphatically this time, since they didn’t seem to be getting the point. Admittedly, he wasn’t articulating it especially eloquently, but—

Pinako folded her arms and raised her eyebrows a little higher. “Are you going to sit your ass down, or are you going to stand in that doorway all night long?”

“Now who needs to watch their damn language?” Ed managed.

Pinako turned to Al. “He’s fine.”

“Roy certainly seems to think so,” Al said.
“No,” Ed said. “We are not having that conversation. Not now or ever or… ever.”

“I see,” Pinako said.

“You don’t see anything,” Ed said, steadying himself against the doorway one last time before he forged forward, staggering over to Al’s bedside to drape himself over Al’s lap, which was close enough to a hug when you were coping with the smoking aftermath of a possibly-radioactive explosion inside your skull. “Because there’s nothing to see here.”

“You have such a way with words,” Al said, patting Ed’s head gently with the un-IV-encumbered arm.

“Thanks,” Ed said.

“I didn’t say it was a good way,” Al said.

“Ouch,” Ed said.

Al patted his head a little more, in a way that might have been apologetic. “I still love you. You shouldn’t have come all this way. Don’t you have class tomorrow?”

Al knew very well he did, because Al knew his schedule as well as he did. Probably better. “Yeah, but just lecture shit. I’ll email ’em and get somebody to give me the notes.”

“I told Winry it wasn’t an emergency,” Pinako said. “She wasn’t out of class until after Al was out of the OR—I wasn’t trying to keep you in suspense, Ed. I thought you’d want to know as fast as you could. I didn’t realize you’d recruited some stud TA to chauffeur you around to family engagements. And he’s a chemistry buff, too? About to get a PhD? Very nice manners?” She whistled, swinging her feet where her legs hung off the edge of the chair. Ed would’ve commented, but she didn’t need the ammunition. “Talk about the whole package.”

“Thank you,” Roy said from the doorway, because of fucking course he fucking did.

Ed was half-sprawled on top of his brother’s hospital bed with one of said brother’s way-too-bony hands in his hair, gazing blearily at his ex-whatever-something, who had one of those little cardboard carrying boxes for multiple drinks so that you didn’t have to try to juggle all the cups. Three of the pockets had cups in them, and the third was filled with little packets and…

“I wasn’t sure if non-dairy creamer counted under the milk embargo or not,” Roy said, “so I brought that and the sugar. The tea’s mine; I paid for that. I have your change, too—”

“Do you have a time machine?” Pinako asked.

Roy blinked at her in that stupid-cute-bewildered way he did, even as he held out one of the coffees to her. “I beg your pardon?”

“A time machine,” Pinako said. “I need to send you back thirty years to my old self so she can scoop you up like gelato.” She raised the cup to him. “Thank you.”

Roy paused for a long second, and then he said, “I think I just found next year’s Halloween costume.”

“Perfect,” Al said. “You can probably buy a thousand of those little square spoons for a couple of bucks.”
Roy grinned. “And I can spray-dye my hair up into a little swirl, and make myself a serving cup out of cardboard and put it on a pair of suspenders, and…”

“I like you,” Al said.

“Here,” Roy said, stepping forward and kneeling down near Ed—much too close to Ed, as it happened; close enough for eyelash-counting and wistful thoughts. “You look like you need this.”

“Thanks,” Ed said, extracting one arm from the horrible angles of the bed frame to take the cup. He nodded to the remaining one. “Is that black tea?”

“Yes,” Roy said.

“You shouldn’t have caffeine this late,” Ed said.

Roy stared at him, pointedly. And then at his cup, even more pointedly.

“I’m a trained professional,” Ed said. “Don’t try this at home.”

“Much as I respect your expertise,” Roy said, “I need to drive back.” He stood up, taking his cup out of the carrier and offering the cardboard skeleton to Pinako. “Can I get anything else for you guys?”

“Oh, no,” Al said, sounding slightly awed. “You’re so nice. Thank you.”

Ed wanted to die a little bit. Or maybe just melt through the floor and reemerge in another dimension. One where none of this had ever happened; one where he wasn’t a colossal fuckup who just kept finding new and exciting ways to ruin things he hadn’t even dreamed he’d get a chance to destroy.

But then he wouldn’t really be him, would he?

That was probably a question for the philosophers, not the chemists. Molecularly, he’d be more or less the same.

“Drive safe, honey,” Pinako said. “You need to take good care of that face.”

“Do you know your way out?” Al asked.

“Yes,” Roy said. He glanced out into the hallway, looked both ways, and hesitated. “Ah… I… think.”

“I’ll walk you down,” Ed said, even though getting up sounded like almost as much torture as staying here. The second truest miracle of coffee, though, exceeded only by its magical powers of wakefulness, was that it was precious enough to overcome Ed’s natural clumsiness, so he almost never spilled any of it. Even when he was doing stupid shit like dragging himself upright with one hand on the side of a hospital bed and the other clutching a cup, he managed to keep it all in the vessel instead of on the floor.

“You don’t have to do that,” Roy said. He half-extended his free arm. “Do you—need a hand, or—?”

“Nah,” Ed said. “I got this.”

He did. Or had. Or whatever the appropriate linguistic formation of that sentiment was.
“Hey,” he said, catching Al’s hand and squeezing it for a second. “Don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.”

“Oh, darn,” Al said. “So much for my midnight marathon.”

Ed gave him a look. Al beamed back.

“Don’t be too long,” Pinako said. “I need to get home to let the dog out now that you’re here.”

Ed shot her a look, too. “I’m just gonna walk him out.”

“Right,” Pinako said, way too smugly. “Of course you are.”

Ed morphed the look into a glare, gave it a second to simmer, and then turned on his more manipulable heel and started out, muttering, “C’mon” to Roy en route.

Roy didn’t say anything until they’d stepped back out of the ICU, and Ed was reaching for the elevator button. “Ah—sorry. Is there a restroom nearby, by any chance? I—”

“Oh,” Ed said. “Duh. Sure, yeah. It’s just, like, twenty steps down that way, and then it’s the first right. You want me to hold your tea?”

“Thank you,” Roy said, passing it over, and then he was off, and—

And this was—half stupid-awkward, and half too fucking normal. Wholly surreal. Utterly unsettling, and Ed felt unsteady with it—like the first few minutes after waking from a nightmare, when the dark still hung all sticky-heavy in your head, and you knew you were getting through it, but you weren’t quite sure which way was up.

At least he’d had the presence of mind not to take this opportunity to pee, too, since the last fucking thing he needed right now was a very tempting opportunity to catch a glimpse of Roy’s dick.

…what a damn day.

He drew a breath, and then he drank some crappy hospital coffee, which was almost comforting in a horrible, acrid, disgusting bitter-bean-water kind of way.

Fortunately, the crapness of the coffee helped to distract him from his crapness as a person. Equally fortunately, Roy didn’t take long, so there wasn’t much time to dwell on it and practice different winces.

“Sorry about that,” Roy said when he returned, like being hydrated was some kind of crime; and then “Thank you” for the fact that Ed had held the tea that he’d bought while doing Ed a favor.

Social conventions were so fucked. And people who were nice enough to use them on Ed even though he didn’t understand them—

“Sure,” Ed said, and their hands did a stupid, stupid faint-brushing thing as he gave the cup back, and it was just because he was both a klutz and an un-self-aware idiot, so it probably looked deliberate, which would make it look like he was deliberately giving mixed messages, which—

As soon as he’d watched Roy drive off into the distance, he was going to go back upstairs and steal a Vicodin from somewhere and pass out on the floor so that this fucking day would end.

Speaking of which, though, he’d be shocked if Roy wasn’t almost as drained as he was—he wouldn’t hazard a more than, though; he’d been on maximum alert for coming up on three hours;
nobody had shit on him in the emotional exhaustion department right now.

“Hey,” he said as they made it back down to the lobby, and he waved to Latoya. “You wanna—I mean—if I give you my number, will you text me and let me know you made it back okay?”

Roy blinked at him, visibly startled for a second before he wrangled the cool-neutral face back on again.

“Of course,” he said. “That’s—very—nice, actually; that… Here.” They’d just finished crossing the lobby as he withdrew his phone from his pocket. “Give me the number, and I’ll text you now so you have mine.”

Ed dictated, and his phone buzzed in his pocket a second later, and then they were most of the way to Roy’s car.

“Send me a picture of what you pay for gas next time you fill the tank,” Ed said. He had the urge to pat the car. Which was stupid, so it was a good thing he resisted. It wasn’t a goddamn horse. “Then I can calculate the mileage and make sure I pay you enough.”

“It’s really not a problem,” Roy said. “It would be disingenuous in the extreme to call my salary a ‘living wage’, but I’m not surviving on scraps just yet.”

Ed knew that. Ed had seen his apartment. Ed had also seen him inhaling awesome Indian food, which admittedly wasn’t in the highest bracket on the price scale, but—still.

“Okay,” Ed said. Then he drew the ace out of his sleeve and laid it crisply down on the felt of the proverbial tabletop: “But it’ll make me feel better.”

Roy smiled—thinly enough to make it very clear that he knew exactly what Ed had just done there. What an asshole. How dare he go around being so goddamn clever on top of cute and weirdly compassionate and—why had it gone like this?

Maybe it’d stay this way. Maybe it could stay sort of low-key and comfortable; maybe they could just… get along. Maybe they could be friends. Ed just plain liked him almost as much as—the rest of it. So maybe they could keep that part. Fuck knew Ed needed a friend right now; he needed all the support he could get. He had no idea what he’d be able to offer Roy as recompense, but maybe he could think of something, and…

It wouldn’t be the first time he’d clamped his heart shut to hold the rest of it in. He’d been friends with Russell for months before it all blew sky-high—‘friends’, that was, in his case. Dull hurt he could handle. That was just what living tasted like, after a while.

“All right,” Roy said. “Is it… hmm.” He bit his lip, glancing at his car and then up at the streetlamp hazily illuminating this little quadrant of the lot. “Do you—God.” He took a breath, mustered a little half-laugh, half-sigh thing. “Sorry; I think my brain’s finally up and quit.”

“Good thing you got that ‘disingenuous’ out of the way a minute ago,” Ed said. “I don’t think I’ve heard that since I took the SAT.”

“Happy to be of service,” Roy said. “Which—is sort of… I was going to ask if it would help or make it worse if I… Do you want a hug?”

Ed—
Wasn’t sure how much more a guy could ricochet through extremes of feeling in a single day without just collapsing on the pavement and closing his eyes for a while.

Did he, though?

Maybe that was a more important question than how much more of this he could take. Did he want a hug, or not? Did he want to press himself in against Roy’s chest and feel that bastard’s beautiful arms pull tight around him, and breathe in deep and risk having Roy’s scent linger on his clothes for the remainder of the night?

Every choice in the world was a game of pros and cons, wasn’t it? And every single one had already been made for you, by the person that you were—by the human being that you’d been shaped into; by the essence you’d become.

In the specific place you’d ended up, there was only ever one choice—the one you had always been on your way to make. The one thing you were bound to do after everything that had come before. You were only ever going to do that, because everything until now had led up to it; a whole world of chance and influence had landed you precisely here, guiding every aspect of you; every instinct and desire was a fundamental piece of who you had been crafted into. The next decision was a foregone conclusion, because you were one more stitch in the fabric of the universe, and the pattern was set in perpetuity.

And that was fine.

He stepped forward, and Roy folded him into both arms.

It felt—

Good. So good. So indescribably soothing that there was a noise in Ed’s throat—a little bubble of pure comfort that wanted to rise up and out and pop into a contented little sigh. Roy knew how to hug, or his impulses were just perfect—whatever the cause, the results were the same, and they were phenomenal, and he applied just the right amount of pressure, and he grazed one hand very lightly against the back of Ed’s head and then drew it down his back and then settled it there—

Ed couldn’t leave his face buried in Roy Mustang’s shoulder forever. For one thing, his coffee would get cold—in addition to which, Roy, clever bastard that he was, had set his tea on top of the car to free up both hands, but Ed had bumbled right on into the spill-potential danger zone by holding onto his cup.

For another thing, it’d be… what? Leading him on? Implying a promise that Ed didn’t intend to keep?

But he could take some solace in it just for a minute, couldn’t he? Surely that wasn’t tempting fate. Surely that wasn’t asking too much.

How long was a minute, anyway? He should have started counting the first second their bodies touched; he should’ve ticked the time off from the instant that he shoved his nose against Roy’s collarbone and breathed in perilously deep. It had probably been a minute already, but it just—he just—

He couldn’t have the rest of it. He’d let that go; he’d cut his losses; he’d made his peace.

Could he just have this?

…he knew the answer to that. He knew the answer it’d always be, when it came to him and shit he
wanted, badly, but didn’t require to survive.

He shifted backwards, just slightly, and Roy’s arms parted, and he stepped away. He took a breath—clean air, this time; not air that Roy had claimed and tainted by occupying it. Not air that coaxed him towards yet another damn temptation.

He looked at the pavement so he wouldn’t have to look at Roy. The white lines demarcating all the spots were worn to pieces, gradually fading. Ed sympathized.

He still had his coffee somehow. Whether or not it was drinkable at this point was another matter entirely. How long had they been out here? It felt like a thousand years, but it couldn’t have been more than five minutes; it must have still been hot.

“Thanks,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” Roy said.

“All right,” Ed said, which it wasn’t. “I should—go. I… drive safe.”

“I’ll do my best,” Roy said.

“You’d better,” Ed said. Crap. Was that too… something? It was definitely too something. “Um—g’night.”

Roy drew his keys out of his pocket and spun them around his index finger, because he was like that.

It wasn’t his fault that Ed was fucking weak for it.

“Goodnight, Ed,” he said, softly, and that—

Ed smiled one more time, forcing it, but with any luck the lousy streetlamps would hide that. He turned around and started striding for the lobby again before he could lose his nerve and get down on both knees—which was no small feat, it should be noted—to beg.

He wasn’t sure exactly what he’d be begging for, come to think of it. Forgiveness, maybe. A change of heart. A change of personality. A Roy who was all of the things that made him feel so indescribably safe and fucking special, but without the parts that he was scared of. A Roy who would drive him two and a half hours at the drop of a hat even though they supposedly meant nothing to each other at the time, but not a Roy who would feel some hot guy up at a club and tell the entire world about it.

It wouldn’t have been fair to ask that even if he had had a single damn thing to offer for the sacrifice. And he didn’t. So it was moot. It was over and done with and dead.

He talked to Latoya for a couple of minutes while he drained the coffee, and then he went for the elevator again. He had a lot of emails to send, and a lot of worrying to do, and a lot of AI stories to catch up on. Maybe he’d find some time to sleep somewhere in there, too.

Time passed differently in here—like a non-Newtownian fluid. Something viscous. Honey, maybe. When you got it flowing, sometimes, it’d slide right by; but other times it was so sluggish it looked stationary, and it was all you could do to keep staring at the walls and stop yourself from screaming.
He’d pulled one of the horrible chairs up right against the edge of Al’s bed, which had a couple of metal bars on the side. Presumably those were useful for preventing people from falling out of these things, especially since they seemed to insist on keeping the backs upright, which must’ve made sleeping a good and proper pain in the ass. At the moment, though, the only purpose it seemed to be serving was holding Ed at arm’s length from his brother, which was agonizing, even if it was protocol. That was hospitals in a nutshell, wasn’t it?

Winry had texted a flood of emojis and a promise to be there tomorrow afternoon as soon as she could get out of her classes. Pinako had texted to report that Den had not destroyed the house in their absence, though the poor fuzzbucket was apparently staring out the front windows a lot like she was waiting for Al to get back. One of Ed’s coworkers had agreed to cover his shift on Saturday if he didn’t make it back in time.

And then, just after Ed had forgotten to wonder, Roy followed suit—not about the dog, obviously. Just the text. His said Made it back intact, or at least as intact as I was when I started. Please give your brother my best, and try to take it easy… Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.

Ed showed Al the screen. Al said “If you don’t want to date him, can I?” Ed’s face must have been a masterpiece, because Al half-laughed and half-cringed and said “Okay, okay,” and then didn’t bring it up again.

So that was all right. Or something.

If he had to be at a hospital because his perfect brother was terrifyingly sick, at least he was at a hospital where they knew him. One of the nurses who’d been working here a while swung by right around eleven bearing a cot for him, and once he’d set it up directly next to Al’s bed and stretched out on it, the slow beeping of the EKG dulled enough for him to scrounge up a little bit of sleep.

It was, naturally, only a little bit—flickers and fragments, mostly; a wisp here and there.

He dreamed, though. He dreamed in color, right on the edges of the real.

They sat him down on the couch near the reception area, which he’d slept on once or twice, and a very serious-looking doctor who he’d never met before told him that Al was going to need another organ transplant. This time, they said, Al needed a new heart.

That was the bad news. The good news was that Ed was a donor match.

He told them to do it. They told him things would change. He told them to do it. They told him he’d regret it. They told him it was hard. They told him he’d never be the same again; he’d never feel the same again—the machines they put in you instead were increasingly advanced, but nothing could simulate the spectrum of human emotion; this was experimental to start with; even if he survived, there was a possibility he’d never live again, in the conventional sense of the word—

He told them to do it.

Things blurred; time passed; the jab of the needle into his radial artery startled him out of his complacency, and he found himself in a hospital bed with faded teal sheets. Al was in the bed just next to him—pushed close enough to grab onto Ed’s other hand, and his eyes were so big and so sad, and he kept saying Brother, I’m sorry; I’m sorry I’m so broken; you don’t have to do this; I’m
Ed blinked. There were surgeons over him. Wasn’t he supposed to be out-out? One of the masked doctors turned to another, bloodied scalpel raised, and said something about upping the dose, and he sunk beneath the surface of the haze again, and the world swam into rippling prism light.

He blinked again, and he was back in the teal bed, hooked up to half a dozen monitors. One of them was a three-dimensional image of his… heart. His fake heart. His new heart. Al had the old one. Al needed it more.

It was built from chrome and steel and ivory, with little silver criss-cross-patterned tubes. He watched on the screen while it swelled and pulsed and pumped, swift and steady, just like the real thing. Mechanically regular; reliable to a fault. That would suit him better, wouldn’t it? That might curb the streak of wildness in him that always made him want to fight and rage and run. That might teach him, once and for all, how to act like a stable, socialized human being—not some kind of half-trained animal trapped inside a person’s shape.

Maybe it was for the better.

*Brother,* Al said, gripping his arm so tight the needles dug in deeper; his eyes were full of opal-gleaming tears, but Ed’s arms were too heavy to lift to wipe them all away. *Brother, it worked; we both made it; maybe now we’ll finally be okay—*

He was out on the sidewalk in front of the hospital, waiting for his ride. He should have called a cab, but they hadn’t given back his clothes. These fucking gowns were as horrible as they looked; his ass was just about hanging out the back of it, and the dumb little ribbons meant to tie it shut kept coming undone. If only the wind wasn’t so cold. If only the wait wasn’t so long. If only—

Roy pulled up to the curb in a shiny black Mustang. Ed wanted to laugh, but it wasn’t… in him. It wasn’t there.

He opened the passenger door and climbed in, trying not to flash anybody in the process. Roy revved the engine and reached out to graze a fingertip against his cheek.

*That was very brave,* he said. *Do you feel like you fixed it? Do you feel like you made it up to him? Do you feel better now?*

Ed smiled.

*I don’t feel anything,* he said.

He opened his eyes.

The EKG was still beeping to keep time. They’d pulled the curtain over the window-wall, but enough light from the hallway slid around it to paint a stripe of pale fluorescence across Al’s face. Ed’s whole body was cold, so fucking cold—physically, sure, but his blood felt chilled; his soul felt frozen; there was ice in every capillary, and he wanted nothing more than to curl up and pull the blanket over his head and hear Mom tell him it’d just been a nightmare, just a dream, just a dream, just a—

Mom was dead.

This was it. This was all he got—himself; Al; a couple people who cared enough to help them get here and get through it all. That was the sum of it. Life was a bitch, and then you died alone.
He forced a few deep breaths down his throat, waiting for his pulse to settle down. And then he dragged his phone up out of his pocket, because of course he’d forgotten to bring pajamas and ended up crashing on a hospital cot in his goddamn jeans.

He knew he shouldn’t, but he just couldn’t help it anymore. It was too cold. It was all too cold.

With a still embarrassingly shaky fingertip, with his eyes stinging from the sudden brightness of the screen, he tapped his way over to the blog.

There was only one new post since the last one, but it was a pretty good chunk of text. He narrowed his eyes to try to make them focus better and poised his thumb to scroll.

*Have you ever been in love? What does it feel like?* someone had asked.

*Oh, my incognito friend…*

*You’ve caught me at a bad time – at the worst possible time, I think; I’m right on the threshold between relief-wired and relief-exhausted, and I left my impulse control on the road somewhere. I’m going to regret this tomorrow. I almost regret it now, and it hasn’t even happened yet – but I won’t be able to delete it, because I despise deleting things from the internet. It’s supposed to be a record of us, the way I look at it; and sometimes that’s a record of just how magnificently stupid or soppy or self-destructive we can be. In my case, frequently all three at once.*

*To your point: I imagine it’s probably a bit different for everyone, but in my experience… It’s like a house. (Or an apartment, if you’re among the vast majority of us, and are not the prodigy CEO of a major tech company who can afford nice things like food and car insurance, but bear with me.) It’s as though you’re touring a house, cautiously perhaps, thinking about purchasing one, and you walk inside during the visiting hours, and immediately you sense that you’re home. It feels right. It feels secure and pleasant and open and comfortable, and the more you look around yourself, the more details about it you find yourself admiring. Perhaps it’s not perfect – maybe you’d prefer a bigger yard, or the wallpaper in one of the smaller bathrooms makes you want to gag – but by and large, you just want to sit down on the couch and stretch out and gaze at the beautiful walls and never leave. You know, deep down, that you want to stay. If the blinds fall off that window, you’re going to put them back up by hand, and you’ll love every minute. If the drains back up, you’ll be exasperated, but you’ll get it solved, and then you’ll settle down again feeling relieved and all the more protective of this place.*

*I think the safety is the biggest part of it, perhaps. Details don’t matter quite so much as that strange certainty that you belong in a place. Anyone can refinish a cabinet or paint a wall or scrub something clean; and most of us can stand to live with a little bit of clutter or a smudge or two of dirt. But feeling that you are in the right place at the perfect moment is extraordinary. And that’s what it feels like, for me – like settling into serendipity one second at a time. Coming home.*

*If you’re one of those lucky people that good things happen to, you find out that the price is far more reasonable than you ever could have imagined, and you buy it, and it’s yours, and you start daydreaming about all of the beautiful days you’ll have in your new home, and all of the wonderful things this partnership will bolster you towards, and all the renovations it wants that you’re so looking forward to making.*

*But if you’re one of the rest of us, more often it catches fire while you’re inside.*

*And that’s the end of that.*

*….or termites! It could be termites, too – you see the signs, but you optimistically ignore them,*
hoping the problem might just sort itself out, or perhaps that you’re overreacting, and there isn’t a problem at all, and then one day the whole place falls down around you, and all you have to show for it is some splinters and a pile of squashed exoskeletal remains.

...yes, I’m going to go to sleep now; goodnight.

It was a quarter to four in the morning now, according to the brutally honest little bar at the top of Ed’s phone screen, but the blog didn’t indicate when Roy had posted.

The stupid, sleep-deprived part of Ed wanted to send him one of those anonymous messages again —How dare you, how DARE you sit behind your laptop with that smug little smile on your face and rip my life apart.

But Al was breathing softly, and the sun would come up soon. Ed closed the window, quit the browser app, pressed his thumb down on the button to turn off the screen, and tucked the phone in against his chest. That was enough. Al getting one more day was enough.

When Al rustling around in the bed woke him again, there was enough light in the room for him to hazard right off the bat that it was a significantly more reasonable hour. He was about eighty percent sure of that, and about a thousand percent sure that he was never going to sleep in his clothes, snuggled up with his phone, ever again in his life. He’d die first. Or, more likely, go to the hospital gift shop and pay exorbitant prices for a couple of souvenir articles that could pass for pajamas.

He’d always wondered why they had souvenirs. He supposed he could understand new mothers or kids who’d broken a bone wanting to commemorate the occasion with a teddy bear wearing a little T-shirt with the name of the place printed on the front, but he’d never endured anything here that he wanted to remember every time he looked at a stuffed animal or a snowglobe or some shit. The best gift he could get from this hospital would have been never having to come back here again—the best remembrance of it would have been the capacity to forget it existed at all.

Maybe someday. Maybe someday it’d all quiet down.

In the meantime, a towheaded angel was shifting around beside him, which meant it was time to get up and be the brother that Al needed for as long as he was able.

Ed pushed himself up on one elbow, trying to ignore the way his head lurched. Al was making adorable crinkly-nosed faces as he moved around, trying to reorganize his blankets. “Hey, kid.”

“G’morning, Brother,” Al said. “Sorry. Did I wake you up?”

“Nah,” Ed said. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Al said. “Just this stupid bed. My butt hurts. Can you help me go to the bathroom?”

Ed probably should have just gotten rid of all of his phone alarms in favor of a single custom tone that was Al’s voice asking him for help—nothing in the world, including air raid sirens and earthquakes and eardrum-splitting screams, could compel his ass out of bed as fast as that.

“You a little dizzy?” he asked as they eased Al off of the side of the contraption with both of Ed’s arms under his elbow.
“Tiny bit,” Al said. “Mostly I just don’t wanna get yelled at.” They didn’t take kindly to patients wandering around alone in the ICU—even within their rooms. It made sense, but it drove Al to distraction that he couldn’t even go stand by the tiny window and watch the little birds without supervision. “I was a little too picky with dinner last night, though. They just put so much butter in everything.”

As they continued their plodding progress towards the bathroom, Ed used the arm he’d wrapped around Al’s waist to pinch, very gently, at the nearest extremely bony hip. “I think you could use a little more butter, kiddo.”

“Well, you could use a little more manners, Brother,” Al said cheerfully.

Obviously he wasn’t feeling too bad.

Al was, unsurprisingly, deeply and “troublingly” dissatisfied with the quality of the soap in his little bathroom. Ed had thrown a couple of his toiletries into his backpack, but since Roy had been idling on the curb below in a ten-minute loading zone, courting a ticket on his behalf, he’d been in such a hurry that he hadn’t remembered how persnickety his otherwise-perfect brother could be when it came to hygiene, and apparently nothing that he’d grabbed in his haste was sufficient.

That was fine, though, because he knew for a fact that the 7-Eleven two blocks down had iced coffee drinks way better than anything they served in the cafeteria, as well as a reasonable array of miscellaneous products that Al had given his stamp of approval in the past.

Al had an X-ray scheduled for nine-thirty, which was good insofar as Ed had time to pop down and pop back up before then; and less good insofar as that was only possible because it was fucking early, and he felt like crap.

Didn’t matter. Al wanted nice shampoo and shit, and Al was going to get it.

“Back in a jiffy,” Ed said, shoving his feet back into his boots.

“Ooh,” Al said. “Peanut butter. I could go for peanut butter.”

“You’ll go for whatever I get for you,” Ed said. Before Al could turn the puppy eyes up from a six to a fifteen, he relented with his best attempt at a half-grin. “I’m friggin’ kidding. Text me a list. I’ll see what they’ve got.”

“Be prepared for a novella,” Al said. “There’s nothing else to do here except think about what I can’t have.”

“You should write an actual novella instead,” Ed said.


“I’d read it,” Ed said.

“You’re a biased audience,” Al said.

“I’d make other people read it, too,” Ed said. “And kick the crap out of anyone who complained.”
“I know you would,” Al said. “But I’d want it to succeed on its own merit. And while I could read about kitties just going about their business from now until Doomsday, I don’t imagine that it would connect with mainstream audiences and chart on the New York Times bestseller list if I didn’t include some semblance of a plot.”

Ed pointed one finger at him. “Work on that,” he said, “and I’ll find you peanut butter.”

Al grinned. “Deal.”

Ed wasn’t sure if it was standard for 7-Elevens to carry peanut butter, but this one did, and that was all that mattered. They also already had the coffee-slushy drinks percolating in the machines with the ever-rolling plastic windmill stirrer-things, so he filled a plastic cup to the brim.

On the one hand, anything that cycled in a giant plastic vat like this for, apparently, days on end must have been more sugar than substance, and probably contained petroleum, and most likely hacked a year or two off your life with every ounce that you consumed.

On the other hand, it tasted great, and Ed had had such a fucking week that he no longer particularly cared if he survived the rest of it. As long as he got the peanut butter back to Al before the coffee killed him, it was fine.

Al had also mentioned that he wanted chocolate milk, which… was one of the many lesser banes of Ed’s existence, because chocolate was great, and milk was the liquid Devil, and having the two synergized like that made him extremely conflicted. As long as it was for Al, though, he supposed that his personal biases didn’t really affect anything. He picked out a carton that looked structurally sound and put it in his basket, and then he moseyed over to the Pop Tarts—which Al had mentioned, but which Ed knew he secretly wanted anyway. And maybe some Rice Krispie Treats. And maybe—

“Holy shit,” someone said.

Someone he knew; someone whose voice he still heard at least once every two weeks in the background hubbub of the worst of his dreams—

He looked up.

Russell Tringham looked so fresh and collected in a half-buttoned white shirt and the signature suspenders and his favorite old brown leather jacket, with the equally-trademarked swoosh of stupid hair in his stupid face, that Ed’s guts dropped—both in a gravitational way, and to sub-zero temperatures that instantly started spreading to the rest of him.

Was this really happening? It was mathematically unlikely—but not impossible; not inconceivable; not out of the question, and his luck had always been so bad—

In the midst of a rant once, Winry had told him that the best revenge you could get on an ex was to move on and be happier without them than they were without you. If that was true, Ed had unequivocally failed.

Well—maybe not unequivocally. Maybe not quite. He hadn’t been happy with Russell, during the extremely brief little strangled gasp of time that it had lasted. Russell hadn’t let either of them be
happy.

Maybe he hadn’t failed, then. But he’d fucked up this golden opportunity to turn a terrifying coincidence into a coup. Russell looked clean and effortlessly Together, in that inexplicable way that you couldn’t fake with a checklist. Ed, meanwhile, was standing in the processed snack aisle of a 7-Eleven at eight in the morning wearing yesterday’s wrinkled clothes, with maybe three hours of sleep under yesterday’s belt, with a halo of mussed and matted and tangled hair that he hadn’t washed in a full day and a half. The bags under his eyes were probably big enough to bring bodies to the morgue in. He was pretty sure one of his boots had come untied.

“Oh,” he said.

It wasn’t exactly a greeting, in the traditional sense, but Russell was smart enough to get the point.

“I didn’t know you were in town,” Russell said.

He was keeping his voice low and neutral in that way that Ed had always hated—the way that made it impossible to tell if he was angry or indifferent or neither or trying not to be both. Ed had long since had to make peace with the fact that his own face hid nothing, which left him always wearing his heart on his sleeve. Russell was the kind of person who glanced around the ambient sleeve décor, shrugged, and shoved a couple more royal family members up his own. He’d never been able to understand that it fucking hurt to lay your feelings out in the open and never even get them acknowledged, let alone addressed.

No—never been able to understand was too generous.

He’d never even tried.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” Ed managed. He was supposed to be having a conversation. Everything was so stuffy-fuzzy-blurred when you’d barely slept. “Al’s…” He jerked a thumb in the direction of the hospital.

“Oh, shit,” Russell said. He looked genuinely concerned, which somehow made it worse. “Is he okay?”

“He’s got a couple more tests today,” Ed said, “but—yeah. Seems like. So far.”

Sometimes he was such a brilliant conversationalist that he even impressed himself.

“Well, that’s good,” Russell said, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets. At least the whole hospital thing sort of excused the fact that Ed looked like he’d been run over by a garbage truck first thing this morning, and then it had reversed back over him a couple of times. “I was just… Fletcher forgot his lunch, and he’s got an early class, so… I was gonna get him something and then bring it for him.”

Fletcher was only a year younger than Al—he must have been at the community college now, too. Made sense; it was a hop, a skip, and a jump from here.

“Cool,” Ed said. “How is he?”

“He’s good,” Russell said.

There was an excruciating pause. Ed was painfully conscious of the way that his slush-coffee was sweating condensation all over his hand. He was also painfully conscious of the bizarre assortment of absolute crap semi-food-like items jumbled up in his basket, but at least he could blame those on
“Um,” Ed said. He sort of had to say it, didn’t he? Fuck. The trajectory of the conversation didn’t give him much of a choice. Fucking Russell couldn’t just, y’know, say something graceful like Sorry, I’m going to be late if I don’t grab something, good to see you and jet the fuck out of here. That would’ve been too merciful. Russell had never had even the faint little streak of empathy required for noticing when other people were uncomfortable and trying to bail them out.

He’d never offered much of anything, honestly. Ed had gambled on him anyway.

And Ed had lost.

He shifted the basket handles so that they wouldn’t cut off the circulation in his fingers while he stood here, slowly dying. “How are you?”

“Oh,” Russell said, like he hadn’t been expecting it—like he hadn’t demanded it with the damn silence. “Good. Great. Thanks.” He cleared his throat and tossed his head, and the pretty hair fluttered and shimmered and then settled back into place. “How are you?”

If the poor cashier at the counter was listening to this incredibly insipid conversation, there were probably only five seconds left before she started throwing objects at their heads. “I’m okay.”

“Oh,” Russell said again. “I mean… other than…” He gestured in the general direction of the hospital. “All that. You’re—at Berkeley, right?”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “It’s good so far.” His phone buzzed in his pocket, and it sounded way too loud, and he almost jumped out of his skin. “Hold on—”

He’d already been on-edge, and now his heart was racing; with the coffee in his hand, he had to set the basket down and reach across himself to the opposite pocket to fish out the phone—

“Is it Al?” Russell asked, like he had any damn right to ask that question, and the incongruity of it was so startling that Ed answered on autopilot.

“Nah,” he said. “It’s—”

Roy. It was Roy. It was Roy saying Hey, hope everything is going okay over there. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help out. Hang tough.

“—a... guy,” Ed said. “That I know.”

This pause was longer and worse than the last one, although at least Ed could stare at his phone screen this time instead of having to look at Russell’s hair.

“Somebody special?” Russell asked.

And Ed—

Ed hated him, in that second. Ed hated the way he’d always acted entitled to all the secrets and the sordid details of Ed’s life, but he’d never once made any effort to assuage the pain laid bare when he forced Ed to uncover them. He’d done it as part of their friendship; he’d been even worse during the brief little staggering stretch of their… other thing. He hadn’t asked to be let in; he hadn’t been gentle, or careful, or even grateful. He’d just torn all the bandages away and cast them aside and poked at the open wounds and asked pointed questions and ignored the answers, and—
And a part of Ed had always felt like it was his fault. A part of him had believed, sincerely, that it was his own doing, and his own failing—that if he’d just been stronger and more mature, he would have handled all of his own hangups, and there wouldn’t have been any gashes left to hide. Most people were more than happy to share everything with a significant other. Most people welcomed that kind of investment from someone. That was standard, wasn’t it? To gather yourself up into the best person you could be, and then give yourself wholesale to someone? It was his own fault he couldn’t do that. It was his own fault he was scared, and the fear made him hold back. It was his own fault he had so much damn baggage to begin with. Of course Russell was going to be confused about it. Of course Russell was going to look at him askance, and not want to touch all the gnarly, bleeding, broken bits. That was how you cut your fingers open. Russell hadn’t signed up to date a disaster; he’d thought he was getting a person, and he’d had every right to be disappointed. Ed needed to work on it. Ed needed to fix some of his bullshit to make it worth Russell’s while.

But today it clicked.

Today it clicked into place and locked, and his heart banged a little harder, inching up his throat.

Fuck Russell.

Fuck Russell for not giving him time. Fuck Russell for not taking it slow. Fuck Russell for not being careful, for not even trying to make it easy, for not even trying to make it safe—

Russell had been a condemned house to start with. It wasn’t Ed’s fault that he hadn’t been able to walk in there and suddenly feel right. He’d tried. Russell hadn’t.

It wasn’t his fault.

The fact that it had collapsed into rubble all around him wasn’t his fault.

“Um,” he said, fake-casually, “sorta. I mean—yeah. I guess.”

Ed hated lying, too, but right now he hated Russell more. Besides, it wasn’t technically untrue. He was lying in spirit, yes, but Russell had asked if Roy was someone special, and Roy was special as fuck. Nobody who’d ever met him would have denied that.

And if stretching the colloquialism a little afforded Ed some measure of petty revenge, then… all the better.

Right?

“Oh,” Russell said—for, what, the third time in a three-minute conversation? Jesus. “Cool. Well—I should… probably grab something for Fletcher and then… get going, so…”

“Yeah,” Ed said. He shoved his phone back into his pocket; he needed to not forget to reply to that text, especially since it had saved his ass in a weird sort of way. “Me, too.”

“Good to see you,” Russell said, in the same way he probably would have said Raw lemons sure are lickable.

“Yeah,” Ed said, about as convincingly, he’d bet. “You, too.”

He loitered in the snack aisle, trying to look interested in the Hostess products even though most of them were an abomination and/or a free pass to diabetes for the rest of your natural life. Would it be hilarious or pathetic if he threw a package of Ho Hos at Russell’s head to make a point?
Wait. Assaulting people with processed sugar-food was bad. He felt like Al had said that to him once. And he knew Al had told him that his sleep-deprived judgment was not to be trusted, and he should reconsider anything it told him to do.

On the upside, he could answer Roy’s text in the meantime, which would prevent him from forgetting that it was there until ten hours had passed, at which point it would be super awkward to reply.

*Thanks,* he wrote. He stared at it. Staring never really seemed to help, but somehow it always sounded like the best option at the time. *And thanks for the ride yesterday, dunno what i would have done. so far so good, if the x-ray and shit today go ok i might be back in time to work saturday which is of course the highlight of the week ha. anyway hope you slept ok and have a good day*

There. That was nice, brief, pithy, and coherent. Fantastic. Masterful.

Fuck it; who the hell cared?

He sent it and tucked the phone back into his pocket. Would Al prefer the classic strawberry Pop Tarts, or the S’Mores flavored ones? Was there a difference in the nutrition facts (if you could call them that in a case like this) between the two? Had Russell gotten his stupid ass out of this store yet so that Ed could stop bracing himself for another comment and focus on the important things?

“Hey, Ed,” Russell called from behind him after he’d spent enough time staring at the Pop Tart boxes for his eyes to glaze over completely. He turned, and blinked, and saw just the silhouette of the jacket and the hair swoosh framed in the doorway, backlit by the sun. “See you around.”

“Yes, you,” Ed said.

It was a lie on a lot of levels—he couldn’t, first of all; and secondly, he wouldn’t have mourned it for a minute if he never saw Russell again.

He shuffled around the boxes of those tiny powdered donuts for another second before wandering over to the drinks again and selecting a couple different flavors of Gatorade. He liked the red one, but Al had always preferred the blue.

When he was sure that he’d killed enough time that Russell wasn’t about to double back and walk in here and dredge up more shit, he dragged his ungodly horde over to the cashier and hiked his basket up onto the counter.

“Hi,” he said. “I’m not on drugs. Which I’m sure you get a lot. Uh. Good morning.”

Maybe Russell walking in had expended all of his bad luck for the day, because the girl behind the register just laughed.

“What is an electrolyte?” Al asked when Ed returned with his cache. “Ooh, peanut butter!”

“I don’t know,” Ed said. “You want me to Google it?”

“No,” Al said. “The world needs to retain a few mysteries. I can live without knowing the answer to that one.” He frowned, which always looked like more of a pout with Al. His adorable baby face
was succumbing to boniness, cast in pallidness and shadow by the ravaging illnesses, and Ed’s heart fucking ached looking at it. “Brother, are you okay?”

Ed paused. “Well,” he said, “the world needs to retain a few mysteries.”

The pout deepened.

“I’m fine,” Ed said, sitting on the edge of the cot—which was slightly precarious—and spreading the contents of his shopping bag all over it so that Al could take his pick. “Just… ran into Russell. It was kinda weird. What are the fucking odds, right?”

“According to regular statistics?” Al asked. “Or in terms of the way your life works?”

“Point taken,” Ed said.

“You know what I think?” Al asked.

“No,” Ed said, “because I’m not a telepath.”

Al rolled his eyes. “But you are a smartass.”

“Like you haven’t known that since we were four,” Ed said.

“I have known since birth, Ed,” Al said.

“Yeah,” Ed said, thoughtfully. “Yeah, I believe it. Anyway—what were you gonna say?”

“I think,” Al said, “that you feel like you have to be untouchable and perfect and strong all the time because I’m sick. Like I have a monopoly on needing help, or reassurance, or… whatever it is, and—and you’re not allowed to hurt or ask for anything from anyone, because that would be taking something away from me.” His mouth twisted up, and his eyebrows lowered, and he folded both arms across his chest despite the tubes they’d stuck back into the right one this morning. “But that’s not how it works, Brother. Love isn’t a limited quantity. I don’t own all the energy people have; and even if I did, I wouldn’t want it. I don’t want you to be unhappy. I don’t want you to feel like you have to be Superman so that I don’t worry about you. I’m going to worry about you anyway! I’ll probably worry about you more if I don’t know specifically what I should be worrying about, because you won’t flippin’ tell me, because you think it’ll make me swoon or something. Just—it’s okay, Brother. It’s okay to be you, even when you are sad or lost or hurting. I still love you. Everyone still loves you. And we can support you, too. It won’t hurt me in the long run. I promise.”

Ed…

Wasn’t sure how speech was supposed to work. Or breathing, honestly. Or much of any hallmarks of humanity, or general vital signs.

“Come here, you dumbhead,” Al said, opening his arms.

Ed shifted across the cot to get closer and leaned over the steel bars to hug him carefully. Under the antiseptic and the stale air, Al still smelled like Al—still smelled like the meaning of his whole damn life. Resisting the urge to squeeze him tight enough for bruises was torture, but Ed managed it somehow.

Al patted his back, and then his head. “I love you, Brother,” he said. “Okay? Unconditionally. Even when you’re silly. Even when you’re self-deprecating. Even when you need help. It’s not
going to change. I’ve got you. Okay?”

“Okay,” Ed said.

But it wasn’t like he could really rely on that—it wasn’t like he’d actually impose his problems on someone like Al, who had real ones, who had to fight every day to breathe and be and just get through when Ed was out there creating his own damn drama and then whining ab—

“Hey,” Al said. “I can hear the gears in your head turning.” He grabbed Ed’s tangled ponytail and tugged gently. “Stop that. Just—trust me, okay? This is what I want. I want to be there for you. Heck knows you’ve been there for me every single day of my life, even when it was really hard. Especially when it was really hard.”

Ed swallowed. “But—”

Al patted his head more aggressively this time. “No, Brother, it’s not just ‘what anybody would do’, and you didn’t have to. You never had to. You did it because you’re you, and you just have so much love to give, and you act in the service of it every minute of every day and destroy yourself with guiltiness on the rare occasions that you don’t.” He kissed Ed’s temple and then touched Ed’s shoulder so that Ed would draw back, far enough to meet his eyes. Al’s were wide and sincere, and then they crinkled a little at the corners as he smiled. “Let us serve you, too, sometimes, okay?”

“All right,” Ed said, but he grinned to soften the imminent sarcasm, because lightening the mood was one thing, and being an asshole was another. “I’d like the filet mignon, and a glass of the house red. What’s for dessert?”

Al made a face at him.

Ed made a face back.

Then he handed Al the blue Gatorade, and tapped the cap of the red bottle against it.

“Cheers,” he said.

“To us,” Al said. “In hospitals, in warehouses, in the homes of people nice enough to take us in. To being the inseparable Elric Brothers, no matter where we go, no matter how far apart we are at any given time, because us isn’t about the distance; it’s about who we are.”

“Don’t be a sap, Al,” Ed said, because that sounded better than dissolving into tears, which was the only other possible reaction.

“I’ll be a sap if I darn well want to,” Al said. He tussled with the cap of his bottle, made a discontented growling noise in the back of his throat, and shoved it at Ed. “Shoot. Can you—?”

“Yup,” Ed said, taking it.

By five that night, all of Al’s test results were in—in, and inconclusive, as with every other goddamn time before.

Al wasn’t taking it too hard, though, which Ed supposed was one of the unexpected benefits of being a ray of sunshine that had bent itself into a human shape. Ed tried to stay upbeat for his sake—
and besides, no news was better than bad news at a time like this; and none of Ed’s professors had told him they were going to fail him for missing a day; and Rosé had already sent him a huge series of cell phone pictures of her notes from the day; and they weren’t going to have to sleep at the hospital for another night. In the grand scheme of things, that wasn’t much of anything to complain about.

They’d called Winry in between the X-ray and ‘the other thing with the whirry machine’—Al had been here, languishing in the terrible bed with his brain pickling in the static air, for longer than Ed had, so Ed hadn’t pressed that issue—to double-team the task of convincing her not to drive down. They ended up sending her a couple of hospital room selfies to try to reinforce their assurances that everything was going okay. Once they’d gotten Al settled at home, Ed was going to head right back to school anyway, so it didn’t make sense for her to try to make it out here right in time to leave.

Pinako picked them up from the front entrance of the hospital, and Den was in the car, and Ed got a major face-licking—which he tried to avert, because fuck knew what kinds of staph and whatever were all over his face that he didn’t want the dog ingesting—and all in all…

It was good. Getting to see the inside of the house that was home now was good; getting to see Al emerge in a billow of steam from the bathroom after a long-ass shower, beaming like a lighthouse beacon, was good. Getting to brush his teeth properly and use up the last gasp of the hot water and collapse into a bed that was not only real and soft but familiar—and not having to wear the plastic leg into it—was good.

Everything was good. And he felt good.

 Mostly, anyway. Mostly he felt safe, and settled, and relieved, and all of that added up to something like contentment.

He was trashed with the exhaustion by the time his head hit the pillow, but he ended up lying there for a while anyway, turning things over in his head. Just inhabiting this room was soothing, and that freed up enough brainspace to start thinking critically again.

As a kid, there’d been times when he’d wished he had his own room—but not that many. He’d always preferred it like this, with him crammed into one twin bed, and Al sprawled on another one on the opposite side of the room. It’d been a pain when he wanted to stay up until ungodly hours, and Al was insisting that they do something novel like get some sleep, but mostly he’d just been so damn grateful that if he listened real close in the middle of the night, he could always hear Al breathing.

Speaking of Al, which was incidentally one of his favorite activities, he had to admit that his angel-brother had had something in the neighborhood—or at least the geographical region—of a point earlier.

Everyone always talked about ‘bottling up your feelings’ like human beings were one suppressed emotion away from being Mentos and Coke, and it was some kind of cardinal sin to hold stuff in. Like there was no choice except blowing up eventually, and you were destined to go full Incredible Hulk on the city of New York and cause property damage on an unprecedented scale, and then the taxpayers would have to foot the bill, and…

But wasn’t that the point of being a grownup? Wasn’t that the difference between a child and an adult—dealing with things yourself? Weren’t you supposed to be able to handle it by eighteen, nineteen, twenty years in? Kids ran into problems they couldn’t solve and whined about it and tugged on their parents’ sleeves to beg for help. And that was fine, but—weren’t you supposed to get past that part and cope with your problems on your own?
It was times like this that he missed Mom the most. Pinako had done more than her due diligence, obviously; the woman was a saint—underneath all of the evil witch trappings, that was, if you waited long enough and looked real hard—but there was something about not having a parent guide to follow that he’d always sensed as a ragged hole in his psyche. The first time some art docent had told his class about negative space in composition, he’d felt like they’d hit him in the face. None of the other kids had seemed particularly affected, though, so he’d tamped it down and tucked it away and never mentioned it to anyone. He had enough battles to wage on the Weirdo Front without staging more.

…that was exactly what Al had been talking about, wasn’t it?

Nothing for it, though. Mom was dead, and the asshole bastard who’d donated the other half of their genetic data was worse than that, or so Ed sometimes hoped. You fanned out the cards life dealt you, and you played whatever you had, and you made the best of it. That was how this worked.

And—shit. If you were planning to unload all your inner demons on someone, where did you even start? ‘Hi, my name’s Ed, I have abandonment issues and craptastic self-esteem’ wasn’t exactly something you could slip into the average conversation. And how were you supposed to get someone to commit? Maybe there should’ve been a written agreement form. You could outline some of the main points for someone, and if they signed at the bottom, that indicated that they were willing to hear you out until the very end, and if they tried to bail, you could threaten them with a lawsuit for breach of contract.

Yeah. That sounded like the brainchild of someone who was real stable and well-adjusted. No wonder Al was worried about him cracking down the middle one of these days.

He wouldn’t, though. The people who had held it together for him when he needed it were relying on him to do it now. Like hell was he going to let any of them down.

He didn’t dream, or at least didn’t remember dreaming. It felt like he fell straight into a thick, black sleep-void—like a night so dense it had swallowed all the stars.

And then he woke to the sound of Al trying to muffle a series of wet, racking coughs in the pillow.

“Hey,” he said, and the syllable slurried a little, but he was already slinging his leg off of the bed and reaching out for the wall to support himself as he moved. “Al—”

“’M fine,” Al gasped out. “Sorry, Br—”

More. Worse.

Fortunately, Ed’s long-term muscle memory knew exactly where all of the ridges on the wall were, and precisely where the doorframe stood; he hopped right over the creakiest floorboard and only thought to marvel vaguely once he’d already cleared it.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, and Al sat up, still hacking into his sleeve. Ed was pretty sure Alphonse Elric would be unerringly polite on his deathbed, but he tried not to think about that, ever, because it sent him into a cold spiral of blind panic so fathomlessly deep that he never knew whether he was going to make it out again.
“Hey,” Ed said. He rubbed Al’s back gently as the worst of the shaking subsided. “Do you need to go back?”

“No,” Al said. It was a firm no—tired and a little breathless, but not just a knee-jerk reaction. He’d thought about it. This wasn’t just the stubbornness and the hospital hangover talking. “I’m okay. It’s—sometimes it’s—” He drew a breath in slowly, cautiously; his chest expanded under Ed’s hand, and that was something to be grateful for and terrified of simultaneously. It was something Ed hadn’t taken for granted in a long time. “Sometimes it’s a little… touch-and-go the first night back. I think partly it’s the dus—”

“I’ll clean it,” Ed said.

There was just enough light from the street outside to illuminate Al wrinkling his nose. “Brother, you hate cleaning.”

“Not as much as I hate you feeling shitty,” Ed said. “You want me to stay the weekend? I can. It’s no big deal. I got my shift covered already, and I don’t have a whole ton of homework or anything.”

Parts of that were truer than others. Some of it was pretty unequivocally honest, even if it did omit some detail.

Al twisted around enough to wrap both arms against him, laying his head down—not far down, mind; it was a close thing; their torsos were practically identical in height, all told—on Ed’s shoulder.

“You know what I want?” he asked.

“A Roomba,” Ed said. “Den’d lose her shit. They’re kind of cute, though. Oh, God, Winry’d take it apart just to see if she could, and then rebuild it with enough sentience to start the cyborg apocalypse. Okay, no Roomba. How about a Swiffer strapped to a vacuum?”

Al laughed softly. “How about I never ask a rhetorical question again?”

“Sounds good,” Ed said.

Al butted his head against Ed’s temple. “You—okay. Listen. Brother, what I want is for you to go back to school. I want you and Winry to have a great time, and learn lots of stuff, and meet lots of people, and love it. And not worry about me at all. Okay? I’ll catch you up.”

“I don’t want you to catch up,” Ed said, and the mumbly voice it came out in did not make it sound any less childish. “I want you to get to do all the shit you want and be happy and everything right now.”

“I know,” Al said, nudging his forehead at Ed’s. “I do, too. But it’s going to have to be enough for both of us that I’ll get there someday. Besides—I’m happy already. That’s one out of three.”

Ed forehead-nudged back, hard enough to put some space between them so that he could then give Al a look.

“I am,” Al said, and there was the pouty bottom lip again. He would have been perfect in a boy band or something; they would’ve foregrounded him in every music video even though there wasn’t an Elric in history capable of carrying a tune. “I’m happy that I’m getting to go to school at all, and learn lots of cool stuff, and meet lots of interesting people. I’m happy you and Winry get to go do that somewhere even bigger and more challenging. I’m happy when Granny gets to do all the gardening she wants. I’m happy when Den gets a treat—I’m happy dogs exist. And cats, obviously, but that goes without saying. I’m happy about sunflowers, too. I’m happy there’s a kid out there
somewhere drawing a picture of a dragon with crayons right now. I’m happy someone made up the idea of cupcakes. You know what I mean. And—yeah, sometimes that’s not quite enough. But most of the time it is. I’m happy, Ed. I’m okay. You don’t have to run yourself ragged trying to make me more okay. I can take care of this part. You take care of you.”

Ed nudged his shoulder against Al’s, but not too hard, because Al’s blood vessels were assholes that liked to break at the slightest provocation and make him bruise all over. “Al, I—”

“You don’t have to promise me rousing success,” Al said. “Just promise me you’ll try.”

Ed had been a trier all his life. This was cake.

“All right,” he said. “Done deal. Pinky swear. All that shit.”

Al smiled, and that would’ve been worth promises he knew he couldn’t keep. “Good.” He poked Ed’s arm. “Now get back over there and go back to sleep.”

“Jeez,” Ed said, levering himself off of Al’s bed before the prodding increased in intensity. “G’night to you, too, Mister Bossy-Pants.”

“Love you, Brother,” Al said brightly.

“You, too, kid,” Ed said.

Ed had to take back all of his nice thoughts about Pinako when she smacked his knuckles with a wooden spoon.

“The bacon is for you,” she said. “Not the dog.”

“But she’s cuter than me,” Ed said.

“To think,” Al said, mincing his eggs into little tiny segments with the side of his fork. “My own brother, a furry.”

“You know what I mean,” Ed said.

“She’s spoiled enough,” Pinako said. “Eat your damn breakfast so we can get this show on the road.”

Ed made a point of taking a huge bite of bacon—which was, admittedly, absolutely fucking perfect—and then speaking through it. “You only live two hours away, Ed? That must be so nice, Ed! Why don’t you go home more often, Ed?”

“Let me rephrase that,” Pinako said. “Shut up and eat your damn breakfast so we can get this show on the road.”

“Do you need more coffee, Granny?” Al said, pushing his chair back and carefully shifting out of it.

“Always,” she said. “But I stand by it.”

“Oh, are you standing?” Ed asked, gesturing towards where she was, in fact, obviously seated
opposite. “You’re so tiny I couldn’t tell.”

“Al,” Pinako said, “I think you should stay home this trip.”

“Why?” Al said, shuffling back with a mug. “It’s a nice drive, and there’s that cute little pastry shop right next to the train sta—”

“Because I’m going to drive the car into a ditch to kill myself and your brother on the way,” Pinako said.

Al set the coffee down in front of her. “Maybe you should put a little extra sugar in this one, Granny.”

“Thank you, dear,” Pinako said. She sipped without even giving it time to cool, which was proof that she was part demon, which explained a lot. “I suppose we could always put your brother in the trunk.”

Ed picked up his last piece of bacon between his thumb and his forefinger, held it up for a second, and then tossed it towards Den without even looking at her.

He heard her jaws snap shut as she caught it in midair less than a full second later.

“Oh, my God,” Al said. “You two are impossible. Can we just go?”
Chapter 8

This is the chapter with what is, strictly speaking, the climax of the fic, although this thing is not nearly over yet. XD Just a heads up! XD

Also, sorry I didn't get a chance to reply to comments this time! :____; I have no idea what happened to most of the hours I was supposed to have today. ‘D Thank you all for saying such lovely things here and elsewhere on the internet; you guys are amazing. ♥

About 30K split pretty evenly between this and the next chapter if you need to budget your time!

Somehow, they made it to the train station without any murders: there weren’t even any especially invested attempts, although Pinako did threaten to drive them off of a bridge at one point. Ed almost missed the train because he needed to hug Al one more time—as tight as he could without causing injury; the trick was to get your arms around a meaty part and squeeze gradually.

And then… that was that. He was staring out the window, watching the back sides of several different cities’ warehouse districts flicking by.

If he caught the first bus from the station near the university, he’d make it to work in time for his shift. Would’ve been nice to rest a little in between, but he supposed this part almost counted. He could cram some reading in, at any rate.

It was a reprieve of sorts, although Ed’s brain wasn’t much good at recuperating anywhere that walked and talked and bit like public. He couldn’t unwind properly in a place where someone might be watching him. It just didn’t work like that.

He did make a respectable start on some of his homework, though, and it turned out to be a good thing that Winry texted him about half an hour before he was due to get in—he was so engrossed in the reading by then that he might have missed his stop without the wakeup call.

You ok? she had written. Al ok? Granny ok? Den ok? Your ass ok? Those train seats are terrible.

He wrote back thank you for thinking of my ass. this is how i know you are my best friend. everyone is good although the unhinged witch you call a grandmother said she was gonna kill me like eight times. and i only deserved about six of them. are you ok? i know this is hard on you too

She texted back, Ed I am fine, how much did you sleep? Or not sleep. How much did Granny not sleep? You two in a room together scares me more than Al being sick I swear

He sent her back a string of what he felt were effusive and evocative emoticons that illustrated the full depth of the responses to all of what she’d said. He wasn’t sure he’d still find them clever in an hour or two, let alone tomorrow, which probably proved her point, but… oh, well. Life was a one-time gig, and the ambient train noise was messing with his nerves a little bit. These seats were crap for several reasons in addition to the one Winry had pinpointed—foremost on Ed’s list was actually the height of them off the floor. He’d gotten used to having to slide forward a couple inches and
fuck up his posture in order to be able to touch his toes to the ground in just about every chair designed for freakishly tall adults, but these were elevated enough that even a little bit of spine-ruining wouldn’t let him plant the soles of his shoes down, which left him with a dangling prosthetic foot. That always made him wonder if anybody else might notice, and if they’d stare, and if—

The train was stupid, was the point. And the universe was stupid for landing him on it. At least both had collaborated to offer him the petty consolation prize of in-car wifi, so he could check his emails and not have to spend data on all of the unnecessary texts.

Speaking of those, his phone buzzed again. He was already eagerly anticipating an emoji operetta from Winry.

Except—

It was Roy.

He’d sent, Just wanted to check in on you. Hope everyone is going about as well as possible, given the circumstances. Did you leave anything here that you need? I’m sure I could negotiate with your roommate for a hostage exchange; I’m very persuasive.

He was right about that part. Which was why Ed couldn’t talk himself out of texting back.

Well—part of why. The other part had to do with the fact that Roy was being fucking nice despite the fact that he’d already done way more than was ethically encouraged in the situation, and he was offering to keep going even though Ed had never once, at any point, offered him anything that remotely looked like incentive or a reward.

Were there still people like that? People other than Al, anyway. Did Roy have some kind of creepy ulterior motive? Was it all a front?

Ed figured he couldn’t find out if he didn’t keep playing this game. And if it wasn’t a game after all —

He was going to cross that bridge when he came to it. Hopefully it wouldn’t be on fire by the time he got there.

Thank you, actually i’m cool but thanks. i’m on the train on my way back up to school and i think i’m even gonna make my work shift so that’s great bc cash money haha. thank you. i hope it wasn’t too shitty driving back the other night.

Ed wasn’t trying to shove a knife in; he swore it. He’d only barely been devoting a tiny fragment of thought to that post that Roy had written at some ungodly hour after the trip; he wasn’t trying to nudge about it, or ask—

Ask what? Ask if any of that had applied to him?

Fat fucking chance. If Roy’s metaphor was going to flourish in domestic imagery, Ed was an apartment that you could only access through a backalley in the Bronx where three people had been brutally murdered behind the Dumpsters just this week. You had to climb up the fire escape—which would give you rust-stained blisters—to pry open the back door to let yourself in, and the bathroom was flooded, and the refrigerator didn’t work—

It was fine! You are truly the master of burning your candle everywhere at once. Is it a short shift, at least? Or is that a redundant question, given that it’s yours?
Ed stared at the screen.

The fact that it was taking him multiple seconds to process the joke was incontrovertible evidence that he really needed some sleep. Which sort of supported Roy’s point, didn’t it? Christ, he was helping everybody win their arguments against him today. He needed to quit doing that.

oh, he sent back. *look at that. dead man texting*

Roy sent back the crying-with-the-lulz emoji, succeeded by the words *I’m sorry, I couldn’t help myself?*

*holy shit,* Ed wrote. *do you have the only phone on earth that doesn’t have a DELETE KEY?? you should buy another one and sell that motherfucker on ebay as a one of a kind!!*

This time he got six crying-with-lulz emojis. *I mean it! I really am sorry! When’s your shift/when are your breaks? I will bring apology coffee. I promise.*

*that sounds like a start,* Ed wrote. And then he typed as fast as he could, because he’d just sent that, like an idiot. Like a flirting fucking idiot. That was what was happening, wasn’t it? Fucking *hell.* He needed to stop doing that, too. *no but seriously don’t worry about it. i’ll be there til close and by then i will just want to crash haha. the breaks are semi random too so you are shit out of luck. just going to have to grovel the good old fashioned way.*

…he was not so good at this stopping-the-flirting thing. Which was bizarre, actually, because it’d never come quick and easy like this before—usually he stumbled harder on banter than he did on objects, floorboards, and other miscellanea when he wasn’t wearing his fake leg. What the hell was going on here, scientifically, that made Roy bring the repartee out in him so fast?

That was a dangerous avenue to start walking.

House on fire. Roy was a house on fire, and Ed was an apartment in the Bronx. He had to remember that. He had to remember that behind the soft eyes and the sweet texts, Roy Mustang wrote a sexploits blog detailing the scandalous things he got up to with people who didn’t even *know* he was spilling their secrets all over the internet.

*Alas,* Roy-who-was-also-Casanova wrote back. *You drive a hard bargain. I’ll see what I can do. Feel free to lambaste me some more if it helps to pass the time.*

That was…

Perfect. That was perfect, because he’d given Ed an invitation to continue the conversation, or a relatively un-awkward out if he’d prefer to drop the subject and get back to his homework.

There weren’t words in the English language for how much Ed hated how much he liked stupid, stupid, two-faced fucking Roy. Maybe Ed was in the wrong field. Maybe one of the innumerable vocabularies out there in the world had a two-syllable term for this. Maybe that was what he should have been studying all this time.

He actually typed out a text to Al which read *ARE YOU NAPPING LIKE I TOLD YOU??* before his brain kicked in and gently pointed out how irretrievably stupid that was. He deleted it, and then he put his phone away for good measure, just in case he tried to send anything else in this state.

It was fine. He’d just work his shift, and pick up something to eat on the way out, and scarf it while walking back to his dorm, and wonder if he’d even tasted anything, and then get back and pass out.
Perfect.

The third time he burned himself on the sandwich grill, he had to admit that this probably hadn’t been his finest idea. It wasn’t even just the sleep deprivation—he’d done more on less before and lived to tell the tale. A considerable portion of the problem was how many other things he was trying to think about all at once.

The difficulty was that this was the kind of work that required just enough of your attention to preclude you thinking seriously about anything else. It wasn’t intense enough to monopolize your brain function, but it demanded exactly the right amount to make you crap at your job if you let your mind wander, and equally crap at putting your mind to use if you were trying to get the task done.

Maybe he needed to change his major just long enough to make some connections in a humanities department, which he could use to get his foot in the door at a library like Winry’s. They kept her pretty occupied, sure, but it didn’t sound like that job greeted her daily with the same kind of brain drain that his did. Plus it was objectively less hazardous—sure, there was a high probability of paper-cuts, and a remote possibility of badly-balanced shelves toppling on your head, but overall, he was in much more danger here among all the knives and open flames. And he still got paper-cuts off of the packaging half the time.

Upon further reflection, the fact that he was naturally accident-prone wasn’t helping matters and most likely wouldn’t help them regardless of specifically where the matters were taking place.

On the upside, the lunch rush tended to be significantly less brutal on weekends: when school was in session, everyone, their mom, and their uncle made a desperate break for this place trying to cram sustenance acquisition into their ten-minute between-class commute.

On the downside, they were getting just enough business that they had to keep all of the hot things on, and hot things apparently attracted Ed’s burnable hands like neodymium magnets.

When he went for the fourth cool water bath followed by a band-aid, his shift-mate, whose name was Jeremy or possibly Jeff, winced and went to the back calling for their manager. Either he found her, or he didn’t care, because he came back and told Ed that they were switching spots, and Ed was going to sticker stuff and do register for the rest of the day before he lost a hand and claimed worker’s comp.

“Think about it,” Jeremy-or-Jeff said, literally pushing him towards the registers when he tried to protest. “How much would it suck to lose a limb?”

“Ha,” Ed said. “I’d have the best Luke Skywalker costume, though. Isn’t he just wearing black in that part? I’d fuckin’ nail it. I know Winry’d be down for Leia. It’d be the best.”

Jeremy-or-Jeff stared at him for a second. “Are… are you okay?”

“Can’t tell anymore,” Ed said. “I think I need to sleep for a week. Where’d you leave the sticker gun?”
Somehow, he wound the shift down. He was thinking giddily about the contours of his mattress in the dorm—which were ordinarily cause for some distress, given how many of the contours in question were actually lumps—when the front doors opened, and Roy walked in.

It was two minutes to six, and Ed was sitting on the floor rearranging overpriced smoothie-juice-things. He remained sitting—and staring—for probably several seconds more than were required to qualify as eerie, but it wasn’t his fault. He honestly wasn’t sure whether or not he was hallucinating, so he was trying to identify enough specific details to be pretty sure that Roy was real before he spoke. Jeremy-or-Jeff already thought he was a little bit unstable; the last thing he wanted to do was offer a cheery salutation to thin air.

…not that he would have offered a cheery salutation, but… whatever.

Roy was staring back at him, although that was probably only because Ed had started it. Mostly Roy had seemed pretty polite so far. Which was a disaster, actually, because it meant Mom probably would’ve said he was “charming”, or at least “a very nice young man”, and thinking about that was really not helping to settle Ed’s stomach or his head or his nerves.

“Hi,” Roy said after an awkwardly long pause. “Sorry—I probably should have come earlier, but I didn’t want to be an inconvenience.”

“You’re not,” Ed said as autopilot kicked in. He overrode it and went back to manual before it was too late. “What are we talking about?”

Roy smiled, adjusting the strap of his bag over his shoulder. “If I can’t buy you an apology coffee,” he said, “can I spot you for an apology dinner?”

Maybe staring was the better option after all. “Wh… at?”

Roy blinked a few times. “Ah… you turned down coffee earlier, when you were texting me from the train—which is probably a sign you’re ill, come to think of it—but I could buy you dinner instead.”

“No,” Ed said, which wasn’t helpful. “I understand what you said; I don’t understand—the concept.”

“Hey, Ed,” Jeremy-or-Jeff said, sidling behind Roy, “I’m just gonna… lock up and… get outta your way, or… yeah.”


“Oh,” Roy said, looking uncharacteristically helpless. “We don’t have to—discuss it here. I just… wanted to catch you before you left; I’m sorry—”

“No worries,” Ed said. He shoved the last of the smoothie-things into the fridge, closed the door, listened for the sticky airtight seal sound, and then reached up to grab the door handle for leverage to haul himself up to his feet.

“No worries,” Ed said. He shoved the last of the smoothie-things into the fridge, closed the door, listened for the sticky airtight seal sound, and then reached up to grab the door handle for leverage to haul himself up to his feet.

“Do you—” Roy said, and he was crossing the space between them and holding out a hand, but Ed had just succeeded in manipulating his own momentum to swing himself upright—and that left them standing there, two feet apart, Ed clinging to the refrigerator door, Roy extending one arm towards him.
“Gimme one second,” Ed said, bending to pick up the box of the straggler smoothies that wouldn’t fit into the fridge with their brethren. “Or—you wanna meet me out back? Just right around the corner, where the tables are?”

“Sure,” Roy said.

Roy escaped out the front—with an assist from Jeremy-Jeff, who looked like he was just as ready to quit this lousy job as Ed had been from hour one—and Ed took his box of lonely juices over to total out the last register. Blessedly, they were off by a grand total of two cents—or at least he’d raced through the math in such a way that it looked like it on the accounting worksheet, but since that thing made him feel like he was in the fifth grade again every time, he wasn’t especially invested in doing it again just to be sure. That was what managers were for, right?

Apparently, managers were also for collecting several little plastic containers of their overpriced pre-made sushi and shoving them across the desk towards him when he tried to hand over all of the register totals.

“Do you want these?” she asked.

“Uh,” he said.

“Jeremy—” Ed had known it. “—said he’s sometimes allergic to whatever it is that they put in these that they call crab,” she said. “But these are about to go, so it can’t wait for tomorrow.”

“Oh,” he said, which was twice as brilliant as Uh, obviously. There was a clear filler progression. “You know—sure. Yeah. Thank you. That’s… really great. That’s about the best thing that’s happened to me today.”

The look she gave him was half sympathy and half pity, which made it wholly horrible. “Yeah, you kinda look like you need it.”


“Sure thing,” she said.

He collected all of the sushi in both arms. This was perfect; it meant Roy couldn’t try to buy him dinner, because he’d just comped more than enough food for both of them. And it’d probably be good. Or at least college-good, which was aces in Ed’s book.

He realized, upon carrying his prize back into the café proper to collect some chopsticks, that this was not perfect. They had to have something to drink, obviously. This place had nice recyclable cups next to a water dispenser, so that was fine, but…

Walking, as slowly and evenly and measuredly as humanly possible, out of the back door, easing the crash-bar open by applying the small of his back to it as carefully as he could, was perhaps the single greatest test of his dexterity since the time Al had insisted that they go ice-skating after he lost his fucking leg. That’d been a hell of a day. There hadn’t been quite as much blood and crying as he’d feared, but it’d been a close thing.

“Oh, good heavens,” Roy said as he caught sight of the Leaning Tower of California Rolls, topped with two cups of water. He hastened over to meet Ed halfway and rescued the waters first, taking them back to deposit them on the table while Ed stumbled a few more steps towards it. Overall, Ed was glad he’d shoved the chopsticks into his shirt pocket rather than holding them between his teeth, since he probably would have drooled on them right now—but when Roy’s fingertips grazed his collarbone to collect them and then lift half of the little plastic trays off of the top of the stack—
Shit.

Why did Roy have to be so—*him*, anyway? Surely he could’ve tried being somebody else for just a minute or two; somebody less maddeningly hot and dizzyingly intelligent; somebody it was safe to want in the ways Ed wanted him. Which was pretty much every possible way. *God.*

“What’s all this?” Roy asked.

“The universe smiled on me today,” Ed said, finally managing to set the rest of the boxes on the table—without dropping a damn thing, he wanted the record to show. Winry would ask later and not believe him. He eased himself cautiously down into one of the awful lattice-like wire chairs; it’d be ridiculous to choke this far down the homestretch. “Or at least the manager did. We can’t sell it anymore, so… yeah. At least this job has one perk.”

“Any perk that comes with ginger and wasabi is a fine perk in my book,” Roy said.

“I dunno if it’s any good, though,” Ed said, cracking open one of the clamshells—which was, in itself, a trial of besting sticky labels and sharp edges. “We usually sell out. And I can’t afford it.”

“Ah,” Roy said. “Sometimes the cost can be a good sign for quality, but that’s not always the case.”

Ed used the chopsticks to prod at one of the rolls, which had several unrecognizable things in it. Well, life was short, and he hadn’t run into any allergies yet. “Plus this makes it definitely not a date.”

The pause lasted long enough that he glanced up—just in time to see Roy wiping the last traces of emotion off of his expression.

“That’s true,” Roy said, completely neutrally.

Ed looked at him. Ed continued to look at him. Ed considered just letting it go.

But that shit wasn’t in him, no matter how many times he tried to be the kind of person who could drop a subject like a hot potato and leave it on the ground.

“Did you *want* it to be a date?” he asked, watching Roy’s face much closer this time.

Roy was onto him now, though—prepared to be impregnable. The tiny smile he offered gave absolutely nothing away. “Not as such. I just wanted to buy your dinner, after the day you’ve had.”

“I’m not into that,” Ed said before he could stop himself. Somehow, despite his great familiarity with it, he frequently managed to forget how much sleep-deprivation mucked with your impulse control. “That whole—’I’ll do this thing for you so that you owe me one later’ shit. And I already owe you for the ride and the… all of that the other night.”

At least he’d gotten Roy’s face to change—but the flicker of emotion on it was too complex to be categorized. Ed wasn’t sure he liked that, either.

“It concerns me,” Roy said, “that your response to kindness is to assume that someone’s deliberately trying to make you indebted to them so that they can cash in on your obligation later.”

Ed bit down hard on his bottom lip to make himself think before speaking. A part of him—a big part of him—wanted to say *You know what you should be fucking ‘concerned’ about? My fist getting up-close and personal with your face if you ever patronize me again.*
A slightly more civil part of him wanted to say *Wake the fuck up and smell the roses, Roy; everybody’s trying to get something. If they’re trying to get something from me, they must be desperate, and desperate people are dangerous. So what is it you’re really looking for, Roy Mustang? You came a long way to buy another favor off of the likes of me.*

He rooted around until he found a third part that inflected its words a little more like Al.

“I mean,” he said, “that’s sort of what… happens. Other than people in your family. Most of the people in your family. Some of the people in your family. Some of them fuck off.”

“I’m not trying to get anything from you,” Roy said.

Ed realized he was leaning back in his chair on instinct—trying to put himself further away from the confrontation at the same time that he fanned the damn flames of it. “Then why do you care if it’s like a date?”

Roy blinked. Just once. The corners of his eyes did not crinkle; the corners of his mouth did not twitch. “I don’t.”

Ed watched him for a long, long, long couple of seconds. Which must’ve looked incredibly stupid, given that he had his chopsticks halfway into the wasabi.

“Okay,” he said. “Fine.”

“Fine,” Roy said softly.

Ed poked the wasabi, trying not to sink into the guilt. He’d taken a perfectly normal conversation and fucked it up again. It was like a compulsion.

“Hey,” Roy said. “Are you going to play with it, or are you going to eat it?”

“I’m a multitasker,” Ed said.

Roy rubbed his chopsticks together, presumably to prevent tongue splinters or something. Weirdly, he did it in a sort of smooth, brisk way that looked much more sexual than the starting-a-Boy-Scouts-fire shit people usually did. Or was that just Ed’s pathetically shameless desire to find his way back into Roy’s pants talking?

“What would you like to multitask with first?” Roy asked. He started spreading all of the trays out on the table like they had to pick and choose or something. Evidently he’d never seen Ed faced with a situation—or, as Ed tended to call them, a paltry challenge.

“Don’t care,” Ed said, which was true. “Go ahead and start with whatever you want. I think there’s tons of everything.”

“I think you’re right,” Roy said. He tucked the chopsticks between his lips to free both hands for fighting with the stickers, and Ed’s heart clenched. Gorgeous. Fucking gorgeous and disarming and off-limits. Ed was back to square one with this whole thing, wasn’t he?

He tried to distract himself by experimenting with wasabi concentrations. The end objective was to saturate the soy sauce as much as possible—it still needed to be mostly liquid in order to soak into the rice properly, but the higher the proportion of wasabi, the better. It was a delicate operation of the utmost importance.

Roy went right for the hamachi nigiri. Smart man—good taste. Ed hated that about him, too.
“This,” Roy said after an interval of reflective chewing and a polite swallow, “is not bad.”

“Free food tastes better,” Ed said. “It’s the rules.”

“Ah, yes,” Roy said, solemnly. “Of course. The hallowed Rules. How could I possibly forget?”

Ed snickered, and Roy smiled, so evidently Ed hadn’t fucked it up too bad.

…yet, anyway. The night was still young.

Roy sat back after a reasonable quantity of sushi consumption, which made it Ed’s sacred duty to polish off as much of the rest of it as he was physically capable of cramming into his body.

“This was a very educational experience,” Roy said.

Ed raised an eyebrow, because like hell was he going to stop eating long enough for a verbal response.

Roy gestured towards one of the decimated containers, which contained nothing but a few grains of rice and the obligatory inexplicable plastic fake-grass-thing.

“I’ve never run out of wasabi before,” he said.

Ed shook his head mournfully. That was worth a proper swallow so that he could respond.

“Doing it wrong,” he managed.

Roy grinned. The sun had long since gone down; it was a good thing sushi was meant to be eaten cold, because a chill had crept in as the automatic lights on the roofs of the buildings and down in the plaza below them had flickered on at nightfall.

“Evidently,” Roy said.

“S’all right,” Ed said. He was full. But there was an entire roll left, and it was the kind with the spicy sauce thing and the little crunchy bits on top. He made himself drag his chopsticks over to it and start trying to pick up a piece. “Never too late to learn.”

The way Roy’s eyes glimmered when he was trying not to laugh charted on the list of the top five most beautiful things Ed had ever seen.

The _fucker._

“You know,” Roy said after Ed crammed another piece of the roll into his mouth, “you don’t have to eat it _all._”

“I don’t have a fridge in my dorm room,” Ed said. “And it’s free.”

Roy winced.

Ed was exhausted, which was a really bad thing insofar as tiredness gradually stripped away all the fucks he should have given for little things like social conventions and sugar-coating his
contributions to any given conversation. “It’s what happens when you grow up poor. You eat like it’s your last chance any time you get the opportunity.”

“I know,” Roy said.

Ed hesitated. Which at least gave him a chance to breathe.

He remembered—like a little bubble drifting up from his chest and delicately popping in his brain—that they’d talked, that night, about eating a ton of canned soup as kids. Ed had implied that he’d done it because he couldn’t afford much else. Roy hadn’t really argued with that premise, had he?

Roy was smiling, sort of wryly. “My parents never really intended to have children, whereas my father’s sister was more than slightly addicted to adopting girls from foster care who’d previously been in trouble with the law—I think I mentioned her the other night, didn’t I? Well. My parents figured that dumping me on her would be a kindness for all involved. What they didn’t know—and what the authorities didn’t know, and still don’t, to the best of my knowledge—is that she more or less runs her place as a commune for adoptees who are mostly sex workers. I suppose it would be easiest to call her bar a brothel, but it’s not hierarchical in that way, and… well. In any case. We lived over the bar, and I was never short of sisters, but it wasn’t always especially profitable, I suppose. Everyone earned what they could and contributed what they could afford. I suppose that’s all just to say—I know what you mean.”

Ed stared. Was today happening? At this point, it was impossible to tell. Was any of this real?

“I didn’t know that,” he said. “About you. Never would’ve… guessed.”

“Most people don’t,” Roy said. “I don’t advertise it. When people do find out, they’re usually delighted to tell me that that explains my entire psychology with deliciously Freudian simplicity, and that now nothing that I do will ever be surprising again.”

Ed swallowed. That felt real. The lingering remnants of the last sting-burn-sinus-blast wasabi encounter felt real, too.

“So why are you telling me?” he asked.

“Because I don’t think you’ll do that,” Roy said, and Ed’s heart clenched—of course he wouldn’t; of course he fucking wouldn’t, but—“And because you trusted me with a lot of your secrets, the other night. I wanted to return the favor.”

It wasn’t that simple, though, was it? It wasn’t just about trading stories. It wasn’t just about shared identity.

It was about power. It was about the power he’d given Roy when he exposed all of those vulnerabilities.

It was about Roy handing him almost as much power back.

It was about Roy saying Here’s something I’m scared of telling people, which you could use against me, if you wanted to. Here’s something you could use to ruin me if I ever tried to take advantage of the things you said to me in confidence.

Ed could hear his heart beating again. Maybe he was the one who needed a return trip to the hospital after all; his cardiac functions were way the hell out of whack lately.

“You didn’t have to,” he said.
Roy smiled. And then he shrugged.

“Too late now,” he said.

The pulse in Ed’s ears sounded like a call to arms, and he couldn’t help it if his nerves piqued; every grin Roy unveiled was like a bayonet.

“What you said,” he said. “Earlier. About—wanting to take me to dinner.” He drew a breath and released it slowly. Maybe they’d both bleed out on the cold ground, but he’d never once in his life gone down without a fight. He didn’t know how. “About… wanting it to be a date.”

“I didn’t say anything about that,” Roy said, because he was a clever fucking bastard who was guarding himself carefully, however cute and clever he played it half the time. “And I don’t intend to. Everything you’re dealing with right now is difficult enough without… complications. What I want is irrelevant.”

“Fuck you,” Ed said. “It’s not irrelevant to me.”

Roy looked genuinely startled for a long second before the walls went back up.

“All right,” he said. “Then what I don’t want is to impose on you at a time like this, so—”

“Bullshit,” Ed said. “You don’t show up out of the blue and try to buy me shit and spin out the deep, dark secrets because you don’t want to impose.”

Roy’s throat worked; his mouth twisted. His eyes were unbearably sharp for a long second—focus pinning Ed’s face to the deepening night around them.

Then he looked down at the table, put one hand down flat on it, and stood up.

“You’re right,” he said. “I’m sorry. I should go.”

Ed’s voice snagged in his half-splintered ribcage and wouldn’t come loose.

“Thank you for dinner,” Roy said. He was picking up the little plastic trays—“Is there a recycling bin…?”

“Not close,” Ed said. “Just trash. Which I’m gonna—” He swallowed shove you into in another second, I swear to God. “What the fuck, Roy?”

“I’m sorry,” Roy said again, though it sounded significantly less sincere this time, and the sarcasm rankled. “I’m sorry I can’t help—liking you, enjoying your company, wanting to be around you, whether or not you’ve made it very clear that you don’t really want anything to do with me because of the blog.” He waved his hand dismissively, which meant he was also waving one of the trays, which both gutted the seriousness and somehow made it scarier, because right this second, Roy obviously did not give a shit. “That’s fine. I get it. I don’t blame you. I can absolutely understand why you’d be uncomfortable with someone whose unofficial side-job is writing erotic fiction. Fine. That’s fine. I just—hardly have anyone else in this city, so forgive me i—”

“Fiction?” Ed said.

Roy turned towards him, face tight, shoulders high, eyes flat-dark, and that—

That was a cornered-animal kind of pain.

Ed would know.
“Some of it’s drawn from experiences,” Roy said, “but yes, it’s fiction, Ed; of course it’s—how in the world could I possibly have enough hours in the day for teaching, my classes, lab, and over-the-top sexual encounters every other night, even if I did somehow muster up the energy? The ones that aren’t entirely imaginary are mostly based on people I knew when I was an undergraduate, anyway; I collected a few stupid stories over time, but—”

Ed couldn’t breathe. Or move. Or blink.

Wait, he’d just blinked. At least that was progress.

Belatedly, maybe, Roy took note of his sudden paralysis problem.

“Oh, God,” he said. “Oh—Christ. Ed—you didn’t—you didn’t honestly think—”

“How the fuck was I supposed to know?” Ed rasped out. Apparently he’d scrounged up enough oxygen for speech. His hands were curling into his sleeves so tightly that his knuckles ached; at least the rest of him wasn’t alone in that anymore. “Nobody—I mean, I’d never seen anybody write shit like that; I’d—all fucking passionate and whatever shit, and personal, and—you answer all the questions as you; don’t you dare fucking try to tell me that shit the other night about love being like a house you’re meant to live in wasn’t real, you f-fucking liar—”

Roy pushed one hand back through his hair.

“I wasn’t sure you’d read it,” he said. “After—what was said.”

“Tough shit,” Ed said, despite the rather relevant fact that it wasn’t entirely clear to him whether Roy had wanted him to read it or not. The offensive was always a stronger position. Always. Even sitting down in the dark with sushi strewn across the shitty wire table; even with his guts writhing and his throat sticking to itself. “Woke up in the middle of the night at the stupid fucking hospital and just—whatever. The fucking point is—”

Roy dropped into the chair opposite his, put one elbow on the table, and propped his head up on one hand.

“The fucking point is we’ve been having two different conversations at the same time,” Roy said.

There were a lot of things Ed could’ve said—and a lot of things his crap instincts were trying to goad him into; a lot of things he knew would make it worse, like Yeah, and your side of it sucks for no other reason than that he was tired and shaky, and confrontation made his skin crawl, and he’d probably eaten too much fish just now.

But there was something that superseded the knee-jerk clapback crap. There was something he needed to say, and needed to say now, before it slipped any further away.

“You don’t want me,” he said.

Roy went very still, eyes fixed on him again, and said…

Nothing.

Fine. That was fair. Ed deserved to have to take this one on alone.

“You don’t,” he said. “I’m—like this.” He gestured at the table, at the dark, at the stupid and apparently unnecessary fight they’d just had— “That thing you wrote—about the house being on fire. I’m always on fucking fire. I’m always wrong. I always hit first and ask questions later, ’cause
where I’m from, that’s the only way to survive, and I don’t fucking know how to be an ordinary person yet. I’m always running scared—my whole fucking life has been running scared, because the second I let my guard down is the second they get me. And I’m tired, okay? I’m twenty years old, and I’m so fucking tired, and it never stops, and I can’t afford to let it, and I don’t have time to even try to put the fires out. So I just let ’em burn. And that’s not what you want. It’s not. You want better than that, and you ought to get better than that, and that’s fine. I’m fine. Just—don’t waste your time. Don’t waste either of our time. Okay?"

Roy put both arms down on the table. He took a breath. He swallowed. And he smiled.

Not a Casanova smile—a Roy one. A Roy who’d been shot down before, so many times that he looked in the mirror sometimes expecting the crosshairs to be tattooed on the center of his chest.

“Ed,” he said, softly, “you are the first person in a long, long time who has felt like home.”

“Shut up,” Ed said.

Oh, good. He hadn’t broken his bad instincts just yet; they were still kicking around.

“You shut up,” Roy said without any rancor, which was so absurd that Ed’s next exhale almost emerged as nervous laughter. “Maybe it’s a good thing—if you’re on fire, I mean. My feet get cold.”

Ed stared at him.

And then Ed stood up, trying and failing to shove his chair back for emphasis—fucking thing was attached to the fucking table; all he got for his efforts at melodrama was what felt like a bruise on the back of his right thigh.

Whatever. He pointedly started shuffling all the empty sushi containers together to try to stack them up.

“I don’t want to have this conversation,” he said.

“Ed,” Roy said, and there was something like strain underneath his voice this time—something tight and stretched almost to breaking. “Believe me, I am intimately familiar with fear of commitment, but —”

“Fuck you,” Ed said again, which was definitely civil and supremely helpful. “I’m not—”

“I know,” Roy said, “that you think it’s inconceivable that someone could like you more than you like yourself, which appears to be not at all—”

Ed’s hands were shaking so hard that he couldn’t gather containers, so he planted his palms on the tabletop and stared at the backs of them instead. “Shut the fuck up, Roy; I will fucking—”

“Listen to me,” Roy said, leaning towards him, and he shifted around the edge of the table to put more space between them, but he couldn’t just up and leave when all of his stupid trash was still here — “I’m not asking you to put your life on the line. I’m not even asking you to put it on hold. Just—give us half a chance. One shot. A couple of weeks, maybe, if I don’t do anything terribly offensive in that time. I just—”

“No,” Ed said. He lifted up his hands, but they weren’t any stabler, so he put them back down. “You don’t—get it. Just—don’t get fucking tangled up with me. You’re better off. It’s for your own fucking good. I mean it.”
"You know what’s not for my own good?" Roy asked. "Sitting here watching you try to isolate
yourself from everyone who cares about you, because you feel like you have all these debts to pay,
and you’re somehow some kind of burden—I wouldn’t ask anything like that of you. I wouldn’t. I
want—"

"Someone else," Ed said, setting his jaw and looking up from the table, which was harder than it
should’ve been. "What you want is someone else. That’s what fucking everybody wants from me,
except Al, maybe, and I fucked him over so much he’s the only one with any right."

Roy looked at him for a long, long, long-ass series of seconds, with the fucking sad eyes.

And then he said, very softly, "Who hurt you?"

"Oh, my God," Ed said, managing to pry one hand off of the table long enough to run it down his
face, which—on second thought—was probably freakishly unsanitary. Too late. "All that, and you
fucking meme at me—"

"What?" Roy said. "No—I—I meant it. I meant that. You wouldn’t—someone taught you this,
whether they intended to or not. Maybe a lot of people. You don’t—no one just wakes up one
morning thinking ‘I’m poison to everyone around me, and I’m better off alone.’"

It couldn’t have sounded truer or crueler or more like his own damn voice if Roy had ripped those
words right out of the middle of him.

"Someone put that idea in your head," Roy said, "and let it germinate, and watered it, and—that’s
not you, Ed. It’s not your fault. But it’s not true, either."

"I don’t want to talk about it," Ed forced out through the massive obstruction that had taken up
residence in his throat.

Roy was watching him again; he felt it, and a glance confirmed it, and it prickled on his skin like pins
and needles, and he fucking hated needles. He always had.

"All right," Roy said—quieter still this time. "Just… I mean that. I mean all of it. I’m not trying to
get something from you, or talk you into anything. I honestly… just… think you’re wonderful. And
I find it indescribably sad that you don’t think that, too."

Ed knuckled at his eyes with the hand he’d already rescued from the table. At least if he was going
to die in agony of some mutated bacterial infection, he’d go much faster if he deposited it in his own
eyeballs right off the bat.

"I’ve never done anything wonderful in my fucking life," he said, and—that one, too. That one
came from a little pocket of pain right next to his heart, where it had been incubating silently for
years. "Look what I’ve already done to you."

"What?" Roy asked, and even before lowering his hand, Ed could hear the attempt at a smile in that
goddamn gorgeous voice. "Participated in several great conversations, a really nice dinner, excellent
sex, a few more conversations, and a nice dinner again?"

Ed glared at him.

"Let me take you out," Roy said. "It doesn’t have to be a ‘date’; it doesn’t have to be anything. Just
—let me spend a little more time with you and treat you the way you ought to be treated, and—"

It would have been a lot easier to tell him where to shove that idea if Ed hadn’t liked him so damn
“Maybe,” he said. “I—dunno. I don’t—I’ve got so much shit to do; I just—”

“Are you going home next week for Thanksgiving?” Roy asked.

“No,” Ed said. “I’ve got—work on Saturday, and Winry does, too, so—we were just gonna rain check it and do the turkey thing another time.”

“Come over, then,” Roy said. “I’m driving to L.A. Thursday to appease my mother, but I’ll be coming back on Friday. You could come over Saturday night—I’ll cook, and you can study. I can pick you up, if you like. It’d save you some time.”

“I don’t know,” Ed said, but the way his heart had started beating so hard that it hurt told a slightly different story. “I—okay. Maybe. Text me, or—something.”

“All right,” Roy said, and this smile was very small and slightly tentative, and so cute it cut like a Bowie knife between the ribs. “I will.”

He probably would. And Ed would probably cave.

And then—

He didn’t know what. He’d never gotten this far, and there were a lot of completely valid reasons for that.

“Okay,” he said. He went back to piling up the sushi containers. “We should—get rid of these. There’s a bin out on the patio in the front.”

Roy stood and started gathering them with him. “All right,” he said.

He sure said that an awful lot for someone who had to know how damn rarely it was actually true.

Roy was as obnoxiously considerate as ever as they headed through the plaza towards the street, where they’d have to part ways—Roy lived down towards the train station somewhere, which Ed’s crap memory probably wouldn’t have stored so well if he hadn’t power-walk-of-shamed his way out of there two weeks prior; and the dorms were sort of straight ahead and to the left. So at least something was straight.

Roy was asking nice questions about Al, and about Ed’s classes, and about what interested Winry about art history, and Ed just wanted to grab him by the shoulders—or maybe the throat—and shake him until he realized that Ed’s personal brand of inner quicksand was not part of a balanced breakfast, and he needed to run while he had the chance.

When they reached the sidewalk where their paths diverged, Roy grazed a hand against Ed’s back, completely unnecessarily—a faint, fleeting sweep across his shoulder-blades; so light and so brief that he almost thought he’d imagined it, but his spine decided to shiver to make sure that he knew otherwise.

“Uh,” he said, feeling stupid and ungrateful and a lot of other things worse than both combined. “You—might not—want to—I mean, someone could—see us.”
The plaza wasn’t exactly hoppin’ and poppin’ with a substantial proportion of the populace at eight o’clock on a Saturday night, but there were occasional students careening through on their bikes, and the lights were on in the awful concrete tower of a building where the journalism goblins lived, and the student union was just at their right, and the gym was only a little further down. People were passing through.

Roy turned enough to observe the general progress of humanity around them for a moment—which was the gesture equivalent of a rhetorical question, honestly, since they both knew it was happening; it wasn’t like they had to pay attention to it just because Ed had pointed it out—before facing Ed again.

“I know,” Roy said. “And I don’t want to lose this job, this life, the whole opportunity… I don’t.” He raised his eyebrows, and he smiled, and then he reached out and touched Ed’s elbow gently. “But I don’t want to lose you, either.”

Ed could hear himself breathing, albeit raggedly, which was a pretty good sign that he was alive and awake. He wasn’t sure, though. It was becoming increasingly impossible to be sure of what was real when he was with Roy.

The adrenaline roller-coaster with a sleep-deprivation chaser that he’d indulged over the past couple of days certainly wasn’t helping, but he felt it was pretty fair to lay the blame here on Roy and his weird, wild, intractable charming… ness. Charmingness. Charmosity. Charm?

Okay, that was one point for the lack of sleep.

“What are you gonna make next weekend?” he asked.

“What do you like?” Roy asked. “Wait, I know this one—everything?”

Ed couldn’t help grinning a little, and it felt… damn fucking nice, actually. Damn fucking nice.

“How about Italian?” Roy said. “I can’t screw that up. Oh, no, I shouldn’t have said that. Hang on.”

He hastened over to the nearest commemorative-plaque-adorned bench, rapped his knuckles on the wooden armrest, and then half-jogged back.

“Are you superstitious?” Ed asked. That was the most disappointing thing he’d heard in… nah, never mind. Being in the hospital with Al and still not having any reassurances, let alone answers, was the most demoralizing thing he could think of, and it would continue to be for the foreseeable future.

“Not in the slightest,” Roy said, which was a relief. “But I’m not taking any chances.”

“You’re a dork,” Ed said before he could help himself.

Roy smiled, lifting a hand again, and a part of Ed wanted to tense, because it was moving towards his face, and—

Roy tapped a fingertip very gently underneath his chin.

“Takes one to know one,” he said.

“What are you,” Ed said, “five?”
“That’s a reasonable estimate,” Roy said. “Though it’s a little higher than that.”

Ed had to push his hair back and stare up into Roy’s face to try to make himself believe that this conversation was taking place.

“You need some sleep,” Roy said, but in a voice so—what? tender?—that it didn’t sound like a command. “I’ll text you tomorrow.”

“So I know I didn’t dream up this whole thing?” Ed asked.

“And to make sure you survived the wasabipocalypse,” Roy said. “I’ve never seen anyone eat like that.”

“Get used to it,” Ed said.

It took him a second to register why Roy was grinning again. Which was… fair, he supposed. He didn’t usually talk about things—particularly good things—in the future tense. That was generally a signed, sealed invitation to the universe to yank the rug out from under your feet. And then shake it out over you. And then dump it on your head while you were still coughing up the dust.

“I’ll just clean out the pasta aisle at Safeway,” Roy said. “That should be enough for one night.”

“You might want to buy out the bread, too,” Ed said. “Just in case.”

“Check and check,” Roy said.

“Oh, man,” Ed said. “Guess I have to get through this week after all.”

Roy paused. “Was that in doubt?”

“It’s practically finals,” Ed said. “At this point, might as well just lie down in the grass in front of the library and slowly expire.”

“I don’t think that sounds like a tenable solution,” Roy said. “And ordinarily I’d say that I’m open-minded enough to try anything once, but—”

Ed was smiling again. This was batshit. That was what it was.

“I’ll text you,” Roy said. “Walk safe.”

“It’s eight o’clock,” Ed said. “You have further to go than I do.”

“I’ll walk safe, too,” Roy said. “No parkour whatsoever.”

“I’d pay to see that,” Ed said.

Roy blinked. “How much?”

Ed grimaced. “How’s… forty cents, some mostly-broken earbuds, and a stick of Big Red? I could spare that.”

“You drive a hard bargain,” Roy said, smirking, the bastard. “I’ll think about it.”

“You do that,” Ed said. “G’night.”

“Goodnight, Ed,” Roy said.
That sounded way too normal already.

“Uh oh,” Winry said the next morning as she came up to the table he’d claimed.

“I have a name,” Ed said.

“Yeah,” Winry said. “I just said it.”

“Oh, come on,” Ed said. “Everybody knows ‘Uh Oh’ is my middle name.”

She grinned at him, hooking her foot around the leg of the chair next to his to pull it out. Sometimes it was the little things people really took for granted, wasn’t it? “You order for me, Uh Oh?”

“Yup,” he said.

“Great,” she said, sitting down, planting both elbows on the table, and cupping her chin in both hands. Her eyes did a horrifying sparkle-thing. “So what happened?”

He grimaced. “Al’s great, thanks.”

She rolled her eyes. “I know. I wouldn’t’ve… jeez, Ed, he sent me the cats-on-the-way-to-the-supermarket digest first thing this morning, okay?”

Oh. Right. That’d been a group text. He’d forgotten.

“How long do you have until your shift?” she asked.

Speaking of phones, he glanced at his, since it was also his watch. “Bout an hour.”

“That’s plenty of time,” Winry said. “I could run a marathon and still get it out of you in an hour.”

“No, you couldn’t,” Ed said.

“Maybe a half-marathon,” Winry said.

Ed folded his hands on the tabletop.

“I could run to the end of the street and back,” Winry said. “Shut up. No, don’t shut up—tell me what happened already, you nerd.”

“Nothing,” Ed said. “Nothing happened. My brother is well enough for cat updates. What else could I possibly need?”

“Coffee, for one,” Winry said.

“Good point,” Ed said. “Other than that—”

“Someone to drink it with,” Winry said.

Ed held both hands out towards her.

“I meant that like an innuendo,” Winry said. “Y’know, coffee date, if you know what I mean—”
“Eew,” Ed said. “And that doesn’t even make sense. Why are you so happy?”

“So you admit that it’s a happy thing,” Winry said.

“What?” Ed said. “I didn’t—”

“You just used my happiness as an argumentative counterbalance,” Winry said. “Deductively speaking, that guarantees that your thing had to be a happy thing, too.”

Ed stared at her.

“I know,” she said. “I’m just that good.”

“I never want to talk to you again,” Ed said.

“Oh, okay,” she said mildly. “As long as we get through this conversation. Then you can quit. So what—”

“You first,” he said.

She eyed him. “You swear you’ll come completely clean and give me all the gritty details if I start?”

“No,” Ed said. “But I’ll tell you all the important parts.”

“Deal,” she said. “I was just realizing this weekend that, like… yeah, I don’t have a hot boyfriend; and yeah, stuff’s hard sometimes, with Al, and… y’know—” Her parents were usually some variation on y’know. She hadn’t had the vocabulary to talk about it when it had happened, and she’d just never found the time to crack the fossilized hurt open and examine the insides.

Ed sympathized with that a hell of a fucking lot.

“But I ended up with great friends,” Winry said. “Totally by accident. I mean, I’ve got you, and despite your innumerable shortcomings—”

“Fuckin’ rude,” Ed said.

“Kidding,” Winry said. “You know what I mean. You got me. You’re my rock. I’d say ‘thank you’, but there isn’t a ‘thank you’ big enough for that.”

“I know,” Ed said, feeling uncomfortably warm and fuzzy. Like lichen personified. Like a bin of stuffed animals on fire.

…more coffee it was.

“Right back at you, for the record,” he said before he sipped.

She held her fist out across the table, and he bumped it. “Anyway—yeah. I just met Catherine, but I love her already. She’s so fun. And not in the, like, ‘Whoo, party girl’ kind of way; just that—she really looks at the world like it’s big and bright and full of possibilities, and she keeps an eye out for possibilities for other people, too. Not just herself, you know? She really wants to be good to everybody around her, and she tries so hard to do that.”

“That’s really cool,” Ed said, and it sounded like he was bullshitting, but he meant it. Words were tough that way, but he knew Winry would hear the sincerity and understand.

“I know, right?” she said, so at least that was fine. “You know she started a charity for helping kids
in disadvantaged school districts get cool books and circulating them around and stuff?”

“Holy shit,” Ed said.

“Yeah,” Winry said. “She started it, and her older brother quit his job to run it, apparently. It’s wild. I guess they’re super, super rich, so it’s not like they need to have really great jobs anyway, since they’re going to inherit an ass-load of cash—”

“To put it delicately,” Ed said.

She grinned. “That’s what you and I are good at, right? Anyway—yeah. I guess she’s got one sister who’s this super high-powered businesswoman in New York.”

“Jeez,” Ed said. “Better not let Al meet her, or he’ll realize what a colossal fucking disappointment I am all around.”

Winry stared at him. “You don’t think that, you—jerk.”

“Of course not,” Ed said. “It’s cool; I don’t wanna quit my job and run a kitty charity anyway.”

Winry eyed him for another second, and then she sighed. “Well—right. Yeah. Catherine’s great. And Paninya is, too. In a totally different way, but I really like her.”

Winry’s mouth fell open a little bit. “Wh—you what?”

“Oh,” Ed said. “Shit.”

“Oh, my God,” Winry said. “I can’t believe this. I just—I had no idea. This is terrible.” She pushed her hair back, eyes huge. “Granny’s gonna kill me. She’s got a prosthetic, and I couldn’t tell? I’m going to have to turn in my license. Which I don’t have, but if I did—do you know what model she’s wearing? Who customized it? It’s gotta be custom; you can’t even see it.”

“Uh,” Ed said. “Didn’t… ask. But—I mean—yeah. She’s agile as hell. Pretty damn good stuff, whatever it is.”

“God,” Winry said. “I just… God.”

“Hold that thought,” Ed said, going for his phone. “I have to apologize to her right this fucking second, or I’m going to marinate in guilt for the next week and probably die.”

Winry rested her chin on one fist, raising her eyebrows at him. “That escalated fast.”

“I don’t have time to waste with escalating shit slowly,” Ed said, tapping his way into a message to Paninya. “I bet they left your latte on the counter.”

“I bet they did,” Winry said. “Also, that was the clumsiest hint that I should leave that I have ever heard, including some from frat boys.”

“Ow,” Ed said.

But she got up and went to go check on her wayward drink, which at least helped Ed to focus on the text he had to write. It was tough enough with the way that his stomach was churning; Winry’s eyes on him had been making it significantly worse.
He grimaced at the cursor on his screen. His last exchange with Paninya was a heard your bro isn’t doing well, sending good thoughts, to which he’d replied with a thanks, seems like we’re past the worst of it and some weak-ass smiley. It was even worse when you inadvertently did something fucked up to someone that you really, really liked.

Not that it was ever not-fucked up. Just that it was—

He probably had, like, forty more seconds before Winry got back with her precious, demonically milk-tainted drink. He couldn’t afford to procrastinate on this any longer.

Hey, he typed out, which was always a good and noncommittal start to a disaster made text. i am so fucking sorry to throw this in your lap and shit and even sorrier that it happened at all but winry and i were just talking and i wasn’t thinking at all and i outing you on accident because i was just talking about that stupid party. and i disabled-outing you too. because when i fuck up i go really hard which i guess is sort of par for the course with me, i never half-ass this shit. anyway it’s winry and she’s totally okay and chill about it and everything but it was not my place at all and i never would’ve done it if i’d had my brain on and i’m really sorry. you have every right to be pissed so if you are i totally understand.

That was… something like sufficient to encapsulating the ravenous guilt gnawing at his insides everywhere at once.

It’d just been an offhanded comment, sure; it had been to someone he knew was safe, sure; but— still. But still.

He knew better. He knew how this world was; he knew how sacred secrets were, and how carefully you had to guard some of them; and how much the silent ownership or broadcasted distribution of an identity like this one—both facets of it—was the purview of the person, and them alone. He’d had no fucking right. And he should have understood that better than just about anybody. The things that he and Paninya had in common were rare and perilous and extremely sensitive; for him to blunder in like—

Winry walked back up to the table right as his phone buzzed with a text from Paninya.

Shitfuckdamn—

He swiped to see it.

Oh no woe is me whatever will I do, she’d written. First off what the hell are you doing up so early, it’s the weekend, go back to bed. Second you have ruined my MASTER PLAN for how I was going to come out to her and I will never forgive you.

Before he’d finished blinking, she’d sent a follow up text—a video, no less. The uncertainty set him to frowning; slowly, he pushed the play button with the pad of his thumb, and—

Paninya was sitting on her dorm bed with her hair undone. She scowled at the camera, which was apparently stood up on her desk, unzipped her hoodie, and flung both sides of it out of the way to reveal a Pride-rainbow tank top emblazoned with the words GIRLS ONLY.

She then added another message bubble to the chain, which read No but for real it’s no prob at all but thank you for saying something. Only thing is now you are required to help me try to get a date with her as PENANCE hahahaa, sry those are the rules

He sent back that’s the best shirt ever and why does no one ever tell me the rules in advance. i am really glad it’s nbd bc you’re cool and shit. sorry for being up early
YOU BETTER BE, she sent back, just about instantaneously.  *ok i’m going back to sleep tell winry she’s hot bye*

“Paninya says you’re hot,” Ed said obediently.  “Also that I’m forgiven.”

“Ask her about her leg,” Winry said.  “Is it the whole leg, or just the foot?  That could be why—if it’s below the knee.  Those are harder to spot.”

“She’s going back to sleep,” Ed said.  “How’s the latte?”

“Great,” Winry said.  “And perfect—still lots of time to find out what you’re so pleased about.”

“No,” Ed said.

“It’s not a yes-or-no question,” Winry said.  “It’s fill in the blank.”

“How about multiple choice?” Ed said.  “I’m picking C.”

“I didn’t give you options,” Winry said.

“I’m picking C anyway,” Ed said, sipping his coffee to show how much he really, truly, obviously, utterly did not care.

“Then C is ‘Had marathon sex in the back of the café last night’,” Winry said.

Winry Rockbell was and always had been very smart, with extremely impressive reflexes. Dodging the spray of coffee that Ed spat across the table required employing both in perfect unison.

The woman didn’t get a damn drop on her.

“Nice range on that one,” she said.  She’d even lifted her latte out of the way.  *The witch.*  “Am I close?”

“No,” Ed said.

“Gotta be relationship-related, though,” Winry said.  She smiled, beatifically, and then blew softly on the surface of her cursed drink.  “Or you wouldn’t’ve spewed that far.”

“You can’t prove that,” Ed said, getting up.  “Son of a bitch.  Hang on.”  He darted over to the condiments kiosk and wrangled a handful of napkins out of the sadistic plastic holder.  The funky-shaped gaps always tried to eat his hand.  When he’d survived and returned, though, he started mopping up the table; if he left it to dry, the sugar would stick everywhere, and it’d be a nightmare to scrub off.

“If you think you’re going to get out of this by being nice to customer service workers,” Winry said, “you underestimate my stubbornness.”

“I’ve never been dumb enough to make that mistake in my life,” Ed said, swiping up a few very ambitious flecks of coffee-spit on the far side of the tabletop.  “Not planning to start now.”

He collected all of the wet napkins in a nice, damp, horrible pile in his cupped hands, toted them over to the trash, and deposited them less than gently.  Now his hands were going to be sticky.  *Awesome.*

Winry was giving him the widened soul-staring eyes as he came back to the table.

“Well?” she said.  “We can do this the easy way, or I can drag it out of you real, real slow.”
Ed sat down.

He drank a little bit more of his coffee, watching her this time to make sure she didn’t say anything else that would make him forfeit his mouthful of it.

Then he leaned back, and folded his arms, and looked at the table.

“I’m not counting my chickens this time,” he said, “but—I—was—I talked to Roy, and—I guess—we’re gonna—go out. Just to—see. Like a test run. Y’know.”

She stared at him.

He stared back.

Why the hell was there so much damn *staring* in his life these days? Every other thing out of every other person’s mouth was shocking or strange or unbelievable, and the only natural reaction was to gaze dumbfoundedly at their face until they clarified; or apparently something he’d said was one or all of those things, so the other person started it by gazing dumbfoundedly at him first, but there wasn’t really any way to respond to that other than by reciprocating in kind, and—

Well. Anyway.

“Oh, my God,” Winry said at last. “I—that *sounds* like a good thing. Is that a good thing? It must be a good thing if you’re happy about it.”

“I don’t know if I’m happy about it,” Ed said.

“Well, you are,” Winry said. “I can tell.”

“I know the whole ‘I know you better than you know yourself’ thing is supposed to be a way of showing affection or something,” Ed said, “but logistically speaking, it is *impossible*, unless extremely powerful telepaths really do exist, and they’re just powerful enough to hide it from everybody, and—”

“Your Babylon 5 privileges are revoked until further notice,” Winry said.

“That isn’t what I meant,” Ed said.

“Sure,” Winry said. “And you’re not happy, either.”

“Maybe I’m not!” Ed said. “Last time, the second I let myself settle into it at *all* and start to think maybe it’d turn out okay or whatever—it blew up in my face. Shrapnel. Smoke damage. Blast radius the size of a suburb.”

“That’s a bit dramatic,” Winry said.

“You’re obviously not telepathic,” Ed said. “So you obviously don’t know me better than I know me, so—”

“Why didn’t you say something?” Winry asked. “If it really was that bad—”

“It’s not the end of the world,” Ed said. “Nothing is. Except… the… actual end of the world. I guess.”

Winry blinked.
Ed glowered back, then took a long swig of his coffee, as evidently he needed it.

“Deep,” Winry said.

“Leave me alone,” Ed said. “It’s been a shitty weekend.”

She smiled in a way that looked quasi-repentant. “Okay, okay. I know. Just—I think this is really great, and I’m excited for you, but if you go into it waiting for it to go bad, you’ll sabotage it from the inside without even knowing it.”

“Thank you for the encouragement, O Great Long-Term Relationship Guru,” Ed said.

She stuck her tongue out at him.

“Cute,” he said.

“I’m always cute,” she said, which was unfortunately true. She’d even made throwing up in the bushes look remarkably adorable considering the circumstances. “Promise me one thing.”

“No,” Ed said. “I know you too well to fall for that.”

“Think about promising me one thing,” she said.

“I’ll think about thinking about it,” he said.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll take what I can get. Think about promising me that you’ll pretend that you aren’t scared you’re going to mess it up. If you pretend hard enough, you’ll end up being open-minded whether you like it or not, and I think that could really take you a long way.”

“We haven’t even gone on a date yet,” Ed said.

“Good,” Winry said. “Clean slate.”

“I have to see him in class,” Ed said. “And he’s gonna grade my final. It’s not exactly what I’d call —”

“Just take the advice, Ed,” Winry said. “Or I’ll call Al and get him to back me up.”

“You’re evil,” Ed said.


Unfortunately, that was also true.

——

When Ed had dragged himself home from his shift that night, Ling was out, so he settled in at his desk with his laptop, hoping for a nice, peaceful stint of alone-time with his comped sandwich.

He got it. To be more specific, he got two minutes and four bites, because that was how long it took to glance at his emails—Sundays tended to be blessedly quiet in the ol’ inbox—before he clicked over to Facebook.

Facebook was where the shit went down, because he had a message.
Initially, he saw only the red notification out of the corner of his eye and almost had a heart attack thinking Roy had gone and done something stupid like friending him. Not that he’d stalked Roy’s account on private browsing, or anything, and silently admired the equal-parts adorable and immensely pretentious profile photo of the asshole himself looking just off-camera, bathed in gold light and squinting slightly towards what had to be a sunset, with one hand raised to shade his eyes and just a tousle-touch of breeze in his hair. The picture itself was a masterpiece, although having a subject like him probably helped.

But it wasn’t that.

Ed had a message.

He had a message from Russell.

Ed had friend-muted him one supremely awkward week after the breakup-thing. It had just started to—hurt, sting, ache, rankle, seeing the link-blue name pop up on his feed with that same smug photo that had made his heart jitter just days before. He’d felt guilty about it, which he supposed was no goddamn surprise, given that he had an unrivaled ability to feel guilty about just about anything. He’d wanted to be stronger than that, or something. He’d wanted to be the kind of person who could shrug it off and keep up the illusion of staying friends within their shared circle, even if the truth was that they’d never be able to make eye contact again. He’d wanted it not to bother or affect or be even remotely apparent to anybody else. It was none of their business; he didn’t want to burden anyone with it; it shouldn’t have been so big a deal.

Everything was a big deal in his heart some days. But that was a personal failing, wasn’t it? No one else ever needed to know. He didn’t want their pity anyway. Oh, you poor thing; your soul is so soft it bruises at a touch, doesn’t it? Is it because one parent abandoned you, and the other died? Or is it because you feel worthless for so many reasons that you’ve lost track of which ones are the worst?

Fuck that. Fuck all of it; fuck Russell the most; what the fuck did he even want, anyway?

Just wanted to say hi, he had written, so at least that answered that question. It was weird seeing you again but a good kind of weird i guess. i hope al is ok and everything. are you still in town or did you go back up? we could get lunch sometime or something. catch up i dunno. i keep thinking about you now. wondering what up with you i guess. how is stuff going?

Ed saw red for a second. Through the searing crimson haze, he bang-typed out the words that sounds an awful lot like “i miss you and miss being your friend but in a totally not gay way because i’m totally not gay REMEMBER”.

He took a deep breath, and then he selected the lines and deleted them.

The best thing to do would be not to respond at all. Russell was the one who had done this to them. Russell was the one who had taken their friendship and twisted it up into some kind of tormented, too-tight, unsustainable pretzel shape and then pitched it out the window when it didn’t taste exactly the way he wanted.

Wasn’t he?

Part of it had to be Ed’s fault, too, didn’t it? If he’d been… better, cleverer, cuter, more prepared—if he’d known what to do, and who to be, and how to deal with Russell’s feelings; if he’d defused the bomb the second that he saw the countdown timer, maybe—
Or maybe he could have circumvented it from the very start. Maybe if he’d just never let on that he was crushing stupidly on his best friend, they could have stayed that way; if he’d been subtler, and smarter, and just kept it tamped down—

The best strategy would have been to close the browser window and try to make himself forget he’d ever seen it—he didn’t owe Russell jackshit. Sure, they’d had something. Sure, they’d had something great, at the beginning; something amazing for a long damn time before they tried to make it bigger only then to watch it die. Sure, they’d spent more nights than Ed could number sitting in Russell’s’s crappy car in the parking lot of In-N-Out, talking shit and amateur philosophy, pretending they didn’t notice how often their fingers brushed reaching for the fries. Sure, Ed had trusted him with almost as much sordid internality as he’d shared with Al and Winry—with almost as much of the dreck, and the drivel, and the piled-up insecurities; and then with the worst thing, the hardest thing, the single most terrifying truth—

Sure, it’d been a notable relief in a lifetime of terrors when Russell hadn’t shoved him right the hell out of the car and peeled off in a cloud of smoke the night he’d finally worked up the guts to say The reason I’ve been acting ‘fucked up’ is ’cause I think—I mean, I really—like you. Y’know. Like—that. And I’m fucking sorry, I am, but it’s been going on a while now, and I’ve been trying to ignore it, but I don’t think it’s going to go away.

Sure, he’d gotten a few days of something that tasted a little bit like Paradise if you could choke down the wormwood first.

But Russell was the one who had poured the lighter fluid and struck the match and shrugged while the whole thing burned to cinders.

Maybe if Ed had been better, or quicker, or easier—easier in every sense of the word; if he’d been more effusive or affectionate or loving or something; if he’d been less damaged or draining or whiny; if he’d been loose and free and giving with the sex or whatever—

It had taken him a while, and a couple of long, awkward, agonizingly unspecific conversations with Al, to realize that even if parts of it had been his fault, or his failings, or his withholdings, Russell hadn’t ever met him halfway. You didn’t owe anything to somebody who hadn’t even tried to do right by you when it really counted, no matter what they’d meant to you before.

So he should’ve just left it. He should’ve left it alone, left the band-aid on over the old blood, left the scab un-picked—

Who the hell was he kidding? He knew himself too well for that.

Hey, he wrote. Thanks, so far so good with Al. yeah i’m back up here. maybe another time. things are pretty good, finals about to kick off though so starting to get busy as hell.

That was a slight exaggeration—he had another week, maybe two, before the shit really hit the fan. But it was a pretty good gambit to get Russell off of his back and back out of his life.

He didn’t have the time for this—or the energy, or the inclination. He’d sorted that shit out, and moved past it, and things were much better now. He was glad, actually. He was glad Russell had picked him up and peered at him and then pitched him out. He was glad Russell had rejected him, in the end, despite everything they’d done and been together, because it had taught him two invaluable things—firstly, who his real friends were; and secondly, that he could weather that, too, and crawl through to the other side and stand up stronger for having survived.

Fuck Russell Tringham and his imaginary catch-up lunch. Ed would see him in hell and not any
sooner, if he got his way.

Maybe it was the direct karmic consequence of exaggerating in order to put Russell off, but the brief half-week blurred past him like a fast-flicking set of ancient photo slides—there he was in class, accidentally letting himself gaze soppily at Roy and wonder if any of this was real and then hastily ducking to his notes before he got caught; there he was at work, standing very still and nodding sympathetically with his jaw clenched so tight it ached as a faculty member complained about their prices; there he was studying; there he was digging his way out of a problem set; there he was at the little gym, slinging himself back and forth on the rowing machine and eyeing his notes like they were his mortal enemy, and it was only a matter of time before he conquered them once and for all.

Ling and Lan Fan had been going out together a lot, which he hoped was a good sign, and of course they’d flown home to San Diego for the holiday; and Winry had dinner plans on Thursday with some of Catherine’s friends who lived too far away to travel, so he was on his own.

It sort of sucked to spend a family holiday like this alone, but he was… fine, actually. He felt fine. It was a good time to pick at more of his homework and wait for Al to get on IM and distract him from how cottony-numb his brain felt after just three days this time around.

Was it supposed to be like this? People always said college was the best time of your life. Was that meant to refer to the daily grind scraping his nerves raw, or to the part where he’d clutched helplessly at his best friend’s shoulders while she vomited into some foliage?

His messenger made the cheery little ding noise that meant Al had signed on, and something in Ed that he hadn’t known was tense tentatively relaxed.

Hi, Brother!!!! Al wrote. How are you?

i’m okay, Ed said, which might have been a minor bit of truth-stretching, if you wanted to be strict. how are you?? still feeling okay?? no more hacking up your lungs in the middle of the night??

I’m fiiiiiiiiiine, Al sent. I’ve been drinking gallons and gallons of that lemon tea with lots and lots of honey in it. And it’s local honey so it should also be good for my immune system! Hashtag cheat code.

that’s not how hashtags work, Ed wrote.

Hashtag like I give a fig, Brother, Al wrote.

Maybe college was supposed to be the best because they expected you to spend a couple of Thursday nights sitting in your dorm room, laughing loud and feeling warm, because of something your perfect brother had sent.

Hashtag ANYWAY, Al wrote next, what are you doing cooped up inside?? Aren’t you supposed to be out partying and enjoying the zeitgeist like a proper hashtag millennial?

enough with the hashtags, Ed wrote, although as far as he was concerned, Al could have done it literally all night long. i’ve got homework and stuff. which i gotta finish because. saturday i have. yknow. plans.
PLANS?? Al wrote instantly. The little bugger was too smart by half, and he could read Ed anytime, anywhere, like a front-page newspaper headline in glow-in-the-dark ink. Is that “plans” like “a date”? IS IT A DATE WITH ROY????

whoa Ed wrote.

Taking that as a yes, Al said. I'm glad you changed your mind!!!! He seemed like a very nice young man.

hashtag geezer, Ed wrote. hashtag ancient. hashtag wtf. hashtag busybody

Shush, Al wrote.

he’s like twenty six, Ed wrote. YOU are the nice young man in this scenario

Thank you, Al wrote. So what happened? What are you two going to do?

he’s going to make food, Ed wrote.

He really needed to develop some kind of a broadcasting system in his life so that he could convey information to all of the people he cared for most in one go, rather than having to repeat himself every time one of them asked the same question.

Has he seen you eat before???? Al asked.

yes oh my god Ed wrote.

Okay, sorry, Al wrote. I was just remembering that one time we went to Suzy Turner’s house in the fifth grade – I guess you were in the sixth grade – and her mom gave us cookies and freaked out because of the way we ate and kept asking if we were starving.

we WERE starving, Ed wrote. It still hurt. Good odds it always would.

Only a little, Al said. But if he’s prepared then you should be fine!! I’m excited for you!! Are you going to kiss him?? And touch his hair??

oh my god, Ed wrote. i’m not exactly making a checklist here i’m just gonna go over and stuff and see how it goes. you’re as bad as Winry i swearrrr

Have you kissed him before?? Al wrote.

OH MY GOD AL, Ed sent. It was about the only thing he could think of that summed up a situation like his angel-brother requesting the gory details of his love life.

Sorry, Al wrote. Just curious!! Roy is a looker, you have to admit.

you are WAY worse than Winry, Ed wrote.

I'm taking that as an unparalleled compliment, Al wrote. He followed it up with a string of happy emoticons including several flowers and multiple copies of the grinning cat.

go right ahead, Ed wrote. He hesitated, and then he hesitated a little more—he knew Al was gently guilt-tripping him into spilling the unsavory beans, but it was also sort of unfair not to tell him at least a little when Ed was the reason Al had been spending his youth in hospital beds instead of out with girls. Or boys, apparently. Or whoever he wanted who wasn’t either one.
Al sent him a long line of various hearts in the meantime.

okay fiiiiiiine, Ed wrote. yes i have kissed him and touched his hair. both were nice. i would not be averse to doing more of both tomorrow. i dunno if that is gonna be like. a thing though. we sorta started out too fast and that was part of the problem so i dunno if maybe he’s going to want to take it slow this time or what.

What a gentleman!! Al wrote. He didn’t know the half of it, obviously, but Ed wasn’t about to volunteer to fill in the rest. That sounds really nice! You’ll have to tell me how it goes!

i’ll let you know, Ed wrote.

I’m going to hold you to that, Al wrote back. If you don’t, I’m going to text you obnoxiously until I get results. I’ve decided that’s how I’m going to convince you to share more about how your life is going so that I can support you more.

…with… blackmail? Ed wrote.

It’s not blackmail! Al wrote. It’s… negative incentive.

that sounds like a fancy way of saying “blackmail”, Ed wrote.

I would never do that to you, Al wrote. And if I did, I would admit it because I am honest with you even when I am blackmailing you. It’s just… persuasion. Creative persuasion. Slightly forceful creative persuasion.

congratulations Al, Ed wrote. that is an even FANCIER way of saying “blackmail”.

Brother, I’m not blackmailing you!! Al wrote. Ed could almost hear his voice getting higher. I’m just taking an active interest in your life because I love you!!

love you too, nerd, Ed wrote, because he couldn’t not. It was about as voluntary as the knee-reflex thing with the hammer. Well, presuming that they did it on the knee that wasn’t metal, anyway.

How are you feeling about it? Al asked. Nervous, excited? It sounded like maybe a bit of both.

yeah, Ed wrote. guess that pretty much sums it up haha. he’s been really nice and shit so far but everything that’s happened up til now was an accident so it’s like. i have no idea if it’s gonna be different if we’re doing it on purpose? i dunno.

Can I say the horrible thing? Al asked.

sure, Ed wrote.

JUST BE YOURSELF AND TRUST YOUR FEELINGS AND HAVE A GOOD TIME, Al wrote. There was a pause while Ed reeled from the assault of caps lock, and then Al added, And “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do”.

Ed almost typed out the words does that include Roy himself, but, blessedly, he was a tiny bit too awake—even after the week he’d had—to make that critical error.

i’ll try, he wrote instead. how’s that?

That’s all anybody decent should ever ask of you, Al wrote, tacking a little heart onto the end. And just let me know if it turns out he was fooling all of us, and he’s not also gorgeous on the inside, and he doesn’t treat you as well as you want, and I’ll turn up on his doorstep with a shovel over my
shoulder and a super creepy smile, and I’ll ask him if he wants to apologize to you now or… well, “now” is the only option, considering.

It was probably a good thing Ed had never told Al much about Russell. He didn’t imagine they had very good hospital care in prison.

you’re my favorite, he wrote. don’t tell Winry, she’ll stop buying me coffees.

Good heavens, Al wrote. We can’t have that! Feel free to tell her anything you have to if it’ll keep the elixir of life coming in sufficient quantities!!

If Ed had ever needed further proof that Al was the most reasonable person on the face of the planet…

Well. He hadn’t.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Even knowing how long this fic is, I can't believe how long this fic is.

Because Ed’s life was an ongoing shambles of modest proportions—sure, crap happened, but it wasn’t like this was at Greek tragedy levels or something—Jeremy called in sick Saturday, and since Ed owed both him and the manager a favor after last week, he didn’t have much choice except to cover the shift and stay until closing.

This resulted in a frantic *hey sorry my coworker has the plague so i’m stuck here is it ok if i show up at like 7???? i could probably make 6:30 if i learn to teleport but i ttly understand if you need to cancel haha*

Whatever they were making Roy do in lab or whatever, he clearly wasn’t busy enough, because he texted back immediately:

*No problem at all! 7 is perfect... gives me time to shoot for 6:30 and hilariously miss. It’s 752 Oxford in case you need it! I’d be happy to come pick you up, too, just let me know.*

Roy was either brilliant or extremely lucky or both—Ed couldn’t really understand or sympathize with either, but he knew enough to admire that in a conceptual way. Whatever the underlying cause, Roy had just avoided forcing Ed into the position of having to ask for the address, which he hadn’t exactly noted down on his way out the door while embarking on his glorious walk of shame.

It was fine. It was all fine. Brilliant and/or lucky or otherwise, Roy didn’t seem to hate putting up with the fact that Ed couldn’t be either if his life depended on it. This had all been his idea—Ed had to try to keep that at the forefront of his mind. This wasn’t last time all over again. This was something different, with somebody new, and…

And the same old him. A worse him, probably, if you thought about it. A him that had gone through the wringer a couple more times; a him dredged from deeper in the trash pit. A him with sandwich-grill burns on his hands and his hair sweat-matted from jamming it under his stupid baseball cap. A him who had let some asshole pry some of the last things he’d liked about himself out of him and dash them on the ground; a him who had given up believing that anything could ever go swimmingly unless it was waiting to drown him when he got further from the shore.

He knew he couldn’t think like that. And he liked Roy—he really did. That sort of made it harder. He actually had something to lose.

But it wasn’t like Roy was going to *settle*, was he? A guy like that? Roy was a long streak of fucking perfect, and he walked the walk—sauntered it, really, with just the slightest hint of a mesmerizing rhythm in the movement of his hips, because he knew where he was going. He was smart as hell and so articulate that he made the dictionary look clumsy; he had dreams and ambitions, and he was well on his way towards both of them, and under all the pretty-boy bullshit, you could tell he had a will like iron when work had to get done—

*How long was someone like Ed liable to entertain him?*
It wasn’t just that Ed was a wet blanket incarnate, either—he was busy. There was always too much happening in his head. He was already overcommitted to his own life, trying to fudge the aerodynamics just long enough to get it off the ground, and on top of that, Al came first with everything—before himself; before sleeping; before eating; before air—

It wasn’t Roy’s fault that nobody in their right mind would want that. It wasn’t Roy’s fault that no matter how much either of them tried to twist this and fold it and hem the fraying edges, Edward Elric wasn’t boyfriend material.

He owed Roy a good damn try, though. Even if it sucked. Even if he let them both down, in the end, he owed Roy the best start of it that he could muster.

So that was what he was planning to do, and he was doing his damnedest not to plan any further than that. Planning never worked out anyway.

He managed ten minutes to seven, in the end, which—by his standards—was so early that Roy should have asked him a bunch of security questions to verify his identity when he knocked.

Instead, Roy flung the door open before Ed had even lowered his hand. That would’ve been natural enough—albeit slightly confusing; surely Roy had boiling water to contend with, or something else that would’ve slowed him down on his way to the door—but then there was the matter of the fact that he was wearing a dark red button-down shirt and a slightly battered black apron.

…and pants. Not that Ed would have objected to a lack of pants, given what was under Roy’s, but they were worth noting even if the other articles were more immediately mouth-wateringly appealing.

Come to think of it, though, Ed hadn’t seen anyone outside of a restaurant cook while wearing an actual apron in… well, hell. Probably since Mom. There was something sort of quaint and domestic and strangely intimate about it. Like it was something you wouldn’t share with just anybody.

Maybe Ed was reaching. Roy was kind of old-fashioned, and it looked like a nice shirt; maybe he just—

“Good heavens,” Roy said, which sort of proved the old-fashioned part, at least. “Hello. What’s all this?”

Ed blinked for a second. He’d been so lost in analyzing the apron there that he’d managed to forget what he was holding.

“Oh,” he said. “Um—here.”

To improve his chances, he had decided to gamble on both ideas instead of picking one: he had a pretty good-sized tin of loose leaf tea in one hand, personally recommended by an A-grade hipster barista at an indie coffee shop; and a tiny potted sage plant in the other.

“I wasn’t sure if flowers were—” Appropriate, too cutesy, too heterosexual, too weird, too much too soon. “—a thing, so… I thought maybe something alive. And I figured since you cook, like, an herb might be useful. And. Um. Supposedly this tea brand’s really good. The description on the back is super pretentious, but my understanding is those can be hit-or-miss.”
“You didn’t have to do that,” Roy said, wiping his hands on the apron, which was also something Ed had always figured was a thousand times likelier in television commercials than anyplace else.

“Guess not,” Ed said. He was still… standing in the doorway holding all of the shit. Roy noticed at the same second that he did and started gesturing in an usher-y sort of way; Ed stepped through, and Roy did a magnificent hop-skip-shuffle thing trying to get past him, shut the door, and take the gifts all at the same time. “Where I grew up, though, it was… if somebody invites you over, you don’t turn up empty-handed. Especially not the first time. And since you had to buy a bunch of extra groceries and do all this work, y’know—”

“You really shouldn’t have,” Roy said, but the way his eyes lit when he started to skim the noxious promotional drivel on the back of the tin of tea told another story. “It wasn’t any trouble at all. Sorry, you threw me for a loop—come in, come in, make yourself at home, other platitudes like that—”

It wasn’t like there was far to go, of course; the loft life didn’t lend itself to a whole lot of exercise from traipsing back and forth with square footage like this. That said, the whole place smelled like Sicily or heaven, and Roy had set out plates and silverware and cute little red cloth napkins on the tiny table, and there were all sorts of intriguing things bubbling and simmering on the stove—

“I hope one of the platitudes includes me eating until I explode,” Ed said. “It’d be a hell of a mess to clean up, though. I’d hate to do that to you after all this.”

“I thought that was implied in ‘Make yourself at home’,” Roy said, flashing a grin over his shoulder as he opened a cabinet overflowing with tea and sugar and jars of honey and the Queen knew what else. “I could put some plastic down.”

Ed laughed despite himself. “What about the walls? You gotta think about the walls. I take exploding seriously, okay? If I do it, I’m gonna do it properly, in three dimensions. Sorry about your deposit in advance.”

“Alas,” Roy said, managing to cram the new tin into one of the corners. The plant found what might have been a temporary home on the counter—although Ed hadn’t noticed during his last visit that there was, in fact, a skylight in the kitchenette. Who the hell had designed this place? Had they deliberately made it as cheery and posh and habitable as humanly possible? Had they known someone like Roy was going to seduce people in it someday? “I hardly knew ye. Ye, and my deposit. Wonder how much saran wrap I have.”

“Sounds like a challenge,” Ed said. “I bet I can make it not enough.”

Roy paused, and then he half-turned, and then he turned the rest of the way, and then he leaned back against the counter and pushed a hand up into his hair, looking…

…distressed?

Shit. Fuck. How had Ed jacked it up already? He’d been here a grand total of two minutes; he’d brought stuff—was it because he’d awkwardly forgotten to say hello? The conversational moment had just—passed; it’d done a jump-thing; he’d missed it, and by the time he’d realized that, it would’ve been agonizingly weird to go back. Had that gotten this whole thing off on the wrong foot? Ed was always on the wrong goddamn foot, sure, but maybe this was the inevitable result when you flouted social conventions; maybe that was the true reason that they had to exist—

Or maybe it was the fact that he’d somehow gotten them to talking in detail about him splattering himself all over Roy’s walls.
Sometimes Ed was so fucking brilliant he amazed himself.

“Um,” he said. “Sorry, I—”

“No,” Roy said, too-fast. Ed had never heard him use quite this voice before—it was a little higher and a little rougher and a little… weak. “I’m sorry; I just—sorry. I really—give me just a second.”

As if Ed had a choice—as if he could have said no; as if there was time; as if he would have, given who he was—but that wasn’t exactly the point.

The point, he supposed, if a point was loitering in the shadows of this little place at all, was Roy wheeling on one heel to face the counter again, putting his back to Ed. He laid one hand down flat on the countertop, curled the other tight around the edge, lowered his head, and… breathed. Slowly, deeply, carefully—and the first one shuddered in and shook his shoulders on the way back out; but the second one was a little more even, and then the third was smoother than that, and…

And Ed’s fingertips were tingling. What Roy had said—that first night, when they were lying in bed, about how he’d pushed himself too hard, about how it had fallen out—

“Sorry,” Roy said one more time, and there was a strain beneath it, but at least his voice sounded substantially more like him now. “I just… get so hung up on everything being perfect. But what’s really perfect is not having to be in control of everything all the time, and getting to enjoy it for what it becomes all on its own.” One more breath in—and out—and— “Doesn’t make it a whole lot easier not to panic every time I realize I’m not in charge of everything in the entire world, but—”

“Hey,” Ed said, as softly as he dared. “You’re—pretty great even when you’re not. And you do this cute thing with your eyebrows when you’re not sure what’s going on, so as far as I’m concerned, it’s a win-win.”

Roy managed a laugh, but it was a little one, so there was still some work to be done there. He peeked at Ed over the arm still braced against the counter. “Do I?”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “You’re doing it right now.”

The next smile looked a fraction stronger. “Am I indeed?”

“Yup,” Ed said. “Better yet, you’re the kind of guy who says ‘indeed’ even at a time like this.”

Roy hung his head again, but the slant of his shoulders had changed, and this angle was much less… miserable. Much less defeated. He huffed out something like another laugh. “That is—very true. Inescapably, I think.”

“Also the kind that says ‘inescapably’,” Ed said.

Roy raised his head slow and looked up at Ed through his hair. The corner of his mouth curved up into a small but absolutely unmistakable smirk.

“So you like that kind of guy?” he asked.

Ed shoved his hands into his pockets so that he could clench them into fists without Roy being able to see it. Bastard didn’t need to know that, even riding the tail end of some kind of an anxiety trip, he was so damn sexy that Ed could barely contain himself.

“Eh,” Ed said. “Kinda diggin’ him so far, but—that could change. Y’know. Depending on whether he can cook or not.”
“Oh,” Roy said, straightening up—and then throwing his shoulders back and tossing his hair, and Ed had made a terrible mistake. “Is that all?” He took one more deep breath, and then he sauntered over to one of the pots on the stove, snatched up a spoon, dipped it into red sauce, lifted it out, blew on it delicately while making eye contact with Ed—

The central heating was malfunctioning. Damn, these loft apartments really weren’t all they were cracked up to be, were they? Faulty HVAC, probably. Shoddy construction.

“Here,” Roy said, cupping his other hand beneath the spoon and directing the saunter right towards Ed. “Try this.”

Ed had to extract his hand from his pocket and wrap it around Roy’s to stabilize the spoon, and the heat in between them was unbelievable; it was like a thing alive; and with his fingertips pressed to Roy’s wrist, he couldn’t tell whose pulse it was that was beating way too fast—

The part of him that had a faint inkling for what other human beings found attractive wanted to maintain the sultry shared gaze thing while he sipped from the spoon and then slowly licked his lips or some shit.

The part of him that knew he was a giant klutz four seconds away from getting a tablespoon of red sauce down the front of his shirt and probably all over Roy’s carpet and also his hair—Edward Elric’s secret superpower was that his clumsiness defied physics and increased the volume of containers every time he spilled something—looked at what he was doing instead.

“Holy shit,” he managed once he’d swallowed.

He was not going to think too much about the choice of words that his internal monologue had just made.

“Too hot?” Roy asked, withdrawing his hand, and Ed caught a trace of a wince before it disappeared into the calm-neutral void.

“Nah, that’s you,” Ed said, which— “Fuck.” He couldn’t help stumbling a step back; his instinct was always to recoil away from the epicenter of the awkwardness. “Uh—I mean—it’s—really good. Really good.”

The wince was long gone. The smirk appeared to be here to stay. “I’m very glad to hear that.”

“Which part?” Ed asked.

“Both,” Roy said.

“Figures,” Ed said.

Roy beamed at him. And more than anything else, it felt… nice. It felt warm and kind of sweet, a little bit like the sauce, though with less tomato and basil and more of Ed trying to blush his way right out of existence.

Making people happy—particularly when they were going through something, or feeling less than great to start with, or having a difficult time—was an extraordinary thing, was all. Sometimes he got so tangled up in the threads of his own life that he forgot that, or forgot how, or just forgot to reach out and poke somebody and remind them that they were great.

And Roy was great. That was Ed’s biggest problem right now, really—how great Roy was.
“Here,” Roy was saying as he sauntered back over to the counter and started moving things around. “I think… ah, yes.”

An oven mitt shaped like a cat head, complete with ears, which would probably have prompted Al to propose right then and there, found its way onto Roy’s right hand, and then something that smelled every bit as savory and delicious as the sauce was emerging from the oven.

“I was thinking of ziti,” Roy said, “but you strike me as the kind of man who would climb Everest for good pepperoni, so I went with baked rigatoni instead.”

“Huh,” Ed said. Given the fact that his mouth had flooded with more saliva than any dam in the world could withstand, he felt that speaking even that much was a pretty considerable accomplishment.

“Perfect,” Roy said, setting the dish full of amazing cheese and whatever was underneath that it that smelled like enlightenment onto one of the stovetop burners. He replaced it in the oven with—

“You made garlic bread,” Ed said, stupidly, with the last four words that he could spare around the tidal wave.

“In case you hadn’t noticed,” Roy said, “I’m trying to impress you.”

He shut the oven door, turned, and grinned.

“It’s working,” Ed said.

“Excellent,” Roy said. “Can I get you something to drink?”


Roy was grinning at him a little more, which was entirely unfair, and then moving over to the refrigerator. “I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you,” Ed said. He took advantage of the reprieve while Roy’s back was turned to grab the collar of his shirt and flutter it until a tiny bit of air circulated across his skin. “You really oughta do something about the heat in here.”

“I’m afraid I can’t,” Roy said. He had a glass of water with ice cubes in it. There were not nearly enough of them, though maybe if Ed held one in his mouth for long enough, or got right to the point and dumped the damn thing over his head—”It’s just you.”

For a second, Ed wasn’t sure whether that was a slight about his body’s ability to regulate its own temperature, or whether it was a come-on. In any other situation, it would have been a toss-up, right?

People were like a maze inside one of those trick-boxes with a Rubix cube on top.

Right on cue, though, he was flushing even harder, so the heat problem was worsening instead of going away.

“Thanks,” he said. “Or something.” He stepped forward gingerly to accept the water—this was not entirely unlike baiting a rattlesnake, although he was hoping that Roy’s bite wasn’t quite as venomous. So far so good on that front.

Thinking about Roy biting him wasn’t helping him to cool down, either.
“Have a seat,” Roy said once he’d fumbled his way close enough to grab the glass. “It’ll be another minute. Can I get you anything else?”

“A reality check,” Ed said as he dropped down onto the couch, which did not, and would not ever, have a name. “I think I dreamed this one time.”

“I hope you dreamed me not burning anything,” Roy said. “Oh—hang on.” He turned to the stove and fished a piece of spaghetti out with his fork. “Would you like to do the honors?”

“Throw it at the wall, you mean?” Ed asked.

“It’s the best part,” Roy said.

“No, it’s not,” Ed said. “I either somehow get it on the ceiling, and it won’t come off until we get a broom; or it leaves a wet spot and messes up the paint; or… and either way, I don’t get to eat that piece.”

Roy was smiling at him. “Is it wrong that I’m greatly enjoying those mental images?”

“Yes,” Ed said. “Figures you’re a sadist.”

“You don’t know the half of it, gorgeous,” Roy said blithely. He cupped his hand under the fork this time and brought the spaghetti over for Ed to taste. “But if I start on that, we’ll never get to eat, and I can’t have you wasting away on me.”

Ed didn’t know which part of that wildly absurd series of statements to start with. At least being dumbstruck made it easy to open his mouth for pasta sampling.

With Roy watching him like that, though, he didn’t really succeed in tasting it in the slightest. He supposed the consistency was more important anyway, and he had a vague recollection of it being suitable to chew and swallow, so—

“S’good,” he said.

“Sorry,” Roy said, taking a small step back and touching his bottom lip with the tines of the fork, which really wasn’t helping. “Am I—flustering you?”

Ed had never heard that word used as a verb before, but that was a different problem. “N—I mean, yeah, but—it’s not—it’s just—nobody’s ever—come on even half that strong to me before, and—I mean, I guess part of my brain’s like, ‘Sounds fake, but okay.’”

“Hold that thought,” Roy said, and he crossed the linoleum, hooked a colander with one deft hand, and poured the pasta into it in the sink. People like Roy probably didn’t burn themselves with the water or the steam. People like Roy—

—were coming back and settling on the couch right next to him.

“All right,” Roy said. “Does it make you uncomfortable?”

Ed blinked at him. “…spaghetti?”

Roy smiled. “Well—that’s—I sure hope not. But I meant the flirting.”

“Oh,” Ed said. He felt like a fucking idiot, but also the sky was blue, and things that went up learned about gravity pretty soon. “I—duh. Of course you did. Um. I mean—not—uncomfortable, just—it’s—confusing. Especially now. ’Cause—I mean, I’m already here. Obviously I—y’know, I’m—
into you. Shit, you already got in my pants once. You don’t need to butter me up or anything.”

The smile went sad. And then there—

There was a hand. On top of Ed’s. Just—resting. Lightly. All gentle and shit.

Ed was staring down at it. Somehow he hadn’t tipped the water glass, or at least not far enough yet to drench himself noticeably.

Roy had really gorgeous hands. They were just—proportioned right; they just looked nice. They were the sort of shape and size you fantasized about. Long fingers, but not spindly-long; strong and extremely sure and very even. Little scars and nicks and whatnot on the backs and the knuckles, but nothing startling. Nice. Really nice.

“No one’s ever talked to you like that before?” Roy said.

Roy’s hand lying on top of his was very warm and… soft. Despite being a little bit heavy. “Well—no.”

“I have to admit,” Roy said, “I admire the restraint of your previous partners.”

“Partner,” Ed said. “Singular. Just the one.”

Roy blinked. At least that was something to look at other than his unreasonably amazing hand. “Really?”

Ed’s brain—which was reliably unreliable in situations like this—urged him to jump to the defensive, but he knew he couldn’t afford to fuck this conversation up. He had to chill. He had to.

“Yeah,” he said. “I mean—I wasn’t exactly… available. I mean, I was, but—Winry told me one time she figured my problem was that I’m so intense most of the time, people felt like starting a conversation with me was interrupting something.”

Roy smiled. He hadn’t moved his hand. Ed wasn’t sure his heart could handle this. “Resting genius face?”

Ed wrinkled his nose. “Uh… maybe. I think that’s a little generous. She’s also said—a lot of times, actually—that I’d have done better if I hadn’t been such a big nerd.”

“Interesting,” Roy said. “Big nerds are my personal preference. The bigger, the better, as it happens.”

“Good,” Ed said. “As you’ve noticed, I’m colossal.”


“Yeah,” Ed said. “I was—busy. Not busy like you, either—not social-busy. Busy like… buried in homework and always at the hospital or working stupid retail on the side. And then working at school at the community college. That was better. The papercuts were a bitch, though. I doubled the office record for number of papercuts in a single day.”

Roy blinked again, differently this time. People were so weird. Eyes were so weird. Humanity was such a mess—such a beautiful, complicated pile of questions that dwindled into individual strings of gibberish.

Then Roy was picking up Ed’s hand in both of his and turning it over, examining the skin. “I hope
you bled all over the vengeful trees responsible for this travesty.”

“Probably couldn’t help it,” Ed said. “What do you have against paperwork, anyway? You always act like it personally betrayed you at some point.”

“Mm,” Roy said. “I’ve always suspected that it had. Now I have proof.”

Yet again, he kept his eyes on Ed’s while he raised Ed’s hand to his mouth and, one by one by soft-amazing-unexpected one, kissed Ed’s knuckles.

Ed was trying to make air move through his respiratory system. He was pretty sure that was a good strategy most of the time, and lately it’d been a right pain in the ass. The last thing he wanted was to have to cancel this dinner and call Al’s pulmonologist in a panic here.

Speaking of dinner—

“Is the garlic bread gonna burn?” he asked. “I mean—not that—I’m not—enjoying that; I am, I—”

“Oh, hell,” Roy said. “You’re right.”

But he still brushed his terrible-wonderful lips across Ed’s palm before he released Ed’s hand and leapt up to go assess the state of the oven.

“Besides which,” he said as he went, “I don’t think there is such a thing as a conversation that wouldn’t be improved by garlic bread.”

“I dunno about that,” Ed said. “I’ve had some so bad I don’t think even garlic bread could’ve save ’em.”

Roy, armed once again with his cat-face oven mitt, winced as he crouched down to open the oven door. Ed was torn between looking at the beautiful golden-brown garlic bread wreathed in magnificent-smelling steam and the equally mouth-watering tight curve of Roy’s ass.

The ass won.

If, somehow, against all odds, this thing went on long enough to trust him with the power of the knowledge, Ed was going to have to tell him that.

“Fair point,” the owner of that excruciatingly exquisite muscle group was saying.

“Not that I would’ve turned it down, or anything,” Ed said. “Even if it hadn’t fixed anything, would’ve been okay as a consolation prize.”

Roy was moving things around on the counter to make space for the tray. Even standing up, his ass was distracting. This was unbelievable. Ed was in so damn deep. He’d never in his life gotten sidetracked from food by someone’s physical features—let alone from Italian food.

“How’s ‘I think dinner’s ready’ for a consolation prize?” Roy asked.

“Jesus, Roy,” Ed said, levering himself up carefully—between the natural tendency towards abject failure in all things and the mechanical knee, he’d spilled more than his share of drinks getting up from chairs, and pouring water all over the couch would’ve been a damn poor way to show appreciation. “There’s nothing consolatory about this. This is flippin’ awesome.” He crossed halfway and then hesitated—it wasn’t his house, and all the rules were different when you didn’t know if you belonged someplace just yet. But he couldn’t not ask: “Can I help with anything?”
“You can park your beautiful ass in whichever chair you prefer,” Roy said, favoring him with another one of those smirks that did nothing to improve the existing knee situation, “and work up an appetite.”

“I’m not gonna let you serve me,” Ed said, hovering behind the chair closer to the couch. Not that he needed to see the door, or anything. Not that he was in the habit of keeping his escape routes clear, just in case.

“Please,” Roy said. “It’s a matter of honor. In fact,” he said, snatching up two plates before Ed could protest, “it’s part of the Chef’s Honor Code that I just made up.”

Ed vacillated for another second before cautiously sitting down. “Uh huh,” he said. “Chef’s Honor Code include a Chef Honor Roll? ’Cause I’d eat that.”

“Me, too,” Roy said. “How much would you like?”

“Challenge me,” Ed said.

“Oh, dear,” Roy said, so softly Ed almost missed it; followed by a much more audible, “One challenge-sized portion of everything, coming right up.”

For all of the banter—this was banter, wasn’t it? Ed had never bantered in his life, before Roy; he didn’t know what this crap was supposed to look like when it was at home; there had been a lot more petty personal insults in the examples he’d seen in movies, for one thing—the real challenge was not tipping over and tumbling right into Roy’s stupid-gorgeous eyes.

On the upside, the balance crisis there and the struggle to figure out what to say about the way Roy’s toes kept brushing his in a manner that might have been deliberate was preventing him from just inhaling all of the pasta and exposing himself as an ill-mannered pig with a penchant for marinara. It was better to save that for the second date anyway, right?

He waited until the worst of the ravenous hunger had subsided, a lull came into the conversation, and he was positive that Roy had just grazed the inside of his foot up Ed’s calf slowly and thoroughly enough that it couldn’t be an accident of shared space.

“Are you—” He’d just had some of his water, and he still had to clear his throat. “Are you—playing footsie with me at your own kitchen table?”

In the first moment, Roy went still; in the second, his foot dropped away from Ed. “Sorry,” he said. “Is it bothering you?”

“No,” Ed said—which was true; ‘bothering’ wasn’t the word for it. “Just—I thought the whole idea of footsie was to get away with something in public that nobody could see. And I’m sure there’s some sorta Victorian shit in it. About how ankles are the Devil’s playground or something, so rubbing them together is probably just as bad as tearing somebody’s clothes off in the middle of a restaurant.”

Roy looked delighted. “I do happen to think the sex appeal of the ankle is underrated by modern society.”

“Yeah?” Ed said.

“Yours,” Roy said, before it could start to rankle enough to prompt Ed to say Too bad I only have the one, then, “is, if I may say so, absolutely exemplary.”
Ed planted an elbow on the tabletop—ignoring the Al Sirens in his head screaming *Rude!*—and rested his chin on it. “And here I thought Winry was the only person I knew who had a mechanical engineering kink.”

“Oh, no, no,” Roy said. “That one is remarkable, but I meant the one you grew yourself.” His toes skated down Ed’s shin again. “This one.”

Ed had to clench his jaw so that he wouldn’t shiver. He couldn’t give Roy that much over him—not yet. Maybe not ever. Maybe it wouldn’t ever really be safe. How the hell were you supposed to know? Was there an equation for this somewhere? $X \sqrt{\text{quality coefficient of the conversations, times compatibility squared}}$—if you passed that threshold, could you afford to lay yourself bare and wide open in front of someone? By then could you trust someone to understand how much power they had over you without immediately using it to tear you into bits?

“I still think you’re missing the point of footsie,” he said.

Roy folded his hands neatly, smiled like a cat, and drew his toes upward again. “Does there have to be a point? I really like touching you.”

Ed stared at him.

“Oh, God,” Roy said, in the quiet-involuntary voice again. “You—is that so hard to believe?”

“Never mind,” Ed said. “Forget it. Where the hell did you learn to cook like this, anyway?”

“I was conscripted at an early age,” Roy said. “And by that I mean, ‘My sisters hated doing it, so they made up a series of games where the checkpoint objectives were for me to make them food.’”

Ed shook his head. “That’s when you gotta pretend like you’re falling for it, and then yank the rug out from under ’em at the last second. Make something amazing, let ’em smell it, and then bait-and-switch it at the last second with some gruel.”

Roy smiled sweetly. “But of course. Although I went for lutefisk. And I served it *beautifully.*”

“I bet you friggin’ did,” Ed said. “Which makes it the best time to ask my next question.” At Roy’s raised eyebrows, he sat back in his chair. “What’s for dessert?”

Roy laughed.

And then he got up, went to the fridge, and came back with a little styrofoam clamshell container and opened it, and—

“Tiramisu,” he said, shifting the garlic bread in order to set it down in the center of the table. “This I’m afraid I didn’t make, but that’s probably for the best. This sort of thing is still a bit beyond me. Would you like a new fork?”

“I would like a new brain,” Ed said stupidly, staring at the edible bliss in front of him. “You broke this one.”

“Sorry,” Roy said, managing not to sound sorry in the *slightest.*

Roy brought him a new fork anyway. At least he didn’t have littler ones with fancy floral designs on them specifically for dessert or something. That would have indicated unsustainable levels of pretentious assholery, and Ed would’ve had to make an excuse about some distant relative dying and
hurl himself out a window.

Which he really didn’t want to do, because the tiramisu looked extremely good.

“I thought you didn’t like coffee,” he said as Roy sat back down.

“I don’t,” Roy said. “But I haven’t yet found it in myself not to like cake, regardless of the particulars.”

He was distracting Ed from food again. Roy Mustang was a monster.

“What?” he said at the way Ed was staring.

“I have found so fucking few reasonable people in my life,” Ed said. “And when I first met you, I didn’t really think you were one of them.”

Roy grinned, and then he did a terrible toying-with-his-fork thing and nibbled on the tines in a way that was absolutely ungodly and made Ed’s stomach drop straight out of him and then right through the seat of his chair. And four floors down, probably.

“I’m sneaky like that,” he said. “If you can convince people that you’re a little bit flighty from the beginning, they’ll underestimate you forever, regardless of how many times you prove you’re paying attention. People love believing that they’re smarter than someone else. If you give them a reason, they’ll always attribute your intelligence to luck, and you’ll have the upper hand every single time.”

He shrugged. “You do have to brook them treating you like a superficial dilettante from now until the day you die, but…”

“Small price to pay for real power,” Ed said.

This grin was different. And worse. Way hotter. Ed hated him. It was so warm in here.

“Precisely.” He finally set the thrice-damned fork down, gestured to the tiramisu, and then folded his hands. “Please, go ahead.”

“Nah,” Ed said. “You went to all the trouble, and everything—you should at least get the first bite.”

“I insist,” Roy said. “My chef honor is on the line again.”

Ed made sure to roll his eyes very expansively before reaching forward to carve off a bite. “I’m gonna start counting how many times you say that, and when you hit twelve, you’re on probation.”

Roy put just the tip of the fork tines into his mouth again, the bastard—“What happens if I’m deliberately bad?”

“I kick your ass and empty your refrigerator,” Ed said, trying to ignore the way his heart had just skipped two beats and only barely stumbled through the third. “In that order. Next question.”

Roy didn’t even blink, though he did somehow make the grin even worse as he nodded to Ed’s fork with his still positioned like a weapon or a sex toy or both.

“How is it?” he asked.

Ed hadn’t even put it in his mouth yet.

…he was not going to say that out loud.

“Let’s find out,” he said instead.
There were so many problems with this whole situation—with Ed, that was; with Ed being the one in the situation in question—that he couldn’t say ‘the problem’ anymore. The entity itself was a giant amalgam of such a large number of individual problems that they defied any human ability to list.

One of them, though, was that his sheer lack of any kind of experience that other people would probably qualify as a normal relationship meant that he had no idea what was supposed to happen at any point. The typical milestone classifications seemed mythological from here—it didn’t help, certainly, that they’d mixed everything up from the very beginning and kissed like animals before they’d ever addressed one another as more-than-acquaintances, but mostly he was pretty sure that most of it was him. He hadn’t ever done it properly, so he couldn’t find a frame of reference, so he didn’t have a damn clue what he was supposed to do after the dinner part.

Was the cooking for him thing just a way of trading for sex? Some kind of guarantee-slash-bribe, or —? Maybe that was cynical, but then… what? Was he supposed to say thank you and start for the door, and deliver a goodnight kiss on the way out steamy enough to make Roy ask him back next week—and that was the understood occasion for the sex trade? They’d already gotten naked once; was it just expected that he’d put out every single time they were alone together? What—

“Hang on,” Roy said.

He was washing; Ed was drying. Ed was pretty sure the panel between the cabinets directly in front of him was, in fact, a little dishwasher, but he wasn’t rude enough to ask.

He paused, though, and Roy lifted the plate he’d been working on out of his hands and turned it over.

“Hmm,” Roy said. “What’s wrong with it?”

Ed stared at him. “Huh?”

Roy held it up for scrutiny like he thought he was Vana White with a prize card. “The plate. I can’t tell what’s wrong with it. Or were you glaring at something else?”

On instinct—he knew better; he did; he knew he could never trust those damn things—Ed stuck his tongue out.

But Roy just—laughed.

Life as Ed had known it for twenty years had ceased to exist. Roy was something else entirely—an alien, possibly; an unprecedented and inexplicable anomaly, at the very least. He never did what Ed anticipated, but somehow that always turned out to be a good thing—a nice thing. Somehow the unpredictability of it never felt unsafe.

“Sorry,” Roy said, for maybe the billionth time tonight, as though he was the one being disgustingly childish here. “I shouldn’t have—none of my business; not my place. I was just concerned maybe it was something I’d done.”

“No,” Ed said. He’d just barely bitten off Not yet, but barely counted. “Just—I wasn’t sure—what—y’know. What you… wanted to do… tonight. I mean—I know you’re busy as hell and shit, so if you’ve got other stuff you need to get done, that’s totally fine, and I’ll get out of your hair, just—”
Plates moved; Roy’s hands dried themselves on a little towel hanging from the oven door, and then the left one brushed over Ed’s shoulder, and Roy leaned in and—

Kissed his forehead.

Which was gross. It was gross and terrible and schmaltzy and putrid, and Ed never wanted him to do it again.

Ever.

Obviously.

“You are more than welcome,” Roy said, “to stay as long as you like. The only thing you’re not welcome to do is stay longer than you like, because I’d hate for you to feel like you were stuck here at any time you didn’t want to be.”

It took Ed a second to process that. It sounded strange for a reason he couldn’t parse initially, and then it occurred to him—he had always, always felt like he was the one that other people were stuck with. He was the person in every single relationship that had to be tolerated. He was the burden—the weight. He was the problem. It never went the other way around.

“I’m not,” he said. “I mean—I don’t. Feel stuck, I mean. I do want… I just—don’t really know what being here’s supposed to look like. Is all.”

“There’s nothing in particular that it’s supposed to look like,” Roy said, setting a hand on the countertop and leaning on it. “It’s up to us to decide together what we want it to be at any given moment. Which—admittedly, it can be a bit intimidating going off-script, but I’ve never found the ‘supposed to’ patterns to be much of any help anyway. You mentioned that you wanted to get a start on finals, didn’t you?” He lifted the hand so that he could use it to sweep his hair back. Ed was furious, and also loved it. “I happen to have it on good authority,” Roy said, “that I am an excellent study buddy.”

“Oh, yeah?” Ed said. “Whose authority is that?”

“Mine,” Roy said. “Trust me; in a matter of about two years, I’ll be a doctor.”

“Of philosophy,” Ed said.

“Still counts,” Roy said.

“You’re going to be one of those insufferable people who puts ‘PhD’ after their name everywhere and insists people address them that way, aren’t you?” Ed asked.

“I think ‘insufferable’ is a strong word,” Roy said. “I’ll be a minor plague. Doctor ‘Minor Plague’ Mustang. That has a lovely ring to it.”

“Eew,” Ed said.

“I beg your pardon,” Roy said. “I think it’s brilliant. I think I’m going to get it on a T-shirt.”

“That’s your birthday present now,” Ed said.

He paused.

He’d just—
Committed to sticking with this until whenever the hell Roy’s birthday was, hadn’t he?

“When is that?” he managed, despite having leapt to the precipice of the terror spiral, where you could see all the way down. “I gotta plan ahead.”

“Christmas,” Roy said. At Ed’s—predictable, probably, but justified all the same—startlement, he grimaced. “It’s a pain. But at least it’s a pain that’s easy to remember.”

“No kidding,” Ed said.

He didn’t have to say it.

In fact, he probably shouldn’t; probably he should just—let it go; counting chickens was for children who were still trying to learn their numbers; he knew better by now.

“It’s, um,” he said. “That’s—funny, ’cause—mine’s—Valentine’s Day.”

Roy stared at him.

Ed swallowed.

“You’re joking,” Roy said.

“Nope,” Ed said.

“That is the most statistically implausible thing I’ve heard in a long time,” Roy said. He raised both eyebrows, and then he peeled the apron off and hung it on a little magnetic hook stuck to the side of the fridge, and Ed obviously did not watch the back of his shirt to see if maybe it’d shift up far enough to show a strip of skin and make Ed hungry all over again in a completely different way.

“Hang on. I’ll show you my driver’s license to prove it if you show me yours.”

“I believe you,” Ed said, maybe a little bit desperately. “And—I mean—my picture is... crap. It’s really crap. It’s crap on a level you wouldn’t—it’s, like, you’d dump me on the spot just for being the same person who’s in that photo, because if I’m capable of looking that bad, you just don’t wanna risk it. It’s that crap.”

Roy was digging in his bag, but he looked up with a faintly wounded expression. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“You haven’t seen it yet,” Ed said.

“Mine’s not exactly a flattering portrait either,” Roy said, “although I’ve been told they let me off easy. I was also warned in advance and spent a lot of time on my hair, and I gave them the three-quarters-profile angle and smiled even though they told me not to.”

He stood—which was a shame, because when he was leaning over to rummage, his ass was sublime—and brought his wallet over.

“Oh, no,” Ed said. “If you show me, then I have to show you, and that—” He looked despite himself. “Holy shit, you liar; that’s a great picture. You look like a model.” He bit off the as usual that wanted to follow that, but it was already too late.

“Do I?” Roy asked, looking positively delighted now. At least that was something. Grudgingly, Ed had to admit that making that asshole happy felt... really, really good. “Thank you.” The eyebrows went up again. “I’m sure yours isn’t nearly as bad as you’re making it out to be.”
“I look like I died,” Ed said. “Twice. And decomposed a little, and then died again, and then walked through a hurricane and snacked on some lemon rind.” He took a deep breath, let it out, and braced himself for the inevitable… whatever it would be, with Roy. Roy was in control of himself ninety-eight percent of the time and a loose damn cannon the other two, it seemed like. You had to watch in the first instant to know what he really felt.

Ed fished his wallet out of his pocket, keeping one eye on Roy’s expression as he eased his driver’s license out of the pocket where it lived and cautiously passed it over.

“Read ’em and weep,” he said.

“Oh,” Roy said, trying—but not very hard—to fight an enormous grin. “Oh, dear. You do look a bit… peaky.”

“Thanks,” Ed said.

“In a cute way,” Roy said, handing it back.

“Like fucking hell,” Ed said.

“I mean it,” Roy said. “Your eyes aren’t brown, though.”

Ed’s hand ceased cooperating, and the corner of the card veered back out of the little slot. “What?”

“They’re not,” Roy said. “They’re—some kind of a hazel. They’re much too light to be brown.”

Ed gave him a look for a second before focusing intently on shoving the damn ID back into place. “I guess they left out the check-box for that one on the form. They look pretty brown to me.”

“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me,” Roy said, kind of softly; but before Ed could argue, he went on: “Isn’t it remarkable? All of these ostensibly dissimilar places—photo ID offices across the world, the DMV, passport offices; all of them in different physical locations, with different configurations of windows and lights—and yet they are fundamentally the same damn place. United by their immutable inability to produce a halfway-decent photo of any human being on the planet.”

“Maybe it’s where the fairies ended up,” Ed said. “Y’know, after they got chased out of all the forests and shit. Started possessing cameras right and left and realized it was a pretty lucrative business where they could still hit humans right in the vanity, where it really hurt.”

It was a stupid thing to have said, but yet again Roy wasn’t treating it like one—instead, Roy’s eyes had lit up like he honestly thought that what Ed had just said was delightful.

Was this what it was supposed to be like?

Were you supposed to just—*talk* to someone you cared about, in a situation like this? Someone who wasn’t even related to you but kept just… listening? So receptively that you never had to be scared they’d start making fun?

Christ, Ed’s life was such a mess. That had to be something normal people had figured out a long, long time ago.

“I think we’ve cracked it,” he said before reality could catch up and remember to fuck him over. “Good thing we got two top-notch scientists working on that one, huh?”

“Sherlock Holmes would be so proud he’d add us on Facebook,” Roy said. His smile twisted
wicked, and he held a hand up, palm flat, at about the level of Ed’s forehead. “Maybe… upper-middle notch?”

“Oh, my God,” Ed said. “Fuck you; if you weren’t so damn old that Sherlock Holmes was the only detective you’ve ever heard of, ’cause you precede all the network TV crime shows by a couple’a centuries at least—”

Roy laughed, bright and beautiful, and it was just so damn hard to hate him when he was so… everything he was.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I honestly couldn’t help it. I’ll—try harder to bite my lip next time. I promise. You were talking about studying—I have an idea.”

“If it involves you giving me the answers to the final,” Ed said, “I’m going to have to speak to the ethics committee. Right after I take the test, you understand.”

“Of course,” Roy said. “You have to be sure that I was actually giving you illicit information before you turn me in. It’s only fair.”

“Right,” Ed said. “Gotta be fair about cheating, after all.”

They looked at each other for a long second.

Ed cracked a smile first. He couldn’t help it. He had to give Roy the point for that round, although it wasn’t an entirely level playing field given that one of them had official, presumably somewhat snooty theater training, and one of them had just lied to the police a lot as a kid.

“Well,” Roy said, “failing that, I have a new study strategy that’s been generating a lot of excitement.”

“And by that you mean ‘You just made it up’,” Ed said.

“Of course,” Roy said. “I’m a scientist. Data is whatever I say it is.”

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that,” Ed said.

“Perfect,” Roy said. “Pretending we didn’t hear things is also a trade secret. Here, bring your stuff.”

Ed couldn’t kick the wariness—that wasn’t built-in; he knew that; it was learned, and taught, and trained, which meant that maybe some day he’d be able to go back—but it wasn’t quite strong enough to stop him from following Roy right up to the point where the bastard flopped down on the Nameless Couch with a lab notebook, hiked one knee up against the couch back, and gestured benevolently to the space between his legs.

Ed’s stomach dropped.

“Oh,” Roy said. “Oh, shit, no—I meant—just sit down. If you want to, I mean. It’s studying and cuddling at the same time. It’s brilliant. That’s all.”

By painstaking degrees, Ed’s stomach clambered back up into place and tried to settle there. “Study-cuddling?” he said slowly.

“Exactly,” Roy said. “It’s an extremely efficient multitasking technique that I just decided the exam board is raving about.”

“Uh huh,” Ed said.
Carefully—carefully—he sat. And then he shifted, an inch or so at a time. And then he tried, very hard, to stop his heart from clenching as he leaned backwards until he met Roy’s chest.

To be fair, it was pretty fucking comfortable.

“That’s okay?” he managed. His leg. What the fuck was he supposed to do with his leg? There was room to just… stretch it out there on the cushions. Disaster averted. “You’re not… I’m not cutting off any circulation or anything?”

“Nothing I can’t afford to lose,” Roy said brightly.

There was a long pause. He hadn’t meant it like… that. Obviously. Nobody ever did.

“Oh, my God,” Roy said, and it was a good thing, in a way, that Ed would’ve had to crane his neck all the way around like the girl in The Exorcist to have seen his expression. The tone of voice was enough.

He didn’t want to be here; he didn’t want to be this—didn’t want to be a goddamn fucking buzzkill every time, even when it wasn’t his fault, just by existing—

“I didn’t—” Roy said. “I’m so sorry; I didn’t—even think; I just—”

“It’s okay,” Ed said. Mostly it even was. “If I had to pick between the leg and being all cozy with people, I’d still be saying sayonara to that son of a bitch.”

He felt Roy relax behind him, which was sort of an extraordinary thing in its own right, no matter what the circumstances were. “Still—I—I’m sorry. I am. It—”

“Stick around long enough,” Ed said, cracking his textbook open, “and you’re gonna get a lot more ‘What happened?’ ‘Oh, you know, velociraptors’ in your life.”

“I think that sounds delightful,” Roy said.

“Good,” Ed said, whether or not he believed it. “So are we gonna do this, or what? Study-cuddling, I mean.”

There was another pause, of an entirely different character.

“Studdling,” they both said at once.

This time, Ed did have to twist around, lack of demonic possession be damned. Or… un-damned, possibly, in this particular case. Or—something?

Roy was grinning at him. “Now it has a catchy name, so I can patent it.”

“Is that how that works?” Ed asked. “You better cut me in when you start making millions.”

“Not a chance,” Roy said.

“We said it at the same time,” Ed said. “At the very least, you gotta buy me a Coke for the jinx factor.”

“You didn’t call it,” Roy said.

“Retroactive jinx,” Ed said.
“You can’t jinx retroactively,” Roy said.

“Can now,” Ed said. “Because I said so.”

Roy looked at him with more than a smidgeon of despair. “I can tell that you’re an older sibling, now that I think about it.”

At least it was Ed’s turn to smirk. He made sure he got a good one in before he swiveled back around towards his book and settled carefully against Roy.

“I want twenty percent in royalties,” he said. “Hey—Royalties.”

Before he knew what was happening, there were two arms wrapped tightly around his torso from behind.

“You,” Roy said, “are wonderful. Please don’t stop.”

Ed’s face was on fire. “I—well—okay. I mean—I dunno what I did, but—I’ll—try.”

Roy kissed his temple and then sat back.

“You’re weird,” Ed said.

“Because I like you?” Roy asked.

Ed could feel the tops of his ears burning. Probably there was some steam. “Actually… yeah.”

“I think I can live with that,” Roy said.

Somehow, despite all odds—and Ed had always had a tendency to interpret odds as a mathematical challenge, which was encouraging as hell with everything except cancer remission rates—the newly-christened studdling system actually worked. Ed felt cozy as shit, and he got a lot of reading done, and he took a bunch of notes, and he felt like the time was extremely intellectually valuable. Once it sort of clicked in his head that Roy wasn’t going to slide out from under him and shout Gotcha! at any given moment, the environment really seemed to help him to relax. Roy’s fingers occasionally carding through his ponytail certainly didn’t hurt.

If anything, it might’ve been too comfortable—once he started to flag, he found himself leaning further and further back into Roy, and before he knew it, he’d just sort of… dropped his head, and he was nestled up against Roy’s chest with his face more or less pressed to Roy’s neck, resting his eyes for a second.

Roy’s temple touched his forehead, and then Roy gently leaned a little weight on him, but it was… nice. It felt nice. Not too heavy; just… good.

“Would you like to stay over?” Roy asked softly.

“Dunno,” Ed said. Would like—stupid words, when you thought about it. The whole conditional tense was stupid. Would, should, ought—meaningless. Meaningless temptation; just distracting. There were things you could do, and were planning to do; there were cans and wills. The rest of it was drivel. The rest of it was wishing and daydreaming as hard as you could bear.

When you were done dreaming, you woke up. And it was fucking cold out here.

“I think you should,” Roy said, which probably meant Ed hadn’t managed to say any of that out loud. Most likely that was a good thing; his vehement grammar rants tended to be somewhat
“Yeah?” he got out. “Why?”

“Because it’s late,” Roy said. “And dark. And it’s a long way. Not that I wouldn’t drive you, but still. And this bed’s much bigger and softer than the one in your dorm—unless I am greatly mistaken, and a lot of things have changed since I was an undergrad. And here you don’t have to share the bathroom with anyone. And I’m a much better alarm clock than someone coming home from a party at five in the morning and vomiting right outside your door.”

“Did that happen to you?” Ed asked.

“No comment,” Roy said. “Would you like to? Stay, that is. Not vomit outside the door.”

“Can’t I do both?” Ed asked.

Roy’s next breath huffed out as a sleepy sort of laugh, and that was so… cute. The bastard. He was so cute. “If it would make you happy… Sure. Go right ahead. Aim for the bucket, if you don’t mind.”

Turning thoughts over caused much more trouble for Ed’s poor brain when it was actively seeking unconsciousness, and he kept having to drag it back from the brink of sleeping. “Do you want me to?”

“Aim for the bucket?” Roy said.

“Stay,” Ed said.

“Of course,” Roy said. Like it was just that fucking simple; like— “I just thought it might make a better case if I presented the reasons it was beneficial to you instead. Marketing. Or something.”

“Or something,” Ed said. “Do I get a free gift with purchase?”

“Anything I can afford,” Roy said.

“S’there coffee?” Ed said.

“Yes,” Roy said. “I bought a tiny French press. The woman at the store looked like she wanted to punch me out when I said I didn’t know coffee from coconuts, but when I promised her it was for someone who did, she made some recommendations.”

“You’re so fucking nice,” Ed mumbled.

“Thank… you?” Roy said.

“Mean it,” Ed said. “Don’t… get why you’re… like that. S’a pain.”

“Hm,” Roy said, which was vastly unhelpful, but Ed couldn’t fault him too much given the lead-up. “Should I stop?”

“No,” Ed said—straight from the heart before his head could interfere. He wondered if Roy could hear it. “Fuckin’…” He had to lever himself up enough to straighten his right leg out so that he could get a hand into his pocket. “Gotta… text Ling. Probably he won’t care, though. Too busy groveling to Lan Fan, hopefully. Thanks for that, by the way.”

“For what?” Roy asked.
“The advice,” Ed said, tapping into his text log. “On how to get him to tell her about the shit with that other chick. Never would’ve… drama like this, with people who treat each other bad on purpose—it’s like a foreign fuckin’ language for me.”

“Oh, my God,” Roy said. “That was you?”

Ed looked up from the screen. “Oh. Right. Yeah, it was.”

“I wish I’d had a better answer,” Roy said.

Ed dragged himself far enough upright to check to see if Roy was kidding. Didn’t look like it, although admittedly the sleepiness had blurred his vision a little bit.

“It was a great answer,” he said. “It worked. I—huh. Sorry. I sorta—forget. I guess once I merged it all in my head, I sorta forgot what I’d said where.”

Roy smiled, but there was a funny sort of sadness to it.

Well—‘funny’ figuratively. Nothing friggin’ amusing about it; it made Ed’s guts go all twisty in a split-second.

“That makes sense,” he said.

“Then why are you makin’ that face?” Ed asked.

Roy cleared every trace of it instantly. “What face?”

“The one you had on a second ago,” Ed said, “before I pointed it out.”

Roy grimaced. “You’re getting much too good at this.”

“Don’t you try to distract me,” Ed said.

Roy sighed, apparently because he was still a melodramatic piece of shit even if he was kind of great, too. “All right, all right, just—it’s… interesting to me that you’d say that. Because to me, they’re—we’re—not the same person. Casanova and I, I mean. I suppose he’s… well, of course he came from somewhere; of course he originated from something genuine, but… I took that aspect and expanded it into a character who acts as a mouthpiece for some of my real thoughts. He’s what I’d like to be, if I were to turn that persona on regularly, but… he isn’t… that isn’t… me. Not really.”

Ed heaved himself up off of the couch and directed his stagger towards his backpack. “That’s okay,” he said, bending over to start shoving his textbook back into it. “I like you better.”

He could practically hear Roy starting to grin. Again with the warm-fuzzies. Maybe he was sick? It could be a disease. Problem was, if he Googled his symptoms, WebMD would assure him that a periodic, unexplained schmoopy warmth in the pit of his stomach was an incontrovertible indication that he was moments from death.

“Are you sure?” Roy asked.

“Depends,” Ed said, collecting his towel and crap instead. “Is Casanova gonna let me borrow his shampoo?”

“I don’t know that Casanova showers,” Roy said, and Ed had to turn and raise an eyebrow at him for that. “He strikes me as the type who mystically remains clean no matter what happens to him. Which would also explain why he doesn’t have an STD by now.” The grin tilted cheesy and spread
broader. “You’re more than welcome to *my* shampoo, however.”

“Thank you,” Ed said. “I’ll try to leave you some.”

“Use it all,” Roy said. “Your hair deserves the very best. If a bottle of shampoo is the only price I have to pay for even five minutes of you all damp with your hair down, I’m making out like a bandit.”

“We can make out however you want later,” Ed said.

…shit. That one had definitely been out loud.

Roy now had a face on that made it look like a candy store had materialized around him, though, so maybe that was all right.

“Uh,” Ed said. “Be right back.”

It wasn’t his most graceful exit, but it also didn’t even feature on the list of the worst ones, so he’d take it. Plus he was pretty sure that he could feel Roy’s eyes on his ass as he scurried for the bathroom, so it probably didn’t matter very much that he’d said anything at all.

He turned the shower on cold to start, albeit more because he could feel a creeping blush of embarrassment biding its time than because he wanted to jump the bastard whose soap he was about to lather all over himself slowly—although it was a bit of both.

He couldn’t help wondering, though—

Why had Roy said all of that? The Casanova stuff. Ed had brought it up, yes, which was why he’d said it, but—what had he been thinking when he did?

Casanova was a genuine facet of a human being, whether or not he was the whole picture. One face of a gemstone was still pretty damn critical to the structure, even if there was a plane directly opposite; even if just the one piece would be two-dimensional on its own. Even if the narrative voice was exaggerated, and the stories were invented, and the whole thing was a ploy to generate the kind of hot-and-bothered word of mouth that had landed Ed on the blog in the first place—it came from a real place. It wasn’t, at the heart, a novel. It was an advice blog. And Roy hadn’t corrected the advice that Casanova had given to Ed; there were no disclaimers, and the values and the judgments that Ed had read there all aligned with the little snippets Roy had given of his past. It all added up.

Besides which—

Ed had sure as hell met the Casanova side of Roy Mustang at that stupid party, on the stairs—and again, the first time he’d been here; Roy had come on like a fucking forest fire, blindingly bright up close and so hot that the whole world had to feel it; tearing through trees so fast that Ed had never stood a fucking chance—

So what was the purpose of saying what he’d said? Sure, he wasn’t Casanova all the time, but it wasn’t like the fiction didn’t factor in.

Was he trying to make Ed feel safe or something? Did he think that if he pretended to excise the parts of himself that Ed had expressed reservations about before, somehow they’d… move faster? Go further? In every sense of both of those phrases?

He was changing the rules of the game while they were playing, and without knowing how to score the points, it wasn’t like Ed could be sure, but it was tough to imagine a scenario here where he
didn’t lose, wasn’t it?

He had to stop thinking like that—he knew he did. He knew it wasn’t fair to either of them; he knew he had to give this thing a fighting chance if he wanted it to go anywhere, regardless of the road or the direction—

But knowing didn’t make it a whole lot easier to do.

He was just going to have to—wait. He was just going to have to wait and see.

Which would’ve been a much more appealing prospect if he was a much more patient person.

Well, shit.

The kitchen was a lot darker when he opened the bathroom door, which automatically sent his brain into stealth mode. He crept out as quietly as he could—which was about par for the course with his track record of sneakiness, considering the artificial leg, the crap-ass balance, and the poor night vision. Arguably two of those things weren’t even his own fault. At least one and a half. He’d fallen over a lot as a kid, too; he remembered that much.

“In here,” Roy’s voice called from the bedroom, and he’d left about two feet of space open between those stupid accordion-style doors, but there wasn’t a whole lot of light in there, either. That had been part of Ed’s confusion; everything had been so dim that his brain had sort of jumped to the conclusion that maybe Roy had gone to sleep, and—

But there was—a little bit of light. Inconsistent; flickery.

Candles?

Roy had lit candles in the fucking bedroom?

Ed tried to make himself square his shoulders, hold his head high, and stride right in—he did. He tried. He told himself, in a firm internal monologue kind of voice, that that was what they were going to do, and he wasn’t putting up with any bullshit arguments.

His body shuffled forward, taut with uncertainty, and peeked through the gap between the doors anyway.

He wasn’t entirely sure what he expected. A pretty significant part of his brain had skipped to the end of this scenario, whatever the intervening particulars, and short-circuited; another part of him was downright dead certain that Roy would be sprawled out atop the white sheets, buck naked and decorated with rose petals. It hadn’t decided yet whether it liked that idea or not.

There were candles—two of them, in fact. Tall and kind of wide, it seemed like, not that Ed had much damn experience with candles; he hadn’t exactly lived in the kinds of households and/or warehouses where décor was a big deal. Roy had set one on the nightstand on the far side of the bed from him—the one Ed had managed to collide with last time, as part of the general demonstration of incompetence that he’d exhibited on the fly—and the other on the little table by the window.

Roy himself was not naked on top of the sheets, which was ninety percent relief and ten percent…
something else Ed wasn’t going to think about too much, but the edge tasted like disappointment, and he didn’t think he liked that thought. Rather, Roy was tucked into bed with what looked like a novel in hand, wearing what appeared to be pajama-ready old clothes again. He was smiling. Ed was doomed.

“Is that—” How hard could you sniff the air without looking like either a dog or a drug addict? “… lavender?”

“Supposedly it’s soothing,” Roy said. “Could be a myth that’s turned into a placebo, but they cost the same as all of the other scents, so I figure it’s worth a try.”

“And to think,” Ed said. “If we hadn’t made out at that party, I never would’ve known you’re such a die-hard romantic that you make Hallmark look like a bunch of hacks.”

Roy’s face started to transition into wince mode. “Is it too much?”

Ed blinked. “Too much for what?”

“For you,” Roy said. “Is it too—”

“No,” Ed said. It had come out so smooth and so automatic that he knew it had to be true—which begged the question, of course, of why that was the case. Probably it should have bothered him, right? Probably this was coming on too strong; this was too sappy; this was overwhelming. Probably most people would balk. Probably… probably lots of things.

But his heart and his head had both said It’s okay before he’d had a chance to flip it over and look at the bottom for cracks.

Why was that?

His feet carried him over towards the open side of the bed while he tried to tease a recognizable thread out of the tangle in his brain. Roy waited—laid in wait, maybe, propped up on one elbow and watching him close.

“I mean,” Ed said, “it’s—you’re—laying it all out on the table, right? Like… maximum date night. If I can handle this, I should be able to take anything you’ve got. It’s—genuine. I guess. It feels like it. I dunno.” He’d reached the edge of the bed. Roy had drawn the sheets partway back—in a suspiciously nice, even little fold-triangle, no less, which had to mean he’d sat there and arranged it for at least a couple of seconds to make sure it looked perfect.

Ed looked down at his feet. Roy had missed out on two of the advantages of being here instead of at the dorms: he didn’t have to try to hide his left foot from anybody’s view; and he didn’t have to roll his pajama legs up to keep them from dragging in the puddles on the bathroom floor.

It came at a cost, though, didn’t it? Everything did. You never got anything for free. Life didn’t work like that.

“So,” Ed managed, trying to look up from his toes and finding them disastrously magnetic, “did you wanna—fuck, or—?”

There was a very long pause. His heart started beating too hard against the back of his sternum, then climbed up it until it found its way into his esophagus. It crawled up that next, banging harder all the while, and he wasn’t honestly sure what he was going to do if made it all the way up to his mouth. Spit it out, maybe. That would be a relief, wouldn’t it, in a way?
“I—” Roy said. One syllable was tough to judge by, but it didn’t sound especially eager or randy or spine-shiveringly rough. “I mean—I always—sort of want to, in a conceptual way, because you’re stunning, and I’m one of those people who… where sometimes fingertips just don’t seem sensitive enough, and when you see something truly wonderful, you want to put your tongue on it, but—”

Ed had to chance a glance up at that. Roy’s eyes were big and soft and sincere. Maybe word-vomit was better than heart-vomit in a case like this.

“Okay,” Ed said. “For people, that’s… I mean, it sort of makes sense, but—like—does that apply to, like, puppies? You wanna lick puppies?”

Roy blinked once.

Then he pressed his lips together, and then he dropped to the mattress and let out the laugh.

“Yes,” he said. “You’ve discovered all my dark secrets tonight—lavender candles and puppy-licking. I’m a reprobate. I’ll understand if you need to leave.”

“Fucking puppy-lickers,” Ed said. He sat down on the edge of the bed and slowly—just in case; he hadn’t really heard a concrete answer; he was basing this on assumptions of other people’s feelings, which almost never went well for him—started to roll his pajama pants up so he could take his leg off. “You guys are the real root of all evil. What about floors? What if you saw a really impressive marble floor or something? Would you want to lick that?”

“I regret everything I have ever said,” Roy said.

“I’ve seen some really nice bathrooms,” Ed said. “Y’know, in rich people’s houses, or nice hotels, or whatever. Fancy as fuck. What about, like, the window displays at Macy’s? Do you lick those?”

“The Christmas ones have candy canes in them,” Roy said. “It only seems natural.”

“Ever get removed by security for messing up the windows?” Ed asked.

“No comment,” Roy said.

It occurred to Ed that he was still sitting on the edge of the bed, holding his pajama pants leg in both hands.

“Um,” he said.

Apparently that was all he had to say, because Roy reached over and pushed the bedclothes down further, mussing up all of his careful work making them look like a Martha Stewart Magazine centerfold or some shit.

“Please,” he said. “Get in, get comfortable, get cozy.”

“Not sure I can do all of those at once,” he said.

The mattress bounced a little as Roy shifted, and Ed—

Was it intentional, or was it just fortuitous? Roy setting the book aside gave him the perfect opportunity to ditch the prosthetic without feeling like Roy was watching his every move from behind, and…

And he wasn’t sure what to do with any of this.
Was this normal? This whole... snuggle and sleep in the same bed, without sleeping together, on the first official date thing? Did it matter if it was normal? Maybe it shouldn’t have been. Not much else had ever been “normal” in his stupid life; maybe this fit into his existence in the first place because it wasn’t, and couldn’t have been. Nothing else about it seemed congruous with the life he was leading. Maybe it was the weirdness that made it possible at all.

He settled down and rolled onto his side and looked at Roy, who was doing likewise opposite him. Roy smiled. And then Roy reached out and tuck a lock of hair back behind Ed’s ear, half-frowning without any real dismay when it instantly slipped away again.

“Warm enough?” Roy asked.

“Yeah,” Ed said. And he was—but it was the funny kind that had started right in the center of his chest. It didn’t smell like lavender, but it sure as hell felt like a candle flame. “You?”

Roy’s knuckles grazed his cheek, and Roy’s smile grazed all the raw, soft, bruised and scabbing-over places in his soul.

“Perfect,” Roy said.

Christ. Roll credits. Ed’s life was officially a goddamn movie, and he wasn’t even mad.

There weren’t any birds chirping. He had to give it that. Waking up slowly, feeling warm and gently cocooned, and gazing blearily across a blurry expanse of soft white sheets towards the hazy outline of a window across the room was so idyllic that he wondered for a moment who he was—but no birds. No wildlife noises.

Also, there was dried drool on his face.

So probably he was still himself.

He pushed himself up on one elbow and started rubbing at his eyes with his free hand. If he was seeing a swathe of empty bed, that meant Roy was... somewhere. Somewhere else. By definition. But—still. Where had he gone? He wouldn’t have fucked off far, would he? It would’ve been stupid to leave somebody you’d had one sort-of-date with alone in your damn apartment; you never knew what people were capable of; you never knew people. Or at least not until you’d spent a hell of a lot more time with them than that.

As he raised his head, though, he heard some faint noises from the direction of the kitchenette, which must have meant Roy hadn’t abandoned him.

He really needed some damn coffee. That thought shouldn’t have been even half as reassuring as it was.

Something smelled obscenely good, which helped distract him from the impulse to over-think the fuck out of that one. If it wasn’t pancakes, it was waffles, and either way, Ed was considering asking half-seriously if he could just move in.

He rolled over, sat up, remembered that his leg was on the floor, scooted awkwardly, and stretched down to get it.
Would it have been too weird if he’d just... gotten up? Tied his pajama pants leg in a knot like he used to do at home; hopped across the room to the door; supported himself on the wall, and then the couch, and then sat down at the table, and...?

That took some getting used to. It’d taken some getting used to for him. If he was being honest—there were still moments he almost forgot. There were still instants, sometimes, where he looked down and expected it to be there; expected himself to be—

Well.

In any case.

It was too early for that sort of thing. People needed time to acclimate to the idea, first; and then he had to ease them into it a little bit by taking it off here and there when he was already sitting down and stuff like that. The hopping thing kind of freaked people out—they either recoiled away or reached out to help him, and neither of those was really very useful.

Maybe if he could get a good enough read on Roy, he’d know which one it would be before he tried it.

Maybe a lot of things.

He put the leg on, carefully shifted his weight onto it and the other one, and stood. One step at a time was the only way to take just about anything.

He pried the accordion-door open as gingerly—and as minutely—as he could and peeked out through the gap. He wasn’t entirely sure why, since it wasn’t like Roy didn’t know he was here or something, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Turned out Roy was making pancakes. And he’d cut up a bunch of fruit. And he had syrup and butter and orange juice out on the table, and there was a box of cereal on the counter, and a bag of powdered sugar, and—

“Holy shit,” Ed said.

Roy spun on his heel fast enough that Ed was worried he’d shove his sleeve into the stovetop flame, but somehow he evaded that disaster like a pro. “Ah—good morning.”

“Oh,” Ed said. “Yeah. Um—g’morning. Hi. You—” He gestured, somewhat helplessly. “This... holy shit. You didn’t have to make real food.”

“It would have been terribly gauche to invite you over and serve you Cheez Whiz,” Roy said. “It would have been illegal to serve it for breakfast.”

“Is that in the ethics guide?” Ed asked.

“It’s writ as law in this state,” Roy said. “With a ‘thou shalt’ for good measure. How did you sleep?”

“Fine,” Ed said automatically. Then he actually thought about it. “Um—good. Really good.”

Roy smiled at him. There was an edge on it—some slight rasp of sharpness; nothing aggressive, but Ed had cut himself on tin cans and shards of plastic far more than he’d ever hurt himself with knives.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Roy said.
It was—relief. Wasn’t it? Relief seeping in slow, but the expectations past it were pulled so taut that it didn’t relax them in the least.

“Would you prefer pancakes or waffles?” Roy asked. “Or one of each—several of each, maybe, knowing you. Or I have bacon, and there are still plenty of eggs. I didn’t think to pick up any potatoes for hash browns, I’m afraid, but—”

Ed was still hanging onto the bedroom door. He hadn’t moved through it.

Despite the fact that he hadn’t hit the caffeine yet, however, the remarkably solid sleep had greased up the gears in his brain, and they were turning.

“It doesn’t have to be perfect,” he said. “You don’t have to be perfect.”

Roy stared, spatula in hand, with an expression like someone had just used it to smack him in the face.

“You’re—pretty great,” Ed said. “Just as is. You don’t have to… I dunno. Go, like, full-on implausible rom-com male lead on me here. Although if you do, you should take your shirt off. Just sayin’.”

Roy’s mouth quirked. “Or everything. And then put on the apron.”

That was Casanova talking, wasn’t it?

Except—

Casanova would have said it differently; would have fired it off with a smirk and a cocked hip and tilted his head back and bitten his bottom lip, absolutely confident that he was going to get results. He wouldn’t have delivered it with that lingering hint of uncertainty, like maybe it wasn’t welcome, like maybe it wasn’t good enough—

That part was all Roy.

People were such a muddled nightmare. How were you ever supposed to be able to sort them out?

“I, uh,” Ed said. “That’s—that’d be a different kind of hungry. If you… y’know. Ever felt the need.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Roy said. He raised the pan. “So—?”

“Jeez,” Ed said, finally stepping away from the door. “You know I’ll eat anything, right?”

“Be that as it may,” Roy said, “your preference matters.”

“My preference is you don’t do any more work on my account,” Ed said, trying out a cautious half a grin to make sure it didn’t sound like he was mad that Roy was fussing over him and making all of this amazing stuff, because that wasn’t it at all. “What’s the easiest thing? I’ll eat that.”

Roy looked down at the pan in his hand, and then, remarkably deftly, spatula-scooped its contents out until he’d built a four-pancake stack on the nearest plate. He offered the plate to Ed. “Is that—?”

The compulsory politeness conspired with the hunger to make Ed step forward and take it even as he protested: “I’m not gonna sit here and eat four pancakes while you slave away and shit. Why don’t—let’s split it. Or—here, get another plate; you can have two, and I’ll—”
Roy sat down, holding out a fork. “Splitting it sounds very romantic.”

Ed took the fork, and then set it down so that it wouldn’t distract him from staring. “Only if we eat the same stuff on our pancakes.”

Roy raised an eyebrow. “Do you do something untoward to yours?”

Ed stared at him for another second, then down at the pancakes, then at the wall.

“I need coffee,” he said helplessly.

Roy pushed his chair back.

“No,” Ed said. “Sit your ass down and eat some of this food you just made. I’ll get it.”

“But—” Roy said.

“Yes, sir,” Roy said in a distinctly whimpery version of his regular voice. “Sorry, sir.”

“Eugh,” Ed said, even though he could see Roy grinning.

He couldn’t stop turning this thing over in his head, trying to see all of the contours so that he could figure out the shape of it by mathematical process of elimination, if nothing else.

He wanted to know—how big this was, how sharp it was, how deep it went. Were there rocks at the bottom? What was he wading into here? How far down did it go? He’d never been much of a swimmer, and three limbs limited you in that regard in a way that was difficult to describe to anyone who was used to having all of them available.

On the flip-side, he didn’t want to think about it so much that his stupid, overactive brain tore it into little pieces and blew on all the shreds. It wouldn’t have been the first time he’d destroyed something that way; it just—this was more or less going so well, and—

But what could Roy possibly be getting from it? That was the thing that was tripping him. That was the vertex that looked so pointy that he didn’t want to touch it in case it punctured the skin. Knives and needles.

It didn’t matter, did it? Not yet, anyway—not now. If Roy wanted to be doing all of this, then he would keep doing it, and Ed wasn’t obligated to try to find some way to be… better, or more attractive, or more productive, or just… more. Ed didn’t have to be more. He could just be himself, for now, and if Roy decided later on that wasn’t sufficient, first off, fuck him; and second, it would be on him to say something and ask for whatever he thought was lacking. Trying to anticipate that wasn’t going to help anything. Ed hadn’t been a mind-reader yesterday, and odds weren’t great that he’d wake up one tomorrow.

He just had to cool it. He had to chill. He had to be one of those people who could roll with the punches without having to analyze their trajectory before, during, and after. One of those people who didn’t tense up waiting for the bruises and then prod them every day after until they’d faded out.
Those people were the ones that other people liked, after all. Those people were the ones who landed smoking-hot full-of-prospects boyfriends and then kept them. Those people were the ones who had friends, but also casual friends—acquaintances and classmates who liked them in passing, maybe admired them a little, didn’t think they were weird or awkward or standoffish or know-it-all-y or—

Paninya waved her hand in front of his face.

“Hi,” he said before he’d even blinked it into focus. “What?”

“Nothing,” she said, planting the elbow of her reaching hand on her textbook and then propping her chin up on it. “Just making sure you didn’t get replaced with a really good wax replica.”

“That Madame Tussaud is crafty,” Winry said. “Also, we had a chemistry-ish question.”

“Oh,” Ed said. He dragged his brain down from the clouds, hand over hand, until it was grounded again. “Done deal. Hit me with it.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Hey, guys, sorry for the short update (and for me not getting a chance to answer comments again ;A;)! Today was………. a thing. Possibly several things. The next bit after this is fairly long and continuous, so there was just no way I was gonna get to it. @__@ Hopefully I'll get through the rest tomorrow, and if not, then definitely first thing next week, and we can ring the new year in with… more of whatever all of this is. ^^;

He was trying not to notice whether or not he was feeling Roy’s eyes on his back in their last lab section before the final. Was it arrogant to think that Roy would be looking at him? Presumptuous, or something? Vain? Christ. Roy was a professional. Whether or not they were dating, whether or not he really did think Ed was attractive enough to be distracting, he’d have no trouble keeping it together for a couple of hours here and there twice a week. In addition to being a paid and highly-experienced TA, he was also an actor, so even if his mind wandered, or his face wanted to, he’d be able to keep it under control. And, really, it was none of Ed’s goddamn business who Roy did or didn’t want to look at, so it didn’t matter, and he wasn’t entitled to anything, and he was paying for this class; he was here to learn; they were both here to do an important job-like thing, and—

Rosé was staring at his bangs.

Maybe that was what he’d been feeling. That whole… sensing someone’s eyes on you thing was mostly bullshit anyway, wasn’t it? There was no way to feel the direction of someone’s line of sight. People just pretended they could because it made them feel significant, or powerful, or both.

Rosé saw him looking at her looking at his bangs, and she startled and blushed.

“Sorry,” she said. “Just—sorry. This is a super-personal question, but—do you dye your hair?”

“Huh?” Ed said, brilliantly. “Oh. Uh. No.”

“I didn’t think so,” Rosé said. “Just wondering. I’ve been thinking about doing something new with mine, so I thought maybe if you did, you might have suggestions on, y’know, like, brands and stuff.”

“Sorry,” Ed said. He racked his fumbling brain a little bit. “I’m trying to think if I know anybody who might.”

“Go to the Hot Topic down on Telegraph,” Roy said, from just behind Ed’s shoulder, and then he was coming around and doling out two sheets of paper onto their benchtop— “But don’t go in. Go to the tattoo parlor directly across the street, and ask for Solaris. Say I recommended her. If she’s in, she should be able to give you all of the suggestions you could possibly need.” He did the terrible, unmerciful raised-eyebrows-little-smile as he sauntered off towards the next bench, and he made eye contact with Ed for one heart-clenchingly meaningful moment before returning his attention to Rosé.

“If you’re in the market for some ink, they’re excellent for that, too.”

Ed opened his mouth to say something colossally stupid on so many levels that it would’ve been a record even for him—something like You don’t have any tats.
For one thing, that would’ve been a delightful way to announce to the entire room at once that he’d seen Roy naked.

For another, he didn’t even know that for sure. There were lots of parts of Roy he hadn’t seen just yet; plenty of stretches of skin he’d never laid eyes on, let alone explored, and it was perfectly possible that the mild-mannered chem TA persona—

Well. Ed already knew that there was a lot more to Roy than you could tell at first glance, or second glance, or even after squinting for a while.

Ed wasn’t even trying to pack up slow enough to let everybody else leave so that he and Roy would be alone, but he’d sort of accidentally gotten into the habit, and the rest of the class just sort of vanished, so…

“I suppose I have to tell you my tattoo story now,” Roy said.

His casual-idle-public voice was subtly different from the one he used inside, when they were really alone. Was everybody like that? Maybe Ed had just never noticed. Maybe he’d just never paid that much attention before.

“Only if you want to,” Ed said. “It’s—I mean, it’s really okay if you don’t.”

Roy smiled down at him—no, not down at him; over at him. He needed to stop thinking that; it was absurd. It was clearly a lateral look. Directly sideways. No inclined angles involved. “Do you have time for a coffee?”

Ed felt his mouth pulling taut into a disconcerted half-frown. “Whoa. That kind of a story?”

“It’s not so bad,” Roy said. “But it’s an excellent excuse to waste a little of your time, if you can spare it.”

“I better not have coffee this late,” Ed said. “But—if you wanna—I mean, we could get dinner or something. If you want.”

“Are you up for it?” Roy asked. He held the door; Ed eyed him; the second Ed stopped eyeing him, Roy’s hand brushed against his arm. It probably would’ve been his back again if he hadn’t hiked his backpack up on both shoulders this time. “The crêpe place is very fast, and they’re always empty this late because no one thinks of crêpes as dinner.”

“Except the ex-president of the French club,” Ed said.

“Précisément,” Roy said, more than a touch smugly.

Turned out crêpes were as good for dinner as they were the rest of the time. And not super expensive, although burritos had them beat a thousand times out of a thousand for fullness-per-dollar value. Still, Ed would’ve jumped off the top of a building before he turned down ham and cheese
bundled into a pancake when he could see the batter sizzling and smell the melting brie.

“Okay,” he said when they were settled on the stools at the table in front of the window, watching the colorful—in just about every sense of the word—foot traffic go by. “I’m feeling brave enough to ask. What’s the tattoo story? Did you have a punk phase?” He leaned forward and peered at Roy’s ears as best as he could around the chaotic-but-somehow-still-perfect fall of silky dark hair. There weren’t any traces of tattoo edges peeking past Roy’s hairline, and no piercing holes had sealed over, at least that Ed could find. “I don’t see any evidence of a punk phase. So what was it?”

Roy took a deep breath, followed by a deep draught of Orangina. Ed was momentarily distracted trying to determine if there was any fluid physics or thermodynamic advantage to the rounded shape of the bottle, or whether it was just supposed to suggest an orange so that you forgot that you were drinking carbonated sugar water despite the name. He was willing to bet the glass made a hell of a lot better insulation than aluminum cans, though—surely someone had done a proper study on that. He’d have to look it up.

“Once upon a time,” Roy said, grinning over the mouth of the bottle when Ed rolled his eyes, the bastard, “when Maes and I were together, we were… experimenting.”

He paused. That was a bad sign. Hastily, Ed hacked a big bite of crêpe off with his crappy plastic fork and shoved it into his mouth—partly to fortify himself, and partly in case whatever Roy said managed to kill his appetite.

Nothing this side of a hospital operating room ever had before, but there was a first time for everything, and Roy had been hitting him with so many of those these days that he hardly knew which way was up.

“There had been a night we were both a bit tipsy,” Roy said, “and sharing secret kinks, and we’d both expressed an interest in knife play, so… Several days later—very sober, and much more dextrous; we weren’t complete imbeciles all of the time—we invested in a very nice little blade, and put some plastic down, and then laid out some sheets we weren’t very fond of, and… gave it a shot. Or a cut, I suppose. And it was all going very well, right up until the part where we were enjoying ourselves so much that we didn’t hear the knocking at the door until the maintenance man used the master key and flung it open, which startled Maes so much that he… slipped.”

Ed was eyeing him even harder now. “Where?”

Roy smiled, winsomely.

Then he drew a two-inch, gently curving line on the side of his left ass cheek.

“Oh, my God,” Ed said.

“Quite,” Roy said. “So—I’m howling, Maes is apologizing, the maintenance guy can hear and see just enough to intuit that something he does not want to walk into is taking place in the next room down; he shouts that he’ll come back; Maes tells him to call an ambulance; I scream that I’m fine—all the while bleeding profusely from the ass, I might add”—

Ed couldn’t help laughing, with perhaps a smidge more schadenfreude than was entirely fair to his own damn sorta-boyfriend.

“Typically,” Roy said, “even after we’d stemmed the worst of it—the plastic had been a very fine idea, and my idea, I might add; although I hadn’t exactly anticipated that we’d use it—I refused to go into the ER and explain to them that we’d been having kinky gay sex, and that was why my friend—
with-benefits had just hacked my ass with a sharp object, but it was purely accidental. In addition to which, I really did not want to deal with stitches in that particular spot. So, many butterfly bandages and awkward attempts to sit in class later, it eventually healed into a slightly bigger scar than perhaps would have otherwise been necessary, but it gave me the ability to tell Maes all the time that he’d left his mark on me, or that he should sign above the dotted line.”

Ed had to bite his lip on the next laugh so that he could ask the important questions: “Did he?”

“That’s where the tattoo comes in,” Roy said.

Ed had, unsurprisingly, forgotten what they’d originally been talking about.

“After he died,” Roy said, and Ed wondered if the gut punch had stopped for him; Ed wondered if it still felt like an ice cube plummeting down his esophagus, and his guts contracted at the impact no matter how many years it had been; “everything felt…”

“Empty,” Ed said. “Unreal.”

Roy smiled sadly. “Yes.”

“So you got some ink to help yourself believe it,” Ed said. “‘Cause at least that you could look at. Right?”

Roy gestured to the spot on his ass that he’d indicated before. “I had some old notes he’d left me that he’d signed with stupid little hearts. Solaris forged his signature for me. She was excellent.” He paused. “Then she asked if I wanted to go out for drinks sometime.”

“I mean,” Ed said, “she had been staring at your ass for, like, an hour, right? Anybody would.”

Roy grinned and tossed his head. “Thank you.” The smile twisted. “The fact that I was flirting relentlessly the entire time didn’t hurt. Part of me knew I needed someone right then who was as opposite from Maes as possible, so that nothing about them would remind me of him. And part of me was much less calculating and much more invested in the fact that Solaris is unreasonably hot.”

Ed must have been doing a thing with his face, because Roy leaned forward before he could dodge and kissed the bridge of his nose.

“You are also unreasonably hot,” Roy said, which severed the sputtering that Ed had been doing and left him with nothing but a choking noise. “Albeit in a very different way.”

Ed covered his nose with one hand. “You shouldn’t—do that—where—I mean, somebody could see you.”

“And be so jealous they hurled themselves through the window like the Incredible Hulk and pried you away from me,” Roy said, which at least ramped the dork factor back up.

Ed scowled at him, which was really damn difficult when he was being like that. “You know what I mean.”

Roy set his elbow on the counter and leaned his head down on it. He always managed to look like a magazine cover instead of a dweeb when he did that. What an asshole. “I do. And you’re right. It’s just—very nearly impossible not to reach out and touch you when you’re close enough for it.”

Ed had been eating, hadn’t he? At some point here? He’d been eating, and he’d forgotten that the food was there, and he wasn’t sure if he was still hungry or not. His blood was moving too thickly
and too fast for much of anything else to register.

They looked at each other for a long time—way too long.

“I’m sorry,” Roy said right before Ed cracked and jumped down off the stool and bolted for the door. “Does it—does it scare you? Me saying things like that. I know I do it a lot. And I know it’s—soon. Early. Overwhelming, very likely. I hope it doesn’t sound fake. It’s not. I should really pace myself, but it’s just—it’s been—a while since there was anyone I thought I could be this honest with. I suppose I opened the floodgates on you, which isn’t very fair at all, is it?”

Ed stared at him for a second, but that wasn’t right; he couldn’t do that—so he turned until the stare was going out the window instead, at the people moving by without the slightest inclination that everything in him was toppling.

*Come on, it’s not that big a deal—what, are you scared? You get to a stage, and then it—fixes stuff like this. That’s the whole point. God, I can’t believe this. Never took you for chickenshit. Are you serious? That’s it?*

There was a tree in him—a tree with endless spindly branches like the legs of those bone-pale spiders, always grasping prickle-footed at the contours of his heart. The roots had buried themselves in among his viscera; the trunk had melded with the bottom of his spine. He couldn’t get it out—not now, not yet, not ever.

Maybe it was a good thing. He didn’t know who he’d be without it.

“I—it’s not—that,” Ed said. And it wasn’t, or not completely, which meant he had to figure out what it was. Shit. “Just—no one… ever… talks to me, or about me, or whatever—like that. No one ever has. So it—it’s like my brain just goes right into ‘Well, that’s gotta be made up,’ and then tries to figure out why, so it starts coming up with reasons, and I—freeze up. I guess. I dunno.”

He did feel awfully damn cold.

Roy didn’t move. Ed was watching him with peripheral vision, just in case, trying to make it look natural.

“Do you want me to tone it down?” Roy asked.

Ed felt his shoulders tightening. That was a headache in the making if he’d ever seen one. “I—no. I mean—I don’t want you to… change. I don’t want you to feel like you have to change yourself. That’s stupid. That’s not what this is about.”

“It is about both of us feeling comfortable,” Roy said, softly, “and if this unsettles you… it’s not like this would require a reboot of my entire personality, after all. It’s the same car. It wouldn’t be any trouble to put it into a different gear.”

Ed turned enough to sneak a glance at him. He was still just sort of—smiling. Mildly. A little bit wistful; a little bit sweet.

Fucker.

“The Royota strikes again,” Ed said.

“Come on,” Roy said. “Has to be a Mustang.”

“Not ’til you drive one,” Ed said.
“You have aspirations for me already,” Roy said. “I’m touched.”

There was a pause, and he tilted his head to the side just a little, like a puppy waiting to be patted so it would know you weren’t too mad about the garbage on the floor. Which was fucking ridiculous, for the record, because all of the garbage was Ed’s.

“Does that sound all right?” Roy asked. “Just… slowing it down a little?”

“Yeah,” Ed said before he had time to think, which… well. He was starting to get the damn point by now. His mouth kept bypassing the brain-check. “Sounds good.”

What also sounded good, apparently, was a full fifteen seconds of uninterrupted eye contact when they reached the spot where their routes diverged. This was like a movie. A crap movie. Ed was absolutely disgusted but somehow couldn’t stop.

Roy broke the repugnantly magical silence with a breathless question: “Can I kiss you?”

“I dunno,” Ed said, because Ed was a stupid, stupid moth, and Roy lit the whole world up bright gold. “Can you?”

“Smartass,” Roy said.

“Thanks,” Ed said.

Roy swept an arm up too fast to dodge and tapped a fingertip under his chin. “May I kiss you, you atrocious pedant?”

Ed’s stomach did a horrible warm curl thing. “Not if you’re gonna talk to me like that, asshole.”

“Hell,” Roy said, adding an impressively overstated grimace. “Third time’s the charm. May I kiss you, you charming and delightful pedant whose devotion to semantics I appreciate very much?”

“Maybe,” Ed said.

Roy mimed being stabbed in the heart with an extremely large weapon, which apparently had enough heft to send him staggering while clutching the hilt of whatever it had been.

“Jeez,” Ed said. “All right, all right, just—we should, like—step behind a bush or something. At least. Y’know.”

“Oh,” Roy said, “the humanity.”

“Take it or leave it,” Ed said.

“You leave me no choice,” Roy said. He held a hand out—but low, at waist level, with his fingers loosely extended, which had to mean—

He meant for Ed to take it.

Was that a thing? Was that a normal thing? Was that a thing he was permitted, given this situation, given the dangers, given everything behind them and all the shadowed horrors that might very well
still lie ahead?

Eh… fuck it.

Cautiously, he supposed he had to admit, he reached forward and put his hand in Roy’s.

It felt—nice. He’d figured it would, obviously; Roy had such damn nice hands, but there was something sort of sweet and secure about it that defied description, and that he hadn’t counted on.

The one other time he’d—

Well, that didn’t really matter right now.

“Come on,” Roy was saying, tugging gently, fingers wrapped around his. As if Roy had to tow him; as if Roy’s very flipping being hadn’t drawn him in like Jupiter’s gravity from the beginning, and it had only ever been a matter of time before he fell.

Following, though, let Roy lead him over to a little right-angle-shaped cinderblock wall by the corner of the nearest building; it doubled as a retaining wall for the landscaping above, and it was relatively secluded behind a windowless stretch of the building nearby, and the bike racks petered out before you made it this far, and…

“How’s this?” Roy asked.

“Classy,” Ed said. “Just the way I like it.”

“Excellent,” Roy said. “Classy is my specialty.”

There was a gleam in Roy’s eye, and Ed was sure he was going to get shoved up against the wall—gently, probably; Roy seemed to have a knack for being careful about stuff like that but making it look natural at the same time.

Except—

Roy was stepping into the corner, drawing Ed in towards him, but not pulling very hard. The fingertips of his free hand skimmed up Ed’s chest, up the side of his neck, along his jaw, and then across his cheek—

“Is this all right?” he asked.

He’d put Ed in a position to set the pace—to back away, if he wanted. He’d handed Ed the power to define how fast this went, and how far, and—

That was staggering. It shouldn’t have been; a single subverted expectation shouldn’t have been so groundbreakingly powerful, but somehow…

It was.

And that was even hotter than anything Roy could’ve said or done or implied with a flick of his eyebrow or a twist of his lips.

Ed wanted him.

Ed wanted him so bad—

He leaned in, starting to let his eyes slide shut, hoping for the best—Roy hadn’t exactly washed his mouth out with soap after any of the other times they’d kissed; maybe—
Roy’s hand shifted back enough for his fingertips to slide into Ed’s hair; he used the other to tangle their fingers together and squeezed gently, and then gravity was winning, and their mouths sealed together, and it was remarkable how well that fit. Had evolution done this to him? Making out wasn’t exactly a requirement for the survival of the species, but it sure as hell didn’t hurt.

Roy kissed like it was inevitable—like it was necessary. Roy kissed like it was a fundamental part of his being; Roy kissed like it was a need, not a desire, never a whim. Roy kissed like he meant it; like nothing else in the world would ever measure up; like it was the only thing he knew how to do. Like it was too urgent to wait but too important to hurry. Like he wanted to savor it forever; like he was trying to remember every instant. Like it mattered. Like it was the only thing that did—in this moment, certainly; maybe for a long time.

Ed had to draw back a little so he could catch his breath. The interruption of the oxygen flowing to his brain had apparently shut down his internal censors again. “You’re really—”

Roy’s eyelashes were unfair. The rest of him didn’t even bear talking about. “Mm?”

“You know what,” Ed said.

Roy grinned. His eyebrows arched. He scooped some of Ed’s hair back and tucked it behind his ear. “My telepathy’s been steadily improving, but I’m afraid I’m not quite up to this one.”

Ed rolled his eyes. “Take a wild friggin’ guess.”

Roy lifted their joined hands, turned Ed’s over, and kissed the palm. “That I can do.”

Fancy that. Ed’s face was on fire. “Y—oh, my God, Roy.”

The smiling up at him thing was a menace and a cataclysm and a tragic threat to the fate of the humanity. “Sorry. Couldn’t help myself. That may just tide me over, though. Do I get to see you sometime this weekend?”

“Sure,” Ed said. He should’ve specified a limit on it, or a condition, or a time that was convenient for him, right? He should have done—something. He should have played it off like he wouldn’t have crawled over coals to get Roy’s tongue back down his throat. For starters, swallowing tongues—yours or other people’s—was a great way to choke and die. “You… think we could do more of the studdling from last time, maybe?”

“I’d be honored,” Roy said. “Dinner and studdling?”

The smile spreading itself on Ed’s face was past his control. His cheeks heart. His heart did, too—but in a good way. The kind of ache nostalgia gave you; the kind of ache when your tear ducts were thinking about crying because you were too happy to handle it. “Yeah. Okay. I get off work at six on Saturday if that sounds okay.”

Roy squeezed Ed’s hand again.

“Perfect,” he said.

It kind of was. That was the fucking scary part.
He’d tied up another week. He didn’t have the spare energy left over to tie a bow on it, or anything, but he’d finished it, and sealed it up, and kicked it to the curb, and that was the important thing. He was one day closer to finals; one day closer to graduation; one day closer to…

What? What came after that? Did you just keep—grinding away at it your whole life and never wonder if there was something else…?

But Al had sent him some chirpy texts full of emoticons, and Winry was having whatever the hell a ‘spa night’ was with Catherine and some other people, and he had just enough brainpower saved up after class and work were both over to split his attention between messing around on the internet and doing a little bit of homework. As far as Friday nights went, that wasn’t so bad at all.

Ling and Lan Fan were out somewhere, too—the text had been typically vague but exclamation-point-riddled, so Ed wasn’t expecting them back anytime soon—which made it the perfect time to turn some music on and stretch out with some problem sets.

He sometimes struggled to focus on math when he had the really good shit on, but Al had, after many years of “No, listen, Brother, there’s a literal cannon in this one,” finally won him over to classical music as epic background noise. Movie soundtracks worked pretty well, too. Unlike most of the people in this wretched establishment, though, he didn’t want to disturb anybody, so he didn’t jack the volume up too far.

It was far enough, though, that the ping of an incoming message on one platform or another—the fact that the notification sounds were similar enough that he could never differentiate seemed like really bad branding—roused him from a haze of chem-thoughts and drew his attention to the screen. It wasn’t Al, which was of course what he’d been hoping.

It was Russell.

*Hey are you there, it says u were active five minutes ago*

Evidently, it wasn’t enough for Facebook to sell his browsing history to Google and Amazon and anybody else who’d pay a couple of bucks to data-mine his habits: it had to sell him out to the likes of Russell Tringham, too, and land him in a supremely awkward conversation that he couldn’t flee from without a nauseous twirl of guilt.

*hi* he wrote. *sorry, i was doing homework*

He figured Russell wouldn’t get the hint, because Russell was the only person on Earth who made him look emotionally perceptive in comparison, but it’d been worth a try.

*lol of course u were*, Russell wrote. That set Ed’s hackles to rising right off the bat, but then of course the asshole only made it worse: *mr goody two-shoes*

*more like mr. goody one-foot*, Ed wrote.

He wasn’t entirely sure why he’d jumped to that—on one foot, for the record, while he was at it—other than that it had always made Russell a little bit… uncomfortable. The whole amputee thing. He’d just tried to look the other way when they’d been friends, but when…

Well.

Fuck him.
If this was all it took to throw him off his guard, when all he ever did was unsettle Ed on purpose, then it was fair fucking turnabout.

_haha_ Russell wrote. The fucker. _yeah well anyway. how are things_

_pretty good_, Ed wrote. _busy._

That was what Winry would have called “A hint typed out in Arial Black size 72, with the text color changed to red and highlighted in yellow.”

_haha i bet_, Russell wrote. Narrowly, Ed resisted the urge to slam his forehead down on the desktop hard enough to leave a mark. _so how are you_

Wasn’t that the same question he’d already asked? Sure, technically there was a word changed, but functionally it was the same damn thing.

Ed rolled his eyes internally, then figured this one was worth an external eye-roll, too, despite the fact that the room was empty.

_i’m ok_, he wrote. _thanks. you?_

_good_, Russell wrote. Apparently both of them were boycotting capital letters tonight. Fridays around here were wild. _how are things going with that guy?_

Ed’s stomach dropped.

What the hell did that mean? That was the kind of question that was really three questions, layered on top of each other, and what he answered to the top layer would ripple through with implications.

_pretty good so far_, he typed out, slowly. He paused for a second with his pinky fingertip hovering over the enter key before he tapped to send. Why did Russell want to know, anyway? Ed should have thrown Hostess products at that asshole’s stupid head while he’d had the chance. _just kinda going with it. guess we’ll see what happens._

_hahahaha ok sure_, Russell wrote.

…the fuck?

Fortunately—well, not fortunately at all, but semi-quasi-fortunately given that Ed’s blood was rushing in his ears too loudly for him to think of anything to say—a little bubble popped up to indicate that Russell was typing something else.

_is that a real “just kinda going with it” or what?_

Ed listened to his heart pound three times before he raised his hands, which had clenched themselves into fists on his thighs, uncurled them, and laid his fingers on the keys.

_i have no idea what the hell youre asking. it’s a just going with it kind of just going with it. i’m figuring it out as i go because it’s sort of going at its own pace and shit, what do you want me to say?_

_jeez_, Russell wrote. _relax i just meant like you must have turned over a new leaf a little bit bcuz lets just say you weren’t very flexible when you and i were a thing haha_

_what the fuck is that supposed to mean i wasn’t very flexible_
He’d already sent it before it occurred to him that rising to Russell’s shit wasn’t going to help. It never had; it never would—he had to exact his vengeance by being a better person, and a bigger person, and having a happier life. That was the only option. That was the only way away from this. He just had to keep it together, keep his dignity, keep his cool—

lol i meant you sure weren't “just going with it” when it was us so i guess he must be pretty special or pretty hot lol

Ed—

—saw red.

It wasn’t a big deal. It wasn’t a big deal; Russell was just being a fucking jerkoff like he’d always been; he was just trying to get a reaction; he was just—

Jealous.

Was that what it was? Russell had basically ceased to have the slightest interest in Ed as a human being the instant they’d tentatively decided to step over the border from close friends to more-than. The moment he’d had Ed’s full attention, he didn’t want it anymore; he stopped listening, stopped caring, stopped investing, and Ed was left there with the pieces in his hands, wondering how the hell it had fallen apart so fast.

And now that someone else gave a shit, all of a sudden he wanted back in?

Maybe that was reaching. Maybe he was just being an asshole because it was the only thing he knew how to do, and it had nothing whatsoever to do with Ed and Ed’s love life and whatever else. Maybe it was just that Russell wanted to mess with somebody, and he knew Ed was an easy target, and…

Lots of people were easy targets. Russell had messaged him first. Russell had started this, and he hadn’t wasted much time with small talk before he asked about Roy.

yeah, Ed typed out, and his hands weren’t shaking; of course they weren’t; Russell wasn’t worth it. he is pretty fucking hot actually but the reason i’m going with it is because it’s going well and the reason it’s going well is that he actually fucking tries which is really nice for a change just so you know

He shouldn’t have written that. He should have just closed the window and shut his laptop and walked away. He should’ve let it go.

He knew it wasn’t in him, but he should have.

whoa haha guess i touched a nerve, Russell wrote.

Ed’s heart stuck in the back of his throat and started cinching upward with every jagged breath. It tasted like bile.

Russell was typing again.

Ed tried not to breathe, or look, or be, but that was a hell of a lot harder in practice than in theory.

have you made it with him yet or what?

That wasn’t—
Fuck him; fuck that; fuck—

that’s none of your fucking business and if you’re trying to convince me to fucking block you on this site forever you’re doing a great job so fucking congratulations now if you’ll excuse me i have a fucking life i gotta deal with and you’re not in it anymore and that is YOUR FAULT and if you’ve got half as many brain cells as you did back when you were interesting you already know that

His heart was racing, and his throat was tight, and even resting his head against his hand with his elbow on the desktop wasn’t helping him at all.

He shouldn’t care what Russell wrote. He shouldn’t care if Russell was pissed off, or just laughed at him, or never talked to him again. That was what he wanted—to get out. He just wanted out. He just wanted this to be over and done with, swept behind him and never seen again; he just—

lol you’re so tetchy tonight it was just a question. i mean i figure that’s what most people are in it for and let’s be honest like you’re cool and all but there’s stuff about you that most people wouldn’t be cool with so probably most people you dated would want to make sure they knew what they were getting into right? i wasn’t trying to imply anything hahaha just wondering.

He’d never played fair; he’d never given a fuck; he’d always been like this—always watched and waited to find out where your softest spots were, so that when he needed it, he knew exactly where to bury all the knives.

fuck you,

Ed wrote. just come the fuck out and say you weren’t attracted to me because i’m a fucking amputee and because you’re like a cat who gets what it wants and then doesn’t want it anymore. just because i wouldn’t have fucking sex with you when we were practically over doesn’t mean i’m going to be alone for the rest of my fucking life because not everybody is like you, and your fucking coy-ass fake friend bullshit is really fucking ugly

He was shaking.

He shouldn’t have let Russell do that to him—shouldn’t have let it matter to him. It was just words. It was all just words, with a little bit of venom underneath. He’d dared to hope he’d built up an immunity by now.

There was still time to block Russell’s dumb ass or close the window and ask Al to do it later—Al knew all his passwords anyway, including the ones he’d never shared. There was still time to get out of this; still time to rise above it; still time to quit while he was behind and bail; still—

what the fuck ed, Russell wrote. have you ever considered maybe you just weren’t very good and i had my own shit going on and had to prioritize what was most important. not everything in the world revolves around you and your complexes and you don’t have to be a fucking dick about it

Ed sat back from his screen.

He felt—

Stung. Stung so broadly and so badly that the nerves beneath were going numb.

Maybe Russell had a point.

And it wasn’t unimaginable, was it, that Roy was looking for a lot more than just some dinners and some snuggling on the couch with textbook corners jabbing into tender places—it wasn’t
unthinkable that he was banking on this becoming more than casual, more than conversational. It wasn’t like they hadn’t started out purely physical, after all. There was a precedent. Roy had every right to define some expectations based on that premise.

But it didn’t matter—at least not yet. What mattered was not giving Russell power over him again. Ed couldn’t let him know he had the upper hand. Ed couldn’t let him know he had any hand, regardless of its relative position; Ed couldn’t let him know he could still get under Ed’s skin like fishhooks and fiberglass with just a scattering of words.

got bent, he wrote into the window, forcing his unsteady hands to find the right letters one at a time. just proves you don’t know the first fucking thing about me after all

And that was true, to a certain extent. But a lot of things were partly true, and getting to the heart of anything meant tearing through so much tissue; you were up to your wrists in gore just trying to reach something incontrovertible, swimming in the blood—

He was too tired for that kind of killing these days.

Maybe Russell finally was, too: he wasn’t typing anything just yet, so Ed closed the damn window—and then the program for good measure. He had other browsers. It was fine. It was all fine.

It took him two hours to give up on that pleasant little bit of bullshit. Nobody he’d ever met had once said he wasn’t stubborn, but he was also a scientist, and facts were facts, and it wasn’t fine. Fine didn’t sit in the base of his throat like a knot of sharpened spikes. Fine didn’t wrap barbed wire around his heart and gradually start pulling tight. Fine didn’t make his stomach acid simmer and then start to boil; didn’t set it to churning like a stormy sea.

What he really wanted to do was text Roy to beg for the full story—the real answers, uncensored and unabridged, without any of the boyish charm and the batted eyelashes that that bastard did so well that he’d made distraction into a form of art. He wanted to text Roy and ask So what are you in this for, really? What are you getting out of it? What do you want? I need you to tell me and be honest about it, because it’s eating me up, and I know that’s not your fault or your problem, but—please. As a favor to me, if nothing else.

But you couldn’t actually do that. You couldn’t demand the truth from people; you weren’t entitled to displays or discussions of their feelings. Feelings were soft—sacred. Vulnerable. Deep. You couldn’t just ask someone to lay all their cards out on the table just because you’d played your way right into your ex’s hands, and he’d beat you not-exactly-fair and fucking square.

And what he and Roy had—

Whatever this was, it was new, and undefined, and fragile. He didn’t know how far he could push it yet; he didn’t even know where the boundaries lay, let alone whether they were flexible or as brittle as his bones felt with every breath that moved through him right now.

He’d curled up in bed with his phone in his hands, like there was a chance in hell he might take the plunge despite how cold the water looked from here.

It was the shock that killed you, not the cold. Not the distance; not the impact; but the way your body shut down, and your brain couldn’t help giving in—
He stared at the little window of bright-blaring screen in the dark. He’d pulled the comforter up over his head, because Ling was back, and he figured that was considerate, even though odds were good that Ling was doing the same thing on the other side of the room. It made him feel secure either way, though. He and Al had done that a lot as kids—curled up together and warded off the monsters in the only way they knew.

He tapped into his text log with Roy. Roy had texted him earlier to ask if about seven was good for him again, as a target for having food ready, and Ed had tried to convince him to get Thai takeout, because it was relatively cheap, super fast, and almost spicy enough. Roy had sounded receptive to that, although Ed was still trying to figure out how he might be able to weasel his way into paying for it this time around.

Even as he scrolled back a ways, none of the messages were particularly revealing. None of them carried a distant hint of some ulterior motive, but people were smart, and people were careless, and sometimes they didn’t even recognize that they wanted something, but they knew instinctively what to do to get it. Sometimes it never occurred to them to think about what it might do to somebody else.

He tapped his thumb on the bar to type a new text and watched the cursor blink—one, twice, three times, four times, five.

Then he tapped out of his texts, and hesitated, and went into the browser instead.

It was partly a relief and partly annoying that the search bar didn’t suggest the blog name—he’d somehow always remembered to open it in private windows. Right now, though, he would’ve taken a few less characters to type over the sparkling innocence of his browsing history.

Roy hadn’t updated much lately. He’d answered a couple of anonymous questions about safety and enticing things to do with and for someone—a few of which were steamy enough to make Ed’s face heat until he considered hurling the covers back after all to get some air.

There was a recent one, though, that Ed hadn’t read yet:

*hey casanova what gives? don’t tell me a pimp like you hasn’t gotten any at all in an entire month. where’s the good stuff?*

*Hell. That was—*

*Well, it wasn’t Ed’s doing, exactly. But it was definitely influenced by him, because he’d explicitly asked Roy not to talk about him, and he’d expressed less than unwavering support of the blog in general. Sure, it’d only really been because he’d been terrified that Casanova was going to consume the parts of Roy that he liked best and then have his ass for dessert, but—*

*Still. It was pretty obvious, looking at the timeline, that the decline of the blog and his increasing presence in Roy’s life were strongly correlated.*

*Well, friend, Roy—Casanova-Roy—had written, first off, I’d like to make it eminently clear that I am not, in fact, a pimp. I personally do not take or offer money. I have the utmost respect for sex workers to a degree I can’t even begin to describe, but I myself am not one of them in any regard.*

*I’m afraid the fate of this little project is still a bit up in the air. Perhaps there will be new and exciting things to write about from a slightly different angle; perhaps there won’t. Sometimes wonderful things happen when and how you least expect them, and there’s no way to predict what path they’ll take you on—or how far along it. And in these cases, often the best you can do is heed*
that very shrill voice inside your head saying “HOLY MOTHER OF GOD, PLEASE DON’T BLOW THIS FOR US!”

So far, that’s what I’m trying to do.

I will let you all know how things shake out, and what it means for this place, as soon as I (we? Good Lord) have settled on something that suits everyone.

In the meantime, surely you haven’t read the ENTIRE archive. And if you have, you ought to be too embarrassed to admit it, so you might as well skim through it again.

Thank you for the patience—especially to those of you giving it willingly, but also to those who have been forced.

—Casanova

There was another one, very soon afterward:

Casanova… all these posts about love and then no posts about sex and then what you just said? it sounds like you found yourself a long term girlfriend. are the glory days over?? please don’t leave!!

It was sort of a pity that Ed was alone in his bed with the covers over his head, because the face he’d just made was probably a winner, and there was nobody around to see it.

For the record, Roy had written back, I do not have a girlfriend. But I do have someone that I’m investing in right now, and until I have a better idea of how that’s going to go – or not go, as it may turn out; my powers of prognostication are still somewhat unrefined – I’m trying to take it one step at a time. Apparently, the first step is not sitting around the proverbial internet campfire telling you all sordid stories about my exploits all day long, because I have other things (and people) I’d prefer to be doing. I’m hoping you can all respect that, at least for as long as it takes to sort out the details here.

And before anyone asks, I will not be giving you all of the sexy details about this person. You’re just going to have to imagine what an incredible time I’m having and stew in your own jealousy. Enjoy.

xoxo

Casanova

Ed also kind of wanted to text him about that. But you couldn’t write Hey, I was reading the blog because I can’t sleep because my ex is an asshole, and that stuff you said about investment and sexy details and whatever? Is the investment conditional upon the sexy details? I mean, just wondering, because you have this reputation going, you know; it’s clearly something you like doing and something you want, and it feels kind of weird for you to use the concept of me to tease your readership, although in a way that’s bizarrely sort of flattering, too. Anyway, point is, what in the hell are you really thinking, behind all of the stuff you say?

Not a chance. Not even if it wasn’t late enough at night that it would’ve been rude to text anybody without an extremely good reason.

Christ. He needed to stop trying to read everything into everything. Even an eighty percent reading-things-into-things rate would have been an improvement; at least his spinning brain would have gotten a break every once in a while. It was exhausting—constantly trying to anticipate what people were going to do; how and when they might hurt you, on purpose or otherwise. It wore you out.
He turned the screen of his phone off and shoved it under his pillow, where he’d still hear the alarm well enough to hurl himself out of bed and drag his body to work tomorrow. At least it was safe to poke his head out into the open again. Hopefully Ling didn’t think he’d been, like, masturbating or something. The bed would’ve been moving a hell of a lot more if he had been, but to say that sometimes people jumped to conclusions without scientific evidence was understating the state of the world to a degree that bordered on criminal, so his internal wince wasn’t unfounded.

Now all he had to do was calm down… and stop thinking… and rest.

Also known as his three damn specialties, right?

Crap.

He got a text from Roy the next morning while he was hoofing it over to work—*Thai still sound good for dinner tonight? Or is there anything else you happen to be craving? :)*

Was that supposed to sound sexual? At least it wasn’t a winking face. But surely the choice of words had to be deliberate, and it wasn’t like someone with Roy’s writing experience—and… other… experience—could possibly not recognize the connotations of that particular turn of phrase. And—

That eighty percent things-into-things deal was starting to sound better and better. What portion of his soul would he have to sell to get in on something like that?

_Thai sounds awesome_, he wrote back, being careful to look up between every few letters so he didn’t trip over his own feet and/or take a header into the fountain on the plaza. It’d be in plain view of any coworkers who’d gotten there early, too. He’d almost done that while he was on the phone with Al once. _like you, haha_

Somehow, Roy typed fast enough to have sent another message before Ed had taken five full steps.

_I, too, am spicy, affordable, and slathered in oyster sauce… wait, one of those may not be true._

Ed choked on his own spit.

Then he stopped walking so he could text back without flinging himself into any water hazards.

_do i have to show up to find out which one?_

_I’m afraid so_, Roy wrote back. _The suspense will be killing us both in the meantime._

Ed took a deep breath. And then another. And then he dropped his shoulders and let himself grin down at the screen.

_if you dunk yourself in oyster sauce just so i can’t call you cheap good luck getting kissed later btw_

_OH NO_, Roy wrote back instantly. _MY DIABOLICAL MASTER PLAN!!_

_gotta go work_, Ed sent, _so you have time to come up with a better one. IMPRESS ME, MUSTANG_

_I’ll do my best_, Roy wrote. _Hope work goes well!_
Russell was wrong.

Russell was so wrong on so many levels; Roy always talked to him like this, with this soft delight, like it was a joy and a privilege, like it was fun, like he wanted to, like he liked it—

Sure, the oyster sauce thing sounded a little… well… saucy, but it was clearly a joke. Ed could take a joke. It didn’t mean that Roy’s past experience defined him, or dictated his present, or monopolized his motives. It didn’t mean that Roy was going to have some kind of expectations just because every other person he’d ever winked at had torn their clothes off and thrown themselves at him virtually instantaneously.

Russell was wrong, and it was all going to be fine.

And cheap.

And spicy.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

UNBELIEVABLY, we are nearly at the end after this one! XD

There is also a bunch more naughty stuff at the end of this update (it's about 24K and just in this one big pile this time!), but again it's not required to follow the fic, so if that's not your jam, feel free to stop when it starts getting steamy!

Hope 2018 is prepared to be as kind to you guys as this fandom has been to me. ♥♥♥
…'cause otherwise I'm gonna KICK ITS SORRY ASS.

There was something surreal about standing out in front of the lobby of an apartment building and hitting the little button to buzz someone who lived upstairs. Partly it was vaguely archaic—like something you’d seen in an eighties movie but never actually expected to do. It was like a pager.

Did anybody in the entire world still have one of those? The days were imminent where kids would hear that word and just sort of wrinkle their noses uncomprehendingly.

Plus Ed’s paranoid ass was halfway convinced that someone walking by would see him, assess the unsettled tilt of his shoulders shifting his backpack off-kilter, and immediately think Ah, booty call. He wanted to grab them by the theoretical collar and say Listen here, pal, I don’t need any of your attitude, Roy’s a class act despite the porn blog, and if you don’t like it, you can kiss his very well-traveled ass—

It looked like the leasing company didn’t do the greatest job with upkeep of this thing, given the fact that half the numbers were falling off, and half of the last names were scrawled next to them in Sharpie on scraps of taped-up notecard, in a handwriting that looked suspiciously like Roy’s, but at least the programming was sound enough that Roy answered when Ed hit the buzzer by his name.

“Ed?” he asked.

That was a risk, wasn’t it, for people like them? At least for people like Ed. Risking being wrong, inviting embarrassment—that was dangerous, in its way.

“The one and only,” Ed said.

“Perfect,” Roy said. “Come on up.”

The lobby door clicked its way unlocked with an unnecessarily intense series of loud mechanical noises. Winry would have either rolled her eyes or started to take it apart right then and there to find out why it was doing that.

The elevator let you off on the floor beneath Roy’s, because Roy’s was the only place at the tippy-top—Ed wasn’t sure what crackpot architect had designed it that way, though he supposed the privacy was probably pretty nice. Downstairs neighbors were one thing; the kind directly beside you were another altogether, and in Ed’s experience, they were much easier to overhear when you wanted it the least.

The downside—the upward-traveling downside—was that Ed’s leg did not appreciate stairs, and it
didn’t make exceptions when those stairs were mandatory. At least this set was semi-private, so no one would freak out, but if this…

Well, if this kept on, he was just going to have to ask Roy to move. Three trips up this staircase now was enough. Time for the guy to find a new place that was ADA-compliant.

That also begged some questions about the architect and the leasing agency, come to think of it.

Eventually, despite the literal dragging of at least one of his feet and the power of deliberately tangential thoughts, he wound up in front of Roy’s door again.

He breathed, deeply—first for the exertion; then for the nerves.

He knocked.

He heard the footsteps; then the bolt turned, then—

“Perfect timing,” Roy said, as though that had ever been true in Ed’s life. He was smiling. He did that way too much. Didn’t he know that nine out of ten scientists agreed that Roy Mustang’s smiles were a leading cause of gut-melting in multiple demographics? “Are you hungry?”

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t phrase that as a question,” Ed said.

“Me, too,” Roy said, ushering him in. “Let’s pretend I said ‘How hungry are you?’”


“So hungry it made me ambitious,” Roy said, stepping into the kitchen and opening the oven, where he’d packed an impressive quantity of styrofoam containers of varying sizes. “Which is probably a good thing, since there might just be enough for you.”

“Awesome,” Ed said, instead of It’s pretty cool that you pay attention to what I want and like or Are you learning so fast because you really care?

“It hasn’t been here long,” Roy said. “Hopefully everything’s still as piping hot as you are.”

“Hey, now,” Ed said, feeling his face warm up. “My old-fashioned smoking habits are none of your business.”

Roy grinned at him.

Gut-melting.

Dinner was great. Dessert—which Ed had brought, which consisted of some selections of fancy stuff from the little French pastry shop, because he’d been hoping it’d make Roy coo, which it did—was great. Studdling was great. Starting to get a little bit blurry-sleepy and leaning his head against the side of Roy’s neck was great, too. Everything was great; everything was too great; everything was wonderful, and that—

That was the thing that scared him.
Russell had been wonderful, at the start—at the very start. Russell had been wonderful when they’d been too-good friends but hadn’t put any other label on it; when they’d play-fought over the remote because Russell had a shitty voice but had to sing loudly over the titles of every show they binged on Netflix; when they’d ended up half-tangled together and just let themselves stay wrapped up, because if neither of them said anything about it, it could just be cozy for its own sake, and it didn’t have to mean anything—

Russell had been wonderful for the better part of a year. He’d been funny—sometimes to the point of being a little bit of an asshole, sure, but mostly when he fucked up, he felt bad, and he apologized, and he was sincere about it. He’d been smart, and dedicated, and they’d burned through hours and hours on late nights studying together; and when the pages started to blur, they always wound up on the couch, too-close, backs of their hands brushing where they were sitting just beside each other on the cushions, talking in hushed voices about all the things they’d do someday, when they had the education and the money and the means to live all of their cautious little dreams.

And he’d stayed up all night texting Ed stupid memes one time when Al had been in the hospital, and Ed had been lying on a cot not-sleeping. And he’d brought crap food from the corner store and a no-homo one-arm-hug that had almost squeezed the tears out of Ed’s exhausted body, because Russell could really understand the prospect of the baby brother that you lived for hanging by a thread—

Ed had tried to forget that part—he’d tried hard, but he just couldn’t scrub it out of his brain. Russell had been a fucking amazing friend to him for a long time. That was the bit of it that hurt the most. He hadn’t just lost the opportunity; he hadn’t just lost the wisps of dignity and self-respect that had been torn away with the rejection. He’d lost a friend. And it was friends that he needed, more than any of the rest of it.

The point was—the way it started out didn’t have shit to do with how it ended. You didn’t know anything about people until it was too late. You had to decide whether to let them in or not long before you could possibly know if it was safe.

Was he safe here?

“Mm,” Roy murmured when he shifted. “I have bad news.”

Ed didn’t want to twist around enough to look at him and raise an eyebrow; that sounded like a lot of work. “Yeah?”

“You’re not allowed to pilfer my shampoo anymore,” Roy said. “Your hair smells amazing. What do you normally use?”

Ed was too sleep-benumbed for a proper dry laugh, but he managed a moderately arid one. “Atelier Whatever’s on Sale at the Drugstore.”

“I’ll be sure to check it out,” Roy said, but Ed could hear that he was grinning. “I think it’s going to be my new favorite brand.”

“Eew,” Ed said.

“You have to admit you walked into that one,” Roy said, and then he was kissing the side of Ed’s neck, and Ed was squirming, because it tickled a little, but it was good, too—

“Bullshit,” he said. “You set me up.”

“Oh,” Roy said. His hand skated lightly up Ed’s side, fingertips dappling over his ribs; even with a
T-shirt and a hoodie in the way, that felt transcendent, and he couldn’t help the fact that the character of his writhing changed all at once. “I suppose you have a point. How terrible of me. How can I ever make it up to you?”

He was, of course, still grazing his mouth up along Ed’s neck, and then over the shell of Ed’s ear, and the heat of his breath tingled everywhere; Ed couldn’t believe his traitor skin was so damn susceptible to the play of it.

“I, um,” he managed. “You’re… off to a good start. Y’know.”

Roy’s other hand dragged up his arm and twirled itself into his hair, which also felt amazing. “That is very nice to hear.”

One of the reasons Ed had never gotten into porn was that the dialogue was crap. The primary and much more significant reason was that, in the periods of his life that he’d both been aware of it and had access to internet, the internet in question had belonged to and been paid for by Winry’s grandmother, and taking advantage of that just sounded tawdry as fuck.

But the dialogue had a lot to do with it.

Roy’s incredibly talented mouth, however, was rapidly earning forgiveness for the mediocre script: he’d turned his attention to the join of Ed’s neck and his shoulder, which turned out to be shudderingly sensitive; and then shifted up, bracing himself on the couch, so that he could reach to favor Ed’s collarbones with more of the star treatment.

This was probably what porn was like. Right? This was what the consumption of that visual medium was supposed to make you feel—overheated to the point that you were almost overwhelmed; Ed was rippling with nerve signals; electricity coursed up and down and all over through him, lighting him up to the tips of his fingers and the ends of his limited quantity of toes. This was a lot like reading the blog had been, honestly—a lot like the experience in words, but so much vaster, and deeper, and at the same time more contained. Tangible, obviously. Consumptive. Immense.

Roy had shifted partway around Ed, so that they were closer to side-by-side. He looked up, eyelashes low, and that should’ve been cheesy. So much of what he did should’ve set off the cliché alarms in Ed’s brain, but every time he made it so real, and so personal, and so—

“Is that all right?” he asked.

Ed blinked.

The faint touch of pink in Roy’s cheeks could’ve been from the close quarters, or the movement, or the making out… or it could’ve been from the incredulity with which Ed was staring at him.

“What?” Roy asked.

“You say that like it’s a multiple choice question,” Ed said.

“True or false is fine,” Roy said.

Ed smacked his arm. Gently, but—it was required. “You know what I mean.”

“Yes,” Roy said, grinning again, the bastard, “but it’s still important to—”

Ed fisted both hands in his shirt collar and hauled him in to kiss him.
Logically speaking, he understood why something like baseball had to be the national pastime—a relatively well-known sport that was enjoyable for spectators, with a subculture built around it, which could be televised, yada yada yada.

Physically speaking, however, it was absolutely ludicrous that kissing somebody you liked a lot was not the country’s premiere promoted activity. You didn’t need any equipment; there wasn’t nearly as much risk of injury on the part of the players—admittedly, the idea of observers didn’t particularly appeal to Ed, at least, and there wasn’t much of an opportunity for corporate sponsorship, but you could use a lot of the same terminology as far as getting to the bases, and holy hot damn was it fun.

“Mm,” Roy said when they drew an inch apart to catch their breath. “What was I saying?”

“Dunno,” Ed said. He reached up, hesitated, swallowed the last little prickly inhibition, and ran his fingertips up along the line of Roy’s jaw. “Don’t care.”

Roy laughed, richly, and leaned into Ed’s touch, and his eyes did this thing where they went pure liquid oblivion, and standing at the edge of that was dizzying and giddy and sublime.

“You know,” Roy said, “I don’t think I care either. Where were we?”

“You were askin’ a fuck-ton of questions for somebody who’s got more important shit to do,” Ed said.

Roy laughed again, shifting further—leaning in over him now. Maybe Ed wasn’t the only one teetering on the brink of a complete and utter forfeiture of self-control. Maybe it wasn’t quite a surrender, then, to lower himself a little, to lean back against the cushions and let Roy climb right over him.

“Point taken,” Roy said.

Ed would have fired off another snarky witticism if he’d had more than half a second before Roy’s mouth was skating up his throat, and that sent a thousand other tiny shocks up his spine in rapid succession—their tails twined together; they merged into one surging current right as they crested the curve, and he arched his back—

The soft moan that left Roy’s lips when Ed’s hips jolted against his sounded like heaven should’ve felt.

They had to have such a thing as sex in heaven. It just wouldn’t make sense otherwise; it was so—good, not to mention evolutionarily required in a population-wide sense for the propagation of the species and whatnot, and—

Perhaps there was a reason Ed had never explored religious reasoning very much; he always seemed to end up in brain backalleys like this at the most inconvenient possible times.

Roy dragged in a shivering breath and let it out slow, settling his hand on Ed’s side, tracing circles around Ed’s hipbone with the pad of his thumb like it would soothe the tormented beat of their blood; Ed could half-hear and half-feel their hearts pounding heavy and hot in something dangerously close to unison.

He wasn’t quite sure what to do with his own damn hands, so he let them choose for themselves where they wanted to wander—the decision was unanimous; they linked themselves behind Roy’s neck, and then they both started carding through the silky magnificence of his hair. The combination of sensations hit Ed like a freight train full of fireworks all over again every time something changed—the damp heat of Roy’s breath against his throat and then the hollow of his collarbones and then
the underside of his chin; the soft press of the hand slipping underneath his shirt and forging upward, towards his ribs, fingertips smooth and soft and delicate with just a hint of urgency; the deliciously cool slither of Roy’s gorgeous hair through his hands; the fervent heat between their bodies, not that there was much of any space to call between. Roy’s whole frame was conforming to his; he tilted his hips up to bridge the breath of a gap remaining; Roy choked on his next breath; their chests heaved against each other for several shimmering seconds while Roy fumbled for a handhold on… what? The universe? Himself? Hard to tell, but he found one in Ed’s hair, and that was amazing all around.

“You are,” Roy whispered, “absolutely incomparable.”

Ed tried to protest, but all that came out was a weak sort of “Pff.”

Roy’s faint laugh bore no trace of condescension, which was good, because Ed didn’t especially want to have to stop this for long enough to murder him. “Sorry. There I go again.”

“It’s okay,” Ed managed. Roy’s palm chafed gently up and down his side; he’d hooked his right leg around the small of Roy’s back at some point. It was a practical position in a lot of ways. “Everything’s okay when you’re—doin’ stuff like—that.”

“Ah,” Roy said, and there was something funny about the way his dorky grin mediated the trace of smugness in it; the whole thing was just way too smushy and gooey and warm and enveloping, and the worst part was that Ed liked it. “In that case—”

His mouth returned to Ed’s, and his hand ventured higher; the one in Ed’s hair twisted gently, tilting Ed’s head back, and despite his mouthful of Roy’s tongue, Ed heard himself whimper. Not a bad one, though; the kind—

The kind that good porn probably used in place of dialogue, come to think of it. The kind that wasn’t ever intended to be a word, only a message. The kind that simultaneously meant oh, shit and also yes.

Roy pushed his hips in and down slowly and deliberately, pinning Ed’s body to the couch with his, and how had Ed never learned how goddamn dangerous it was to play with this particular kind of fire? The heat of Roy’s half-hard dick grazed his, and his whole fucking being caught, and his nerves inflamed, and his skin smoldered, and his heart beat so hard it left scorched marks on the inside of his ribs, and—

And he wanted. So much. But he didn’t know what, or how, or where to begin.

“Edward,” Roy murmured into his ear, with such sizzling intent that Ed’s spine tightened; “I was thinking—if you’re up for it, and if you’re ready—normally it’s a little easier for the newer partner to start out on top. And we could, if you like.” His fingertips dragged across Ed’s chest, a long, tingling diagonal trail— “I prepared for it, just in case you… well. In case of this.” His palm flattened right over Ed’s heart, and surely he could feel it trying to claw its way free of the cage of bones and hurl its shuddering form down on the carpet. “I can walk you through it. We can take it slow.”

Ed had to swallow three times and breathe twice. “You mean—you want me to—fuck you.”

The way Roy’s breath caught would have been answer enough. “Yes. If you—”

Two things happened simultaneously: his groin throbbed, and his guts dropped.

Russell’s voice rang in his head so loud it was like the piece of shit was right there in the room
—“Your life’s not a chick flick, dumbass. What the hell did you think he was wining and dining you for? What else could anybody possibly want from you?”

A part of him was hungry. A part of him wanted to use his weight to flip them over—to hold Roy down on the cushions of this wonderful-terrible couch and kiss him senseless and show him a thing or fucking two, prove to him that he hadn’t learned everything just yet, demonstrate just how far gumption and enthusiasm went—

But the rest of him—the bulk of him, the vast majority, the heart and the brain and everything except the deepest chasm in his guts—went cold.

“I—” he said.

He owed an explanation, at the very least; he knew—or his brain did.

His hands apparently didn’t. His hands scrabbled for purchase on the couch back, and then one found Roy’s chest and pushed while the rest of his body twisted—

He caught a glimpse of Roy’s face contorting, towards what final expression destination he couldn’t tell, because he was slipping out from underneath the instant that Roy drew both arms back, and then he was half-tumbling off the couch, barely finding his feet, reaching down to steady his left knee with his hands before he realized it was holding him up—

A rush of mangled, overlapping syllables wrangled its way out of him: “I just need a second, I—I just—hang on—”

And thank fucking Christ this apartment was so small, actually, because bolting for the bathroom was a matter of moments, and it was only when the door was shut behind him, and he was leaning against it with his head thrown back that he could force himself to breathe.

Fuck. Fuck. He should’ve just—played it cool. Should’ve talked his way out of it. What the fuck would Roy be thinking right now? Might as well have slapped him in the fucking face; that would’ve been about as graceful a fucking exit; he wasn’t—it wasn’t like he hadn’t expected it; it wasn’t like he hadn’t been thinking it over day in and day out this whole stupid fucking week—

He dragged another breath in, and another, and that helped a little. His face was still on fire, and his heart was still jackhammering around the circumference of his chest, but he could see straight, and he could almost think straight, and…

Well. Gay, obviously. Gay but clear. Was the point.

He took one cautious step forward, testing his quaking knee and ankle, and when they didn’t fail him, took the next.

And then he sat down on top of the toilet lid, set his elbows on his knees, and let his head fall into his hands, because it wasn’t pathetic enough unless you went the whole nine yards with this shit.

What the hell was he supposed to do now? He could theoretically go out there and apologize. Hey, my bad, guess I’m more of a wreck than I was counting on, funny, huh? Anyway, if you still want to date now that you know you won’t get any more action possibly ever, call me, yeah?

Or he could dismantle the sink piping and use the biggest piece as leverage to break a hole in the side of the shower and thence in the wall of the building so that he could hurl himself out through it.

That was starting to sound like the best option. He couldn’t—do this. Not this part of it, anyway;
the rest was fine. The rest was fucking beautiful. But you couldn’t walk up to the universe’s front
desk and request ninety percent of something that was happening to you; you couldn’t pick and
choose; you couldn’t—

There was a soft knock at the bathroom door.

Ed’s heart changed its mind about settling down and revved up into a brand-new gear instead,
complete with deafening engine noises.

“Ed,” Roy said. “Can I come in?”

At least he hadn’t said It’s me, like it could possibly be anybody fucking else. Like Mothman. Then
again, if an unfamiliar voice had said Ed, it’s Mothman, he probably would’ve been like, Oh, thank
fuck, are you one of the cryptids that kills people and doesn’t leave a trace? What are your going
rates right now? My wallet’s outside, but I’m not exactly gonna need it anymore, as long as you’re
cool with collecting after the fact.

“I’d just like to talk,” Roy said, very softly, “if that’s all right.”

Ed cleared his throat. It was sticky. Like this situation. Ha.

“Yeah,” he said. “I—it’s—it isn’t locked.”

There was a two-heartbeat pause wherein he thought maybe Roy had given up and walked off in a
huff, but then the handle turned, and the door opened very slowly, and Roy peeked through the gap.

He didn’t look… especially mad. Or even particularly disgusted. Not even overtly disappointed.
That alone was pretty damn close to a miracle at this point.

Not that it helped decelerate Ed’s heart in any meaningful way, but—still. It was something.

He’d had to lift his head enough to look towards the door, so he wrapped his arms around himself so
that they’d at least have something to do instead of sitting there shaking a little bit.

“Hey,” Roy said, which seemed unnecessary—like this whole conversation would have been if Roy
had had a halfway-stable, halfway-decent fucking boyfriend. “I’m sorry.”

Ed stared at him. At least the arm positioning meant that he could tighten his grip on himself to make
sure that reality still existed, more or less.

He couldn’t sit there and contemplate the fraying fabric of space-time forever, though, because Roy
deserved an explanation, at the very least; Roy deserved a hell of a lot more than just the excuses Ed
would probably give him. He deserved answers. He deserved more.

Obligation had always been an excellent motivator for Ed.

“The fuck are you sorry for?” he choked out.

Roy sat down on the floor and crossed his legs like a little kid in class. He was so damn cute. That
was the worst part.

“I rushed you,” he said. He offered a wan smile. “I should have known better, and I should have
thought it through more, but I let excitement get the better of me, and I’m sorry.”

“Christ,” Ed said, because if he slowed down too long, that would sink in, and he sensed that he
couldn’t let it; couldn’t afford it; wouldn’t be able to stand it if it did— “It’s not your fault.”
Roy raised both of his hands, palms open to the ceiling, and jimmied his shoulders towards a shrug for good measure.

“I could have done a lot better,” he said. “I want you to know that I know that.”

“Or I could’ve not been a colossal fuckup who can’t communicate for shit,” Ed said.

Roy blinked.

Ed blinked back.

The tip of Roy’s tongue darted across his upper lip, and Ed’s tormented libido perked up wistfully. “Neither of those things is t—“

“They are so,” Ed said. “And it—it’s not—you, it’s nothing you did or should’ve done or… It’s just —” His head went back into his hands, where it belonged. “Me. I guess. Me and all this shit in my head, and even when I know it’s not… even when I know it’s just…”

Lies. Vengeance. Sick, old ghosts.

 “…bullshit, it still…it sticks. And that’s not—fair. To you. You’re really—great. You are. And you’re fucking trying so hard, and I just—I can’t—be what anybody ever wants. Not really. Not when you get right fuckin’ down to it.”

“That’s not true either,” Roy said, trying to be all gentle and shit, and Ed—

Ed just couldn’t do it anymore.

“I mean it,” he said into his hands. “I’m not—this isn’t for fuckin’ pity points or some shit; it—the guy. The guy I—dated before. The only guy I dated before. He was my best friend before that—I mean, other’n Winry, and that’s different; that’s a sister kind of best friend, and… yeah. I dunno. It was just—we were in all the same classes from the start, and I could tell he was smart, and he actually wanted to be there so he could get to somewhere else, and we just—we clicked. A lot.”

There had to be a short way to tell this story. Surely he could scrounge up some kind of a summary. Surely he was clever enough to think his way around it; surely he could get through this without having to bite the words out like spitting bullet casings for as long as it took—

“We were just—we were both—”

“Ed,” Roy said softly, “it’s okay. You don’t have to tell me. You don’t have to justify it. You don’t have anything to prove. It’s okay. It—”

“It’s not,” Ed said, and the explosion of it out of him had jerked his head up again, just in time to see Roy’s eyes go wide. Good. Scandalize the poor bastard. Scare him. That was perfect. Ed was on such a fucking roll. “I just—I want—you to understand. Not ’cause—you don’t owe me anything; it’s not like that; it’s just—I want you to understand why it’s not you.”

Roy looked at him for a long couple of seconds, head tilted slightly to one side.

One corner of his mouth turned up, but he still looked sad.

“Can I come a little closer?” he asked. “Is that all right?”

There were hardly four feet between them given the size of Roy’s bathroom, but it was damn considerate of him to ask first all the same.
“Yeah,” Ed said. “I mean—if you want.”

Roy didn’t move. “What do you want?”

Ed scrubbed both of his hands down his face, which neither changed his appearance nor erased his identity, which was a bit of a waste. “Not to be fucking this up.”

Roy shifted like he was going to lever himself all the way up to his feet, hesitated, smiled with the other side of his mouth this time, and then scooted over on his ass, propelling himself with his hands and a hilarious little crab-crawl-thing he was doing with his feet.

Ed cracked a grin before he could hang on to the misery hard enough to hold it back. “The hell was that?”

“Laziness overcoming dignity,” Roy said. He settled with his back against the wall across from the sink, which left a little bit of space between them—but not much. He drew both knees up to his chest, wrapped his arms around them, and set his chin down on top. Sometimes Ed missed being able to do that. “One of my many talents.”

“How do you keep track of ’em all?” Ed asked.

Roy blinked at him. “I have a color-coded binder, of course. It’s alphabetized. Every time I discover a new talent, I make a page for it, and I put it in a little plastic sheet-protector and put a gold star sticker on the front, and then—I’m serious. This is very important. Don’t you have a talent binder? At least a Rolodex.”

“Nobody has Rolodexes anymore,” Ed said.

“I’m surprised you even know what that is,” Roy said.

“I did admin shit at the community college,” Ed said. “For work-study. Filing papers and taking messages and stuff. They had the last one on Earth. I named it Terrence.”

Roy shook his head slowly. “And yet you won’t acknowledge the given name of my illustrious couch? You’re a cruel man, Edward Elric. Cruel and discriminatory.”

Ed gave him the finger.

“Case in point,” Roy said. “I’m being oppressed.”

“You’re being an asshole,” Ed said.

“That’s the first entry in the binder,” Roy said. “Wait—the first one is archery, which I’m naturally amazing at. But it’s in there.”

Ed looked at him.

Roy looked back.

“You don’t have to,” Roy said, gently. “You never have to tell me anything you don’t want to.”

But he did. He did, because it was a lead weight expanding with the heat, and carrying it had been one thing, but swallowing it down when it was growing every second—

It’d throttle him. It would choke him, and it would drag him to the ground.
“I’ve never told anybody the whole story,” he said. “’Cause—I mean—Winry didn’t know. Al didn’t even know it was… I mean, I figured he might’ve—guessed, but I just didn’t… want him to think I was rubbing it in his face that I was doing something that he couldn’t, just ’cause he was so goddamnn sick, and he was in and out of the hospital all the time, and there wasn’t… room. In his life. And I didn’t think there was in mine, but fucking Russell snuck in the back fucking door, and —”

“Trashed the place?” Roy asked softly.

Ed pushed his hair back from his face. “Yeah.”

Roy shuffled his feet and moved his chin to the other knee. “Sometimes it’s appalling what people are capable of.”

“It wasn’t even—he was scared,” Ed said, and in that instant—

In that instant, he fucking hurt for Russell Tringham. In the way he used to, back then—in the way he used to feel the things that Russell felt so damn acutely, like they were linked together by a web of invisible capillaries and little silver cables bowing in between their hearts.

“We were both in fucking denial for ages,” Ed said. “I mean—I knew. It’d hit me one day, and it was just too factual for me to do anything except acknowledge it and put my head down and just… try not to let anybody else ever see it. But he was so far back in the fucking closet that the dust bunnies were eating him alive. And it wasn’t his fault. The year before Winry’s grandma moved us all up there, there was this kid—some kid in high school who was openly gay, and he was out one night by himself, and half a dozen of the guys from his class beat the shit out of him in a backalley, and he died. They got tried, but the court kept pushing for a lighter sentence ’cause they’d only wanted to kick the crap out of him, which, y’know, is fine, right? And nobody would call it a hate crime, and it just… I always had a feeling Russell knew him. The kid that got killed. I never mentioned it, but I just—I dunno. Maybe that’s just part of who he is. He just—buries shit so he never has to be vulnerable, and if you tear your hands up trying to dig down to him, then it’s your own damn fault.”

Roy was watching him without saying anything.

Maybe that was why it’d been so fucking easy to trust him—not the silence; the burying thing. Roy wasn’t like that. Roy just kept… giving. Roy kept offering things, and even when he wasn’t forking over dark secrets, he was just so… open. Effusive. Warm, all the way through.

He was like Al that way. Winry, too. Sure, he didn’t wear his heart on his sleeve; he kept it tucked back and shrouded so you had to guess at the shape of it, but he never held back. And when it was important, he told the fucking truth.

“Anyway,” Ed said. “We—I dunno. One night it went from Netflix and kinda-like-cuddling-but-no-homo to… we were watching fucking Captain America, and he accidentally paused it on this frame where Chris Evans looked like fucking dessert, and I just—it was stupid late, and we’d just come off midterms, and I was so exhausted I wasn’t thinking, and I said—y’know, ‘Damn, he’s so friggin’ gorgeous,’ and then I realized what I’d said, and I froze, and there was this second… and then he said in this totally measured voice, he said—’Yeah, he’s pretty hot.’ And my whole fuckin’ world flipped, ’cause—I mean, him leaning on me for hours at a time had gotten to be so normal, but we just never said anything, like that’d make it not mean anything, and… I knew this could change all of it.” He drew a breath and let it out and looked at Roy’s shower curtain, which was the kind of classily simple geometric design Ed never would’ve thought to pick out at the store. “And I just—I waited too long, and it was starting to get awkward, and he reached for the remote again, and I just
blurted out, like—‘Y’know, you could be him for Halloween if you’d just get your hair out of your damn face.’ And he looked over at me, and I looked at him, and he had one fuckin’ leg practically on top of my lap, like, what the fuck were we even… And he said ‘Yeah?’ and I said ‘Yeah,’ and then he leaned in and fucking kissed me and then pulled away and looked at the screen, and he was going all pink, and I thought I’d died, and he was like, ‘I’ve seen this too many times, do you want to watch something else?’"

Roy winced. “Smooth.”

“Always,” Ed said.

Roy winced harder. “What did you do?”

“I said ‘I guess,’” Ed said. “And then I said ‘Well, I mean, shit, it’s late, I should go home,’ and he said, ‘Yeah, I gotta check on Fletcher’—that’s his brother—and I said, ‘Yeah,’ and then he said ‘Okay,’ and then I said, ‘Do you want to—is there anything in theaters right now that you want to see? This weekend or something?’ And he said ‘Yeah,’ and I said ‘Okay,’ and he said ‘And—dinner or something, maybe, if you want,’ and I said ‘Yeah,’ and then… I went home.”

“Oh,” Roy said softly.

Ed wasn’t sure what that meant, but he was sure that Roy’s eyes on him were starting to make him—not nervous, exactly; his skin wasn’t crawling any more avidly than it had been, and his heart’s erratic thumping hadn’t noticeably changed its cadence. But there was something about having Roy curled up there, watching him, that just… that made it harder. Was all.

“Hang on,” he said. “I don’t like sitting here on your can pontificating at you.”

One of Roy’s eyebrows quirked. “It’s hardly…”

Careful of the metal knee and its innumerable modes of betrayal, he got up only to sit down again—but at Roy’s side instead, with a little space of wall left between them. That was better. Safer, somehow. It felt more committed, in a way, because he couldn’t just jump up and leap over Roy’s feet and race for the door, but having a lateral conversation with someone felt… gentler. Somehow. More even. Ed had so many balance problems in every possible sense of the phrase that he tried to take whatever he could get.

Roy reached over and brushed a few fingertips over the top of Ed’s nearer knee. Fortunately, it was the right one, so Ed could even feel it. “You aren’t pontificating.”

“You know what I mean,” Ed said.

Roy’s fingers grazed his knee again, a touch more intently this time, even though he was looking at the cabinet under the sink.

“Yes,” he said. “I do.”

Ed drew a breath and let it out. He had to get his momentum back here, or he was never going to get through this.

“Shit,” he said. He couldn’t afford to let Roy doing cutey-affectionate stuff distract him, either. That was the one big downside of sitting here instead, wasn’t it? “Okay. Um—right. So… so on Monday, between classes, I caught up with him and all of his friends—I mean, our friends, at that point, but… whatever—and I went up to him, and the whole way over, between seeing him and getting there… you know, I was thinking about what I was gonna do, what I was gonna say. I was
thinking I’d just play it real casual, just—really lightly touch his arm and say ‘Hey’ or something, not make a big deal out of it but make sure he knew I hadn’t changed my mind or forgotten about it or whatever, but... I mean—he saw me when I was partway to him, and his—body language just—changed. Instantly. He’s always sort of an uptight piece of shit in public, because he cares too much about what people think of him, and he tries to be what he thinks they’ll think is cool, so he has this stance that looks all stiff and contrived and shit if you really know him, but—this was different. He went from that to just... tight all over, like he was bracing himself, and you can only ever see one of his fucking eyes at a time, but it went big like he was scared and then narrow like he was suspicious, and then... and so I went up to him, and I was sort of—I mean, I still wanted to... just—touch him, so I kind of—started to reach out, and... He just—jerked back like I was fucking diseased or something, and his whole expression was so fucking discouraging that it was like—I had this second where I wondered if I’d fucking made it up. The whole thing. Maybe I’d been so tired that all my stupid fantasies about him had finally gotten the better of me or something, and he’d never done any of that at all.”

He could feel Roy staring at him again—one of those ones that rung with disbelief; the kind where a little lines pressed deep between the person’s eyebrows as their whole face tried to get in on the incredulity.

“Ed,” Roy said, half-voiced, before Ed could barrel on towards the rest of it. Pausing for breath was a gamble. He needed to stop betting; he knew he had shit luck. “I—at the very start. After that Halloween party—the things you said—”

“There’s more,” Ed said.

“Oh, God,” Roy said. “Can I—?”

Ed glanced at him—only sidelong, and cautiously, as a question. Roy extended his arm and very lightly laid his hand on Ed’s knee—the one with nerves in it, that was.

Roy touched him constantly. Roy touched him in passing, in conversation, in silences and in between thoughts. Roy touched him without thinking, and without expectation.

Roy touched him like Roy just wanted to. Like it was something worth doing for its own sake.

“Yeah,” Ed said, which was insufficient to convey all the things he should’ve been saying. “That’s fine. That’s—nice.”

Roy smiled a little, squeezed his knee very gently, and said nothing.

He was lying about that telepathy thing, wasn’t he? Bastard was psychic as hell, and he was just keeping it a secret because it so often gave him the upper hand.

Ed breathed in deep again and pushed his hair back from his face.

“Oh, God,” Roy said. “Can I—?”

Ed glanced at him—only sidelong, and cautiously, as a question. Roy extended his arm and very lightly laid his hand on Ed’s knee—the one with nerves in it, that was.

Roy touched him constantly. Roy touched him in passing, in conversation, in silences and in between thoughts. Roy touched him without thinking, and without expectation.

Roy touched him like Roy just wanted to. Like it was something worth doing for its own sake.

“Yeah,” Ed said, which was insufficient to convey all the things he should’ve been saying. “That’s fine. That’s—nice.”

Roy smiled a little, squeezed his knee very gently, and said nothing.

He was lying about that telepathy thing, wasn’t he? Bastard was psychic as hell, and he was just keeping it a secret because it so often gave him the upper hand.

Ed breathed in deep again and pushed his hair back from his face.

“Okay,” he said. “Um—yeah. Anyway. He was just—stepping away from me the whole day, you know? Putting another person in between us, moving out of the way even though I’d gotten the damn point, and I wasn’t about to try that again. I don’t think anybody else noticed, but I guess that was the idea. And he was good at that. He was always good at that. Reading people. Well enough for self-preservation, anyway. And I was mad. I mean—hurt-mad, but that still counts. Hurt-pissed. And I sent him this long-ass tirade over text that night, just like, Who the hell do you think you are; that really happened; you and I both know it happened; you can’t just pretend it didn’t, kind of a thing. And he sent back something like Are you thick, of course it did, but we can’t exactly go around advertising it. If you want to go to the movies, let’s go to the movies. It’s ours. It’s just
“I do,” Roy said quietly. “And what a pretty red flag it is.”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “But—yeah. Well. He chilled out a little the next day, I guess because he figured I’d gotten the damn memo, but he was still keeping a safe distance, and there were a couple times where we were alone, and I could see him scanning around us to make sure nobody was watching, just in case I—tried something, or whatever, I guess. But he was sort of relaxing, so we were starting to, like, laugh at each other’s stupid-ass jokes again, so…it was okay. It seemed okay. He was even starting to get close to me again by Friday, so I thought—y’know. Maybe he’d just gotten spooked or something. He’d told me about one or two girlfriends he’d had before, but it’d been a while, so I figured…y’know. It was new to him, too. And what the hell did I know, anyway; maybe all of this was normal, right? So—yeah. I just—yeah. I figured a movie theater’d be perfect, because nobody’d see us, so we could get a little closer without him having to worry about it. But I wasn’t exactly sure what that was gonna be like, and I wasn’t exactly sure how far he was going to want to go, so I was starting to get seriously fucking nervous about it—but good-nervous, hyped-up-nervous. Excited.”

“Is it an ‘and’?” Roy asked. “Or a ‘but’?”

“Either,” Ed said. “He was—he—you know. Didn’t want to share popcorn, even though their stupid ‘small’ would barely fit in a mid-size sedan. And I didn’t even want popcorn; I didn’t want my fingers to get all greasy if we were gonna be touching each other, but he kept insisting, and—but I was trying to be cool. So I just quit arguing and paid for exactly half of it like he wanted, so that the fucking kid at the cash register wouldn’t think we were good enough friends to spot each other at the movie theater, let alone on a fucking date. And we went and sat down, and I just felt like shit, you know, like—I didn’t know what I’d done wrong, and I thought maybe I’d just had the whole idea of dating somebody backwards from the start, and maybe it wasn’t supposed to be any good; maybe it was supposed to feel like this, and that made me feel worse, and he kept asking what had crawled up my ass and died, and hadn’t I really wanted to see this movie, and didn’t I want some damn popcorn, and…”

He got the feeling that this was one of those moments that burned its own silhouette into your consciousness and stayed there, carved out in lines of ash. He was going to remember sitting here and telling this stupid, stupid story forever. Every time he thought about Russell from here on out, he was going to see a vivid afterimage of the woodgrain of Roy’s bathroom cabinet door.

At least that was an improvement over Russell’s stupid face.

“Can I…?” Roy said.

He’d lifted his hand up again, the better to lift the rest of his arm with it, which he was…extending. Like he wanted to put it around Ed’s shoulders. Just ’cause.

Ed shifted in and fit himself under Roy’s shoulder. That felt even fucking better than the knee-squeeze thing.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Nothing to thank me for,” Roy said, leaning his head down to rest it against Ed’s. Not in a pointed way. Or at least not yet. If he tried to pull that card, Ed was going to kick his ass, no matter how hot and cute and compassionate he was. “Pleasure’s all mine.”

“Whatever,” Ed said.
“Whatever indeed,” Roy said.

“Russell,” Ed said.

“Extra whatever,” Roy said. “A side of whatever with whatever sauce.”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “He—I dunno. I figured maybe once the movie started, when the lights were down, it’d… he’d be okay. Right? We’d gone to the movies a million times, and we were always elbowing each other and whispering and stuff. So I thought maybe I could start with that, just to kind of—remind him what we’d been to each other before, and maybe if… he just didn’t want to do anything more than that, then it’d be fine.”

“Lord,” Roy said.

“It was a crap action movie,” Ed said. “Did you see the one with the gun-inside-a-gun thing?”

He could feel Roy’s jaw moving, but he could only imagine the expression—which was a shame, because it was probably magnificent. “Ah—no. Thank goodness. No.”

“Okay,” Ed said. “Well—it wasn’t great. So about half an hour in, I was bored and desperate enough that I…” The words stuck. Coughing them up was like deep-throating knives. Maybe it’d get easier someday—dredging up moments like this, where the shame of his own naïveté almost drowned him. “…tried to hold his hand.”

There was a silence. Lovely. Even Roy was judging him.

“‘Tried’?” Roy said slowly.

Funny thing was, that sounded a lot more like sympathy than it did like judgment.

“He pulled his hand away,” Ed said. More knives—delicate little ones. Bright, polished, uniformly sharp. “So fast he knocked over his stupid fucking popcorn and spilled it all over the floor.”

Roy’s other arm swept in around him—which was startling, but Ed managed to suppress the urge to flinch, which was good, because then Roy was pressing his forehead to Ed’s temple and saying, “Fuck him,” and he wouldn’t have wanted to miss that for the world.

“Yeah,” he said. “Well—we—after that we went and got pizza, which was fine, I guess. He at least made an effort to have a conversation. Sort of seemed normal for a while. And then I’d driven, so I took us back to his place, and when I went to drop him off, he was like, ‘Wait,’ and had me park across the street. And then we made out for, like, half an hour.”

The tension of Roy’s hug changed. Then he drew back, and this time Ed could see his face.

This expression wasn’t as good, though. This one was a combination of bewilderment and disgust that Ed was pretty familiar with—on other people, at least.

“What?” Roy said.

Hot blood flooded his face. Roy didn’t really have a leg to stand on—so to fucking speak—as far as thinking he was easy, after all; where the hell did he get off talking like that? “Well—”

Roy’s eyes narrowed. “How dare he use you like—” He closed his eyes, took a breath, and sat back against the wall again, keeping one arm around Ed and dropping the other to set his hand on Ed’s elbow. “Sorry. Go ahead.”
“Well—it was—fine,” Ed said. Al had once asked him, completely innocently, if those just happened to be his favorite words in the language, or if he’d ever meant them in his life. “I mean—y’know, eventually he was like, ‘Okay, I gotta go, but I’ll see you later,’ and then… that was that.

He was mostly okay the next week—not exactly boyfriend-y, or anything, but he was kind of getting back to normal, and I was starting to think maybe that was the best I ever gonna get. And maybe that was how it was supposed to be anyway. Outside of stupid rom-com movies, mostly people just complain about their significant others anyway, right? So what’s even the point of putting yourself through all that?”

“Mm,” Roy said, damnamingly noncommittally. “Sex, I suppose.”

“Right,” Ed said. He had a weird tingling feeling at the back of his neck, but he was ninety percent sure Roy was trying to be dry and ironic here and was actually agreeing with him. “So—the next weekend, he was like, ‘Movies are so expensive, do you want to just hang out? We can call it a date if you want,’ and I was thinking maybe if I just let him run this thing the way he wanted, he’d get comfortable with it, and maybe he’d even start to like it, and then it might be different. So I figured, fine, y’know, whatever, and I went over to his place like normal, and we just did the same sort of shit we always did for a while, and that was great. And then he was like ‘Do you wanna make out?’ and I was kind of tired and didn’t really want to be there for an entire hour again, trying to figure out what to do with my fucking hands the whole time, but I was like, ‘Okay, sure,’ and… and it got—pretty—heavy, I guess. Y’know, he got really into it. And then he all of a sudden pulled back and was like, ‘Wait, we can’t do this here, don’t be like that,’ and I was like ‘Okay, one, be like what, and two, why not?’, and he was like ‘We can’t do any weird shit around Fletcher, dumbass.’”

“His brother?” Roy asked. “Where—”

“In another room,” Ed said. “If he was even home. I don’t remember. I was just—I was like, ‘What the hell about this is weird shit?’, you know?”

Roy was doing the head-leaning thing again. Ed was fairly sure that was a good sign; it seemed to mean that he knew this shit was getting serious. “Oh, God.”

“And, I mean, I get it,” Ed said. “It’s not like the second I figured out I was into dudes, I flung myself out of the closet and slid across the floor on my knees and kicked up a musical number and started accessorizing in rainbow or some shit, but—I mean—Fletcher’s a nice kid. He’s always been a nice kid. And he wasn’t just some kid, either, you know? He and I were cool. We’d hung out. Russell’d had a final on his birthday the quarter before, and me’n Al had taken Fletcher out to ice cream and then breakfast, in that order—shit like that. It wasn’t like he’d stop talking to me because he thought I was macking on his brother or something.”

“Ice cream before breakfast is a terrible idea,” Roy said softly.

“Heathen,” Ed said. “Don’t knock it ’til you try it.”

“Fair,” Roy said. “And besides—if he didn’t have a problem with that, I can’t imagine he’d take issue with two men in a relationship, particularly if one of them was a family member whose happiness he had a stake in.”

“Right?” Ed said. “Just—fuck. Anyway. I—anyway. I was like, ‘Okay, well, fucking fine, let’s just watch another movie, and then I’ll get my disgusting ass out of your house before I pollute your couch any more,’ and he was like, ‘It’s not like that,’ so we had a big fucking fight about it, but in the end it was like—he kept telling me he did want to do it, he really did, he was really interested in me, he really wanted to give it a shot, blah de blah and so on; he just wasn’t sure about some of this stuff, and I wasn’t giving it a chance, and yada yada—”
“It is remarkable to me,” Roy said, “what a talent some people have for seeing the world in mirror-image.”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “And then telling you it’s your fault when you’re confused about where things are.”

Roy winced. “Precisely.”

Ed’s voice was starting to fray at the edges—kind of like his patience, which begged the question of why Roy’s hadn’t given out yet when Ed’d been monologuing for long enough to strain his vocal cords.

And why the hell was Roy so damn good at listening to things like this, anyway? It was partly the bastard’s own damn fault for doing the sympathy thing so well. Ed had had this problem last time, too—with the first life-story/sob-story incident on the couch. Roy made it so friggin’ easy to sit your ass down and spill your guts for what felt like hours at a time.

He needed to wrap this up—if not for Roy’s sake, then for his own. Laryngitis was not cute, and he was probably going to need that voice later, if for nothing else than to ask last-ditch questions in lecture about material that might be on his finals. And for telling Ling and Lan Fan to get a room that was not this room, probably; he’d had to use that once or twice of a weekend where there was illicit liquor involved.

“Jeez,” he said. “Well—anyway. Yeah. So—I figured—I mean, I’d been stupid enough to moon over this guy for a fucking year at that point, so I figured—might as well see it through, as far as I could. Maybe he meant it. Maybe he was just scared, and once he got comfortable, it’d be okay. Maybe Fletcher’d find out and be super cool about it, and then that’d help him realize it wasn’t some big, dramatic, life-or-death thing, and... y’know. Lots of maybes. And you’re a scientist; you know what ‘maybe’ does.”

“Kills you slowly,” Roy said, “with the questions first, and then the guesses, and then the thirst for data.”

Ed—

Felt things. Felt things so strongly for this weirdo that he was terrified to look at them head-on, because they were big, and feelings that outweighed you could crush you to dust in an instant if you tried to carry them alone.

“Yup,” he said. Nice and noncommittal. “So—yeah. Just—went with it. For another week. And that weekend we got real lucky, and Winry’s granny took her and Al to a museum they wanted to go to—I mean, it probably wasn’t actually luck; probably they were all sick of listening to me and Russell bicker about TV shows and what to eat and every other damn thing in the universe every time we were in the house—but the point was we got the place to ourselves. And I was like—okay, maybe he’ll finally fucking chill out, and we can have a nice night, and I’ll get the Real Boyfriend Experience, and maybe it won’t be so bad.”

“And?” Roy said, slowly, like he wasn’t sure he wanted to know, but the thirst for data had him desperate.

“And he was like ‘We should have sex,’” Ed said. “Five minutes after everybody walked out the door—which is stupid, first of all, ’cause people forget their keys and double back, like, all the damn time. But—anyway. Anyway, I—I said—well, first I said, ‘Do you even know how?’, and he said ‘Of course I fucking do, what the hell, why don’t you?’, and then I said ‘No.’ Just out and—I didn’t
even think about it; I just—knew, and… it just came right out, just like that, and—and then he started in with the ‘But it always makes this sort of thing work better, it does, that’s the whole point of intimacy, and I don’t like fighting with you, and I just want to try it, we don’t have to do much,’ followed by the ‘What the fuck, I didn’t expect you of all people to be some kind of prude,’ followed by the ‘Well, fuck you, am I not good enough? I’m probably the best you’re ever gonna get, in case you hadn’t noticed, there isn’t exactly a big population of horny oil-slicked models bangin’ your door down asking to have sex with you and your shitty attitude and your bad jokes and your fake fucking leg.’”

Roy gasped.

Roy actually gasped out loud.

And then he clapped his hand over his mouth, which was even cuter.

And then his eyes went so sad, which wasn’t.

“He didn’t,” Roy said. “He didn’t—he didn’t say that to you. Ed—please tell me…”

“The shit people really think always comes out when they’re mad like that,” Ed said. “It wasn’t… I mean, it wasn’t a surprise. Just… I’d really hoped for better. With him, at least. I’d put a lot into getting close to him even though I’d always… I mean, a part of me’d been waiting for it. For that. You start to expect it after a while. And he’d always… y’know, he’d side-eyed it, when he’d thought I wasn’t looking, or he’d said things sort of in a roundabout way, but… it still… hurt. A lot. To be—that, to him. Rather than me, with that.”

Roy said nothing. Ed wasn’t sure Roy could utilize language just now. On the upside, that was probably a completely unprecedented occurrence—Roy Mustang, struck speechless.

“It’s fine,” Ed said. “That wasn’t even the part th—”

“It’s not fine,” Roy said. “Nothing about that is fine.”

“Lemme finish,” Ed said. “I’m almost there.”

Roy looked at him for a second more, and then the arm still draped around Ed’s shoulders squeezed them gently.

“Of course,” Roy said. “Go ahead.”

Was it weak to lean in? Was it sappy? Was it taking advantage? Ed didn’t know which one was likeliest, or which one was worst.

Too late anyway.

“There isn’t much more to it,” he said. “I told him where to shove it, in some detail, but it was my house, so I couldn’t just… leave, right? So he was just—y’know, standing in the living room telling me why I was gonna be alone forever, and reminding me all his friends would take his side, not that there’d be a side, because none of them were gonna know about this, and… and I didn’t want to lock myself in anywhere in case he stared fucking with Winry’s granny’s shit, but I went into the other room where the dog was and just—she knew. So I just sat down, and she came over and sat with me, and I put my arms around her, and she put her head on my shoulder, and I just—stayed there. And Russell came in after a minute of talking to an empty room about what a shitty boyfriend I was, I guess, and I told him to get fucked, and he said he definitely wouldn’t be doing it here, so I said it again, but I couldn’t yell at him without scaring the dog, so… y’know. After a couple of minutes he
I got bored and just walked out. I dunno how he got a ride home, and I don’t really fucking care, and after that we hadn’t even spoken again until the other day when I ran into him at the 7-Eleven near the hospital when I was getting stuff for Al.”

“God,” Roy said, faintly.

“He was just scared,” Ed said. “But he was scared and taking it out on me, and that’s… fucked. That’s fucked up, and you don’t do that to people, and you definitely don’t do it to people who are just as scared as you are, and just aren’t assholes about it.”

Roy was wincing again. How did he make that look good? “It’s hardly just—”

“Well,” Ed said, “I mean—scared and insecure together, probably. But I didn’t… I guess I didn’t ever think he’d get so fucking sharp from it. That was the part that made it so bad, because he’d never been like that before. Not with me. But—you know. You fuck up, and then you get up, and you learn from it.”

He was done. He was done, and it was done—every last word of it had been released from where they’d been festering within him, and the weight was lifted, and Dobby was finally free.

He wasn’t sure what the hell he was supposed to do about Roy’s arm at this point, so he sort of… patted it…, and then he braced himself against the floor and the wall and levered himself up to his feet.

“Anyway,” he said. “Glad that’s all fuckin’ over with. Bottom line is that people are fucked up, and I didn’t—I don’t—have fucking time for that, so—”

Roy stood up. Ed could feel his eyes again, and they were…

They were not finished with this conversation, was what they were.

Shit.

Roy drew a breath, let it out slowly, and said, “He broke your heart.”

Ed had never actually been tased, but he had shocked himself on electrical outlets more times than his touted intellect wanted to admit.

This felt a little like that.

“No,” he said, “he—of course not; he didn’t—it was just some community college bullshit. It’s no big fucking deal.”

“He broke your heart,” Roy said.

“No, he didn’t,” Ed said. “It wasn’t—important. It didn’t matter. It doesn’t matter.”

Roy breathed in and out again. “He broke your heart, Ed.”

Ed ground his teeth and turned the glare up towards the ceiling, not that it appreciated the artistry.

“No, he—”

“He told you,” Roy said, “in so many words, and then demonstrated, past a shadow of a doubt, that he didn’t think you mattered. He set you up to fall and then convinced you it was your own fault. He broke your heart.”
There it was—there was the heat; the fire; the anger, and if he turned it all on Roy—“Nothing about me is fucking broken, Roy Mustang, and if you say that one more fucking time—”

“I’m sorry,” Roy said. “That he hurt you. I’m sorry he treated you like that. You don’t deserve it. You never did. You deserved much better, and much kinder, and much more. And I’m sorry you’ve had to spend so long thinking otherwise. I’m sorry he left those marks on you. I’m sorry you had to pull yourself through it on your own. And I’m sorry no one has been able to give back what he took away.”

Ed’s teeth clenched again; he forced the words out past them; he had to find a foothold here, somewhere, anywhere—“I’m not missing anything; I’m not—I swear to fucking God, Roy—”

“You know what I mean,” Roy said, and his voice was soft, but his eyes were unrelenting, and Ed’s heart had started to pound out a warning; as the tempo tightened, the sound grew harder and harder to ignore—

“It doesn’t matter,” Ed said. “It didn’t matter then, and none of it fucking matters anymore.”

“It matters,” Roy said. “It matters, and it’s important. You are allowed to be hurt—to let yourself hurt, to let yourself feel it, to let other people know.”

Ed’s throat stuck, but he forced the truth out past the snagging bit: “Nobody’s got fucking time for that.”

“I do,” Roy said.

Ed snorted before he could stop himself. That was cute. “You’re one of the busiest people I know.”

“I have time for you,” Roy said—apparently undeterred by all of the supremely attractive noises Ed was making, since he stayed completely serious. “I would make time for you if you needed it. That’s the whole point.”

“The whole point of what?” Ed said. “Me fucking up your life just by being in it?”

Roy frowned at him.

“I’m just bein’ honest,” Ed said.


“Now you’re speaking my language,” Ed said. Maybe if they kept going in whatever direction this was, they’d end up so far away from the previous topic that Roy would forget where they’d started.

“If you think I am somehow out of your league,” Roy said, “it stands to reason that I, as a person, by and large make good judgment calls. Yes?”

Ed eyed him. “I don’t like where this is going.”

“That’s because you’re smart,” Roy said. “Answer the question. Am I reasonable?”


“Opulent praise,” Roy said. “I thrive on laudation. In any case—taking my relatively good judgment as a baseline assumption, is it then safe to presume that when I specifically decide to do something, it’s probably a good idea?”
“No,” Ed said. “People don’t work on premises like that.”

“Play along,” Roy said.

“Maybe,” Ed said.

“Close enough,” Roy said. “So if I am a rational human being, and my decisions are mostly good, and I am deliberately choosing to create space in my life for you, because that is what I want, and I feel that I will benefit from it, whether you foresee the same results or not—is it safe, then, to conclude that dating you is most likely, at a basic level, a good idea?”

Ed stared at him.

Roy flashed a winsome grin.

“You are one hell of a bullshitter,” Ed said.

“Again with the lavish compliments,” Roy said. “Don’t look at me; I’m blushing.”

“Not much of a liar, though,” Ed said.

Roy reached up and brushed Ed’s bangs back from his face. “Pity. Did I make my point?”

Ed scowled. “You made—a point.”

“Can I tell you my version of that story?” Roy asked.

Ed blinked. “Wh—I mean, sure, but…”

“The heartbreak story,” Roy said, and it took all of Ed’s remaining willpower not to flinch, which didn’t leave him any for bailing out of this while he had the chance.

“Yeah,” he said. “Course. I sure as hell fucking talk enough for two of us.”

“You talk exactly the right amount,” Roy said.

Ed made a face at him.

Roy smiled.

Then he said, “He took me out to dinner.”

It took Ed a second to call up all the hazy, half-buried recollections of things they’d talked about before the morning and the revelation and him stepping out into the sunlight and trying so damn hard to let go.

He’d failed step one, obviously, but that wasn’t important right now.

“Nice dinner?” he asked.

“As nice as two college students could afford,” Roy said. “All he was willing to say in advance was that he had something very important that he wanted to talk to me about, and he wasn’t sure how I was going to take it.” Ed started cringing in preparation, but it was somehow worse than he’d feared. “I thought,” Roy said, very softly, “that he was going to propose.”

Ed managed not to say He should have. Ed managed not to say What kind of a fucking idiot would
**turn you down?** He knew, in his brain of brains, that it wasn’t like that—that people weren’t; love wasn’t. He also knew that the statistical majority of people weren’t predominantly predelicted towards their own gender; he knew that sometimes it didn’t make sense; and he knew that people fit together in different ways. Roy did not look to everyone the way Roy looked to him.

“Oh, shit,” he managed instead. “Okay, my turn.”

He held both arms out—and in the split-second before Roy dove into them, Ed caught a glimpse of a fascinating combination of delight and relief and something that looked an awful lot like gratitude.

It felt—

So nice. So damn nice. Why did everything with Roy always resonate in the center of Ed’s chest like a perfectly-harmonized chorus of angels followed by a righteous guitar solo?

“Mm,” Roy said into the side of Ed’s neck, where he’d buried his face. Ed was pointedly not looking at how sharply he’d had to bend to make that possible. “You smell good.”

“I smell like the sandwich oven at work,” Ed said.

“No,” Roy said. “You smell like you.”

“Me smells like sandwiches,” Ed said. “It’s the dark side of work-study. Well, the darker side, since all of it’s pretty damn grim. Are you still hungry, or what?”

Roy kissed his neck—and not the lingering, sexy kind he did so agonizingly well; just a peck, like it was an impulse too delectable to resist—and then drew back, grinning. “Not particularly. Or at least not for sandwiches.”

Ed made a face at him.

Roy made an overstated smoochy face back, complete with batting eyelashes, and the laugh that rattled out of Ed’s chest felt like it shook some of the black mist loose with it.

“You,” Ed said, wondering if it was safe to savor the way Roy’s hands stayed splayed out on his shoulders; wondering if it was safe to lift his own and wrap them around Roy’s elbows—wondering and then doing it anyway; “were going to tell me a story.” Shit. “I mean—if you want to.”

Roy’s expression was more of a stab wound than a smile. “I… was. There isn’t all that much to tell. We went out; I was a wreck; I’d been practicing what I was going to say; I’d been Googling around to find out which states it was legal in back then, and what the prettiest cities in all those places were, and trying to remember whether my mother had ever expressed a particular distaste for any of them.” He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and sighed. “He made me wait until we were halfway through appetizers.”

“Rude,” Ed said weakly. “Did he pick a moment when you had food in your mouth?”

“Of course,” Roy said. He was stroking at Ed’s hair—kind of absentingly, almost like it was a compulsion. Or like he didn’t notice he was doing it. Or both. “And then he took my hand on the table and gripped it very tight, and I was thinking, *Oh, my God, here it comes, am I ready for the rest of my life?*—it was all, admittedly, a bit melodramatic even for me. And he said… hell, what did he say. I used to have the exact words on the tip of my tongue whenever I went for them. I guess it’s a good sign if they’re starting to slip away.” He paused, looking at the wall, and there was a little line between his eyebrows, and they were, in fact, really having this conversation in the bathroom of Roy’s apartment after Ed had spilled his guts all over the little bathmat and the fuzzy blue rug. “He
said—‘Roy, this might be the most important thing I ever do in my life.’"

Ed winced so hard that he was surprised his face didn’t just implode around it.

“He didn’t know,” Roy said, smiling wryly, which made it even worse. “He didn’t have the slightest idea. Meanwhile, my heart was going haywire; do you know how…? It just starts to race, and then it feels like it’s everywhere at once, and for me my breathing starts to get ragged next, and… I kept trying to tell myself to calm down, because if I was a mess, he might change his mind—or I’d make a terrible scene, and I wasn’t sure which would be worse.”

Ed got the feeling that Roy survived by convincing people that that sort of thing was true—that a social embarrassment was as important to him as his own feelings, not because the faux pas was devastating so much as because his emotions were shallow and fleeting and easy to forget.

The terrible thing was that he wouldn’t still do it unless a lot of people in the past had bought it instead of calling bullshit.

“So,” Roy was going on, “there I was, trying not to panic; there he was, oblivious to my misconception, and then… he said, ‘I know most people, and you’re probably one of them, would say it’s way too early to tell’—which, as you can imagine, didn’t help—‘but there’s something… I feel like I’ve finally woken up. I feel like the whole world is new, and everything looks different, and it’s all so beautiful, and I just… I hope we can make it through this—you and I. You’re so important to me, and I never want to do anything to jeopardize that, but I just know that this is right.’”

“Christ,” Ed said.

“I know,” Roy said. “I couldn’t have given him better dialogue. I’m paraphrasing a little; I think I’ve probably made it worse in my head over time. But it really… it really was remarkable.” He shook his head. “Anyway—finally, I suppose, he came right out and said, ‘I met somebody, Roy. I met the most incredible girl. We’ve only gone out a couple of times, but—Roy, she’s like a revelation. And what you and I have had has been so amazing, and I treasure it, I really do, and I always will, but I think… I think I’m serious enough about her that we need to stop doing it. I think it’s time. And hey, maybe that’s a good thing, right? It’s been so good—maybe that’s been holding us back, in a way. Maybe it’s been keeping us away from other people. Maybe it’s been keeping you away from somebody, too. Sound like a plan?’”

Ed’s instinct was to reach out and pet Roy’s hair a little, like some kind of weird consolation prize.

Apparently the WTF Is Relationship? gods were smiling on him tonight, though, because it looked like Roy absolutely loved it.

“Cool.”

Roy looked at him, almost too intently, for a long couple of seconds. It was funny—his eyes were
dark enough that you couldn’t distinguish any color variation; they weren’t like Al’s, which had tiny flecks of gold and brown and olive green and changed a little bit depending on what colors were around him to influence your perception. But Roy’s were still, somehow, among the most interesting eyes Ed had ever seen in his entire goddamn life.

Roy settled one hand on either side of Ed’s jaw, closed his eyes, and touched their foreheads together, and this was like something out of a movie, and Ed was so startled by it for a long second that he forgot how to be a smartass and missed his chance to say something obnoxious.

“I can’t promise you,” Roy said, softly, “that I’m going to be perfect. I’m not. I can’t even promise I’ll be great, or that this will always be great, or that I’ll live up to your basic expectations, let alone your wildest dreams.”

He opened his eyes. Ed swallowed. They were so fucking deep; so deep and so dark and so warm.

“But I can promise you one thing,” Roy said, “without a single reservation. You can bet your life on it. I will never, ever treat you like shit. I won’t.”

Ed’s throat was acting up again. He tried another swallow. “I—I mean, I don’t—my… impulses are all… bad. They’re always bad. But I’m—trying. I swear I am. I’m gonna do the best I fucking can, and—you might have to be pretty damn patient, but—I’m tryin’, Roy. I really, really am.”

Roy smiled at him, and they were so bright now—his impossible eyes. Warm in a different way entirely.

“I’d never ask any more of you than that,” he said.

“I’ll remember that the first time you try to get me to do the dishes,” Ed said.

“Curses,” Roy said. “Foiled again.”

Ed nudged his hand at one of Roy’s arms in a way that he hoped conveyed sincerity. Or at least something useful; he wasn’t too picky about what. “Hey. I don’t… want you to be perfect. Just—so you know. Perfect is fucking terrifying. Perfect is ‘I could have anybody, so the second you fuck up, I’m out of here.’”

Roy’s little smile lit up something in the pit of his stomach again. “All right. Not-perfect it is. Not perfect, but doing our best.”

“Yeah,” Ed said.

The smile slipped away, and Roy looked at the wall again, although his hands didn’t move—save for twisting one finger into a lock of Ed’s hair like he was trying to curl it around his knuckles. Ed bit back some smart commentary on how it worked better if you used hairspray; and not to ask why he knew that; and okay, it involved Winry and Al and a bad night with way too much pizza and some questionable choices in the name of product-testing and scientific curiosity.

“When Maes died,” Roy said. “What did I tell you about that? Do you remember?”

Ed could have said I seem to remember basically everything you’ve ever deigned to say to me in exquisite detail because I’m paying really close attention, but instead he went with: “Yeah. Car accident. On his way home from work.”

Roy’s mouth twitched, and the corners moved in an upward direction, but despite the shape, this one wasn’t a smile at all. “That wasn’t… the whole story, I’m afraid. It was—I’d convinced him to meet
me for drinks on his way back. It was about halfway between. Not—lots of drinks; he knew he was
driving; he only had a beer, and the accident wasn’t his doing regardless, but—it was my fault that he
was there at the time that he was. It was my fault he fell where he did in that chain of coincidences.
I’d been… desperate. Far too demanding, probably. I’d just—I hadn’t seen him in so long, and I’d
been begging him to come by and catch up on a Friday night for weeks, and… that was how it
ended. Me not being able to let go was what killed him.”

Ed’s heart clenched strangle-tight. “That’s not—that’s not how it works. It’s not.”

“I know,” Roy said. “But most days, it feels like it is. And then—maybe it’s worse. At the same
time, I couldn’t stop thinking—if he’d just picked me instead of her, it never would have happened in
the first place, right?”

“If one more person had stopped at an intersection and made him miss a green light, it never
would’ve happened,” Ed said. “You can’t play that game. You’ll never sleep again.”

“I know,” Roy said again. “And I know that you know. I just…”

“It still hurts,” Ed said. “It never stops hurting. It gets quiet, sometimes, or you get so busy you
don’t notice for a couple minutes, but it never goes away.”

Roy took a long breath, held it, and let it out slow. He nodded, just the once.

“How long’s it been, exactly?” Ed asked.

“It’ll be four years in April,” Roy said. Ed spread both arms open again, and Roy wrapped himself
into them. “How long before you get to the part where it’s quiet?”

Ed had to reach up further than he would have liked to run his palm across Roy’s shoulder blades,
but the indignity was worth it. “Depends on how loud you can make the good shit in your life,” he
said.

“Damn,” Roy said. “They’ve got a noise curfew here.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to have all our riotous sex in the street,” Ed said.

Roy drew back abruptly, the better to stare at him, which made his face go from zero to tomato soup
in a fraction of a second.

“Um,” he said. “Just—I mean—I was thinking—I oughta take a shower. And—do you wanna—
y’know. Join me?”

Roy’s expression went still. Then he tilted his head a fraction; it dipped towards seriousness—and
then, gradually, he smiled.

That was the really amazing thing, wasn’t it? Ed didn’t have to say We both just got soul-naked. It’s
not like this would be all that different.

“Only,” Roy said, “if that’s something that you want.”

“I—think so,” Ed said. Honesty was the best policy for royally fucking up all of your interpersonal
relations and all that. “I mean, I reserve the right to bail if I totally miscalculated, but—I mean, do
you want to?”

“Let me think,” Roy said, with a flash of a grin. “Do I want to get my hands all over you while
you’re wet and warm with your hair down, and potentially psychologically train you to associate the smell of my shampoo with sex?”

Ed’s heart did a funny thing. A bad-funny thing. Like most stand-up comics, come to think of it. “Um—”

“Not sex-sex,” Roy said. “Even if you decide you’d like to, that’s... challenging. That’s challenging even in a shower that boasts a mythical thing called space. Probably the most I can manage in this square footage is some high-quality groping. Which is absolutely on offer if you want it.”

“Mostly I just wanna see your tattoo,” Ed said.

Roy’s eyes widened. “Aha. At last, your true motives come to light; how positively dastardly.” He paused. “I could just show it to you, if you’d rather.”

“I’d rather the thing with the Pavlov shampoo,” Ed said.

That brought the grin right back. “Your wish is my command,” Roy said.

“Careful,” Ed said. “My wishes can get real creative.”

Roy leaned in—way in, all the way in, in until only a half-gasp of air remained between their mouths, and Ed had to bite down on his bottom lip to keep it from trembling in anticipation of the taste of Roy’s.

“Are you sure?” Roy breathed, and his gaze flicked up from a slow scrutiny of Ed’s mouth to meet Ed’s eyes instead.

“I’m sure I wanna give it a shot,” Ed said. He swallowed. Twice. “S’that—enough?”

“You are, now and always,” Roy said, “so much more than just enough.”

Ed wanted to hit him.

And also to kiss him forever.

One of those was much more likely to end in the literally steamy makeout session he was looking for. It also posed a significantly lower risk of ending in an assault and battery charge.

Besides, it was easier—just as a matter of muscle and energy, it took less work. They were already so close that the tiny movement of pulling on Roy’s wrists drew them enough to eliminate the minuscule distance between their mouths, and then—

And then it was almost too easy. Was it supposed to be like this? Was it supposed to be simple every time?

Roy’s fingertips found the buttons on his stupid work shirt, and Roy was the kind of person who could undo them with his eyes still closed; Roy was the kind of person who could undo them with one hand, sweeping the other around to settle at the small of Ed’s back, swiveling them around, and then start backing up towards the shower without ever breaking the kiss.

Ed, however, stumbled, because that was part of who he was.

“Sorry,” Roy murmured against his mouth, and then he’d drawn back just enough that they were both slowly opening their eyes. He was smiling. It was like he still didn’t know what that did—to
someone like Ed; to things like Ed’s internal organs; to the speed of the reckless rhythm of Ed’s
blood— “Too fast?”

“Just fast enough,” Ed said, and he realized as the words escaped that they were true. “S’my fuckin’—hang on.”

He didn’t want to back away from Roy any further than was strictly necessary to give himself the
elevator room to start unfastening the fly of his jeans—an effort that was complicated enormously by
the fact that his hands kept shaking. It wasn’t that he didn’t want this; it wasn’t reluctance; it wasn’t
anything like fear; and the realization that it must have looked like that only made the tremble worse.

“Shit,” he said. “I—”

“My dear,” Roy said, and that single fucking syllable made it four times worse; “allow me.”

“Oh,” Ed said, and he moved his hands aside, and Roy dragged both of his down Ed’s chest, which
set the half-open shirt to rippling deliciously against his skin, and then applied those impossibly
clever fingers to the task of removing Ed’s pants.

Honestly, it was a relief; Roy was much defter at it than he’d been.

It was less of a relief for his dick, which was immediately extremely committed to making its
presence and interest known to Roy’s tantalizing hands.

The “Oh” that came out of Ed’s mouth this time sounded very different than the last one—breathier,
for one thing, and lower, and absolutely involuntary.

It also made Roy look up from the zipper of Ed’s jeans, and the way his eyes smoldered, and his
lashes lowered, and the corner of his mouth turned up—

“Fuck,” Ed added, at about the same volume, with about the same amount of force.

Roy’s smirk worsened—or bettered; or… well, it was a bit of both. It intensified. It intensified, and
Ed’s blood quickened with it, and his heartbeat stuttered, and he wasn’t sure where his hands had
ended up; all of his extremities felt very distant except for the one that was dangerously close to
Roy’s very capable hands.

Before Ed could express any of these trepidations in something resembling human speech, Roy sank
to his knees, tugged on the fly of Ed’s jeans hard enough to pull them down around his thighs, and
started kissing along the top of the elastic of Ed’s boxers.

“Fuck,” Ed said again, even more emphatically this time. It was somewhat insufficient to describe
the way that it felt like all of his nerves were flaring at once; like the skin in that whole damn region
was inflamed; like Roy’s mouth wrought fire and lightning everywhere it touched— “F’you—f’you
keep that up, we’re not—we’re not gonna make it to the shower—”

“That,” Roy murmured, breath hot and wet, and Ed’s susceptible knee quavered, “would be a
terrible shame.”

He pressed one last lingering kiss to Ed’s hipbone, and then he hooked a finger into one of Ed’s belt
loops on either side and tugged the jeans all the way down, somehow managing to free one hand for
cressing Ed’s right thigh even as he did it. Ed started to move to step out of them, but then Roy was
kissing the inside of his right knee, and then gazing up at him like he was the one who was fucking
miraculous—
“Hey,” Ed croaked out. “C’mere.”

Roy grinned. And then he held one hand over his eyes as if to shade them. “But you’re so far away up there.”

The laugh rattled out of Ed before he could help it; everything was swirling, and he had no idea what to do with it all—either the warmth or the brightness of it alone would have been overwhelming; trying to contain both together felt like swallowing the sun. It was irradiating him from the inside out, wasn’t it? That was the only explanation; it shouldn’t have felt so good.

“Dork,” he said, reaching down to curl a few fingers into the shoulder of Roy’s shirt. “C’mon—”

This time, Roy obeyed the summons. The way Ed was yanking at his shirt certainly didn’t seem to hurt, but since the end result was having Roy’s face closer to his again, Ed wasn’t picky about the particulars.

Roy’s shirt had buttons on it, too—far too many of them, honestly; nobody needed that many buttons to keep their clothes on; it was a sartorial conspiracy; the button companies were enacting a nefarious plot of some kind, he was sure of it—and a collar that made a perfect double-sided handhold for drawing him into another kiss.

Had anyone ever had a more perfect mouth than Roy Mustang? Ed hadn’t exactly conducted a whole lot of surveys over the years, but it seemed statistically implausible that anyone else could chart so high on so many different factors. Roy was something fucking special. Something extraordinary. Something breathtakingly, brain-bendingly, spine-shiveringly great.

And he was Ed’s—for right now, and possibly for some stretch of the future.

Could Ed blame his seething, searing blood for the impulse—which he fought but couldn’t hope to beat—to bite down gently on Roy’s bottom lip before he pulled away? He just wanted everything, all of it, more—

The gleam in Roy’s eyes made it evident that he wasn’t what one would call opposed.

Ed wanted so many things now that they were tangling in his head; thoughts kept catching on one another’s edges until his whole brain was a muddle of half-ideas, fragmented images, feelings and best guesses and urges he wasn’t quite sure how to quantify. He reached out and started in on Roy’s shirt; he could sort out just enough to be positive that he wanted it gone—out of the way, discarded; it was obscuring so much of Roy’s skin, and Ed could have been touching all of that just now if it wasn’t for this fucking shirt—

He bested the buttons at long last; Roy shrugged it off so fluidly that he looked like a professional stripper, and Ed’s brain crapped out once and for all as his guts flipped over and hummed with the heat. His dick was throbbing so hard it hurt. He didn’t know what to ask for; didn’t know if he was still even capable of speaking; didn’t know how much of this he could take—

He spread both hands on Roy’s chest, splaying his fingertips as wide as he could to cover all of the surface area he was capable of. He wanted all of it; wanted everything; wanted to know every dip and curve and line of Roy’s entire fucking body; he couldn’t imagine any future where he wasn’t hungry for it.

Roy reached in and buried both hands in his hair, ducking to start grazing his mouth up along the side of Ed’s neck, leaving a cooling trail of damp impressions as he kissed his way upward towards Ed’s ear. His fingers carded back—his hands met underneath the tie holding Ed’s ponytail, and they
started to draw it out—

“Is this okay?” Roy murmured, and his teeth touched the shell of Ed’s ear, and all of the tendons in Ed’s right leg nearly failed at once. “Can I—?”


The soft noise Roy made in the back of his throat struck Ed’s guts like a spray of gunfire, sparks everywhere.

“God,” Roy breathed against his skin, “your 

Ed wasn’t sure that that counted as a complete sentence, but nothing else seemed to be forthcoming, and given the way that Roy practically whimpered when the tie slid out, and all of Ed’s hair slipped down and settled over his shoulders and slithered down his back, probably that was it.

“Oh, hell,” Roy said. While that was usually, in Ed’s experience, an expression meant to indicate inconvenience or distress, neither of those things was evident in Roy’s voice—or in the way he immediately hooked one arm around Ed’s waist, drew him in, and buried his face in Ed’s hair while his free hand raked through the newly-released volume of it.

“It’s just hair,” Ed said.

“No,” Roy said, faintly, nuzzling deeper into it, which felt… tickly, and admittedly sort of great. “It’s beautiful hair.”

Ed hitched his hips forward against Roy’s, very meaningfully, and grabbed an equally implicative fistful of Roy’s jeans. “It’s just hair,” he said.

“Ah,” Roy said, even more faintly. “You… you bring up an excellent point.”

“Yeah,” Ed said, rolling his hips harder this time, which forced him to grit his teeth to hold back a groan; “I—try.”

Roy returned his attention to attacking Ed’s shirt, so Ed attempted to apply his unsteady hands to removing Roy’s jeans, and after an unreasonable amount of fumbling and more than a little bit of helpless laughter on both sides—

“Shit,” Ed said. “Shit, hang on—let me see it.”

Roy—stupid, dorky, perfect, gorgeous, should-have-been-impossible, should-have-demanded-better-than-him Roy—read his ridiculous mind.

Roy—still all of those things, to a terrible T—turned his back, fitted his thumbs into the waistband of his boxers on either side, and shimmied his hips deliberately as he pushed his underwear down an inch at a time, slowly revealing the mark Ed had been waiting for.

The scar itself wasn’t as dramatic as he’d expected, though he supposed it had had several years to heal, and the ones all over Ed’s back and right shoulder had started out a lot deeper and broader and worse than the average injury.

The tattoo was train-wreck fascinating, though—not just because examining it required Ed to stare at Roy’s extremely nice ass, although that certainly didn’t hurt. The lettering was very crisp and distinct, which he supposed recommended the tattoo place pretty highly. It was, however, more or less illegible, not that Ed and his mess of a signature were a pair to talk—there was a relatively clear
M at the start, and a capital H in the middle, and the rest was a bit of a scribble.

“Anybody ever use you to verify his handwriting?” Ed asked.

“Tragically,” Roy said, and part of Ed’s brain up and exploded as he swung his hips hard enough to dislodge his boxers once and for all, and they slid to the floor; “no. And I felt I might be risking arrest if I offered.”

Ed could not take his eyes off of Roy’s ass. It was just—it was so nice—it was so—well-formed and well-shaped and well-rounded and mouthwateringly close, and—holy fuck.

“You’re risking arrest right now,” he managed around the sudden flood of saliva in his mouth. “S’illegal to look that fuckin’ good naked.”

“Is it?” Roy asked delightedly. He turned, slowly, stepping out of his abandoned boxers, and lifted both arms, holding his wrists together. The gesture was almost—but not quite—provocative enough to distract Ed from the extremely delectable half-hard dick a little ways past it. “I’m so sorry, Officer. Are you going to cuff me?”

“Fuck,” Ed said, helplessly, because he couldn’t think of a single damn thing else to say, but the obliterative appeal of what was in front of him had knocked a breath out of his lungs regardless.

“Or maybe,” Roy said, sauntering forward, and Ed’s feet were rooted to the floor; “you’re the one who’s been a bit bad, so it’s your turn to get punished for a change.”

Roy’s hands settled one either side of his ribs, stroking down slowly in order to settle on his hips, and he could hear himself breathing, but it didn’t seem like there was an atom of oxygen left in the room—let alone a two-atom molecule, which was the kind he needed in order to function; possibly the sheer fucking heat of Roy Mustang had realigned them all into ozone, and now—

And now he was going to die very happy. He supposed it could be a hell of a lot worse.

Roy backed him up against the wall—not that there was far to go in this tiny little room with its improbable atmospheric composition—and curled his index fingers into the waistband of Ed’s boxers. He tugged outward, but not down; and then leaned in until he could breathe against the side of Ed’s neck again—

“My impression,” he said, “was that we’ve both been a little dirty.” He kissed just under Ed’s ear, right as Ed’s heartbeat started to trill a touch too quick—“May I wash your hair, gorgeous?”

“Y-yeah,” Ed said. His body kept trying to jerk forward to meet Roy’s, but Roy had angled himself away, and he was pinning Ed to the wall—albeit gently—by the hips, and—

“I’m getting ahead of myself,” Roy said. He dragged both of his fingers back and forth, fingertips trailing across Ed’s stomach, and that was a brand-new, unforeseen, extremely excruciating type of torment, wasn’t it? “May I take the rest of your clothes off before I wash your hair, gorgeous?”

He drew back far enough to meet Ed’s eyes, and then he tilted his gaze very slowly downward to rake it down Ed’s chest, after which he spent a long, long, flush-redoubling moment admiring Ed’s very obvious erection through the flimsy fabric of the boxers.

Then he looked lower, and then he paused.

“Do you…” He hesitated, which was unnervingly weird for Roy, and then glanced up at Ed with a tentative little smile. “Can you shower with it on? Your prosthetic. I don’t… I’d hate to damage it.”
“I can,” Ed said. “I’m not supposed to. Do it in the dorms anyway, and just try to dry it real well after, ’cause… yeah. But—I mean—” He tried to clear his throat, but whatever had just settled halfway up it didn’t want to budge. “If you… wanna leave it on, that’s fine. I do it all the time.”

Roy brushed the hair back from his face, which was futile and unnecessary and great.

“I want to do whatever is best and easiest for you,” Roy said. “It doesn’t make me uncomfortable. Nothing about you makes me uncomfortable.” He raised his eyebrows, flashed the smirk, God—“Except in the most strictly physical sense, when I’m paying too much attention to how incredible your ass looks when you bend over a lab bench.”

Ed wasn’t sure he needed to take a shower at this point; if his skin got any hotter, it was just going to fry the filth right off of himself anyway.

“You been pervin’ on me in class?” he asked. “Shame, Roy Mustang.”

Roy pulled a face. He was still gloriously, gut-wobblingly naked. This was surreal.

“I know,” he said. “Brb, going to hell, etcetera. But it’s true.” He smiled. The sweet thing was the worst; the sweet thing made Ed’s stomach flip and his heart stumble. “I want you to be comfortable. What’s the best thing for you?”

Ed swallowed. And then he tried to listen.

His inner Al was saying Be honest with him, Brother. He’s being honest with you right now—he means what he said. It’s all right.

His inner Winry was saying If you get any more water in that thing, so help me, God, I am going to wring your lousy little neck.

His inner Paninya—which he hadn’t fucking realized he had until just now; how in the hell had she found her way into his head so fast?—was saying You know, purely from the perspective of spatial practicality, it makes way more sense to take it off. That shower is like a shoebox, and if you’re planning to do anything exciting in there, you’re gonna want the extra space. It’s a win-win!

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, and he tried to smile back at Roy.

“Probably to take it off,” he said.

Roy’s expression didn’t falter. The open, unassuming little smile didn’t fade.

What it did, after a moment of softness, was split into a cheesy grin.

“Sounds good to me,” Roy said. “So far I really like taking things off of you.”

Ed wrinkled his nose.

Roy darted in and kissed his forehead before he could flee.

“Gross,” Ed managed. He couldn’t writhe away very well; there was nothing but wall. “Just—okay—I—”

“How about,” Roy said, “I’ll turn the water on so it’s actually warm by the time we get there, and you can handle that part of the disrobement, and then, if you’ll grant me the unrivaled pleasure and privilege of divesting you of the last of y—”
“You sound like an SAT prep book,” Ed said.

Roy beamed, and then winked. “One you’d shower with?”

There wasn’t much of a response to that other than to reach out and shove him a little—but the plan itself wasn’t bad; the plan itself was... pretty damn brilliant, actually. It was all contrived, of course, but that didn’t change the fact that it gave Roy a valid reason to keep his back turned, testing the water from the faucet, while Ed pried his leg off and then carefully set it aside. He wasn’t sure how loud the water was—whether Roy could hear the tiny sounds of it shifting, and of Ed leaning it against the cabinet; or whether it was just pure, unfettered, sex god instinct that made Roy turn back towards him at precisely the right time.

Roy turning back towards him was a marvel in and of itself, given the goods on display, although Ed had rather been enjoying side-eyeing the ass end in the meantime, too.

Roy didn’t make a point of looking at the stump of Ed’s leg, but he didn’t make a point of skipping it in the appreciative onceover, either. Ed wasn’t sure what he wanted—if there was any such thing. What he wanted, at the heart of it, was for none of the whole amputation business to have ever happened in the first place, but he’d talked himself down from dreaming about that one a long time ago. Even if he’d somehow revolutionized the fields of surgery and biomechanics and whatever others he had to recruit to figure out how to stitch limbs back on and fix them to be functional again, his had gotten so damn mangled in the wreck that it wouldn’t have been suitable anyway. The universe had dealt him this hand, with these cards, and he had to play it. That was the bottom line.

He supposed that someone—someone super, super hot, slightly ridiculous ass tattoo optional—who acknowledged and accepted it but didn’t make a big point out of it was probably what he would have asked for, if he’d ever thought it out.

“Well, that simply won’t do,” Roy said, gesturing to the boxers Ed was still wearing.

His groin had calmed down kind of a lot over the course of the recent combination of adrenaline spikes and simple waiting, but even just having Roy’s attention on his dick made it start diverting blood towards itself again. What a selfish piece of shit, organally speaking. Ed supposed that was evolution’s fault, not his, if you looked at it the right way.

Roy was certainly looking at it the right way, in a manner of speaking. He stepped forward and settled both hands on Ed’s waist—which was a tiny bit unsettling, now, without the other foot. Ed’s balance on one had gotten to be pretty damn impressive, and he’d learned at home how to switch his center of gravity between the best possible points in each configuration at the drop of a hat, but—

But everything was always different when someone saw it for the first time. Everything was always different; and some part of him was always that stupid, scared little kid just running for the crosswalk, with his heart in his throat and his ears, with his guts roiling so hard he thought he was going to puke before he ever choked on his breath, because Al was alone at the hospital, and he might be dying, and Ed had to move faster; he didn’t have a choice; he’d never in his life had a choice—

Roy’s deft, gentle hands spread themselves on his hips again, thumbs rubbing at his hipbones, fingertips grazing up and down and flirting with the elastic of Ed’s waistband.

“May I?” Roy asked, softly.

And what decided Ed, in the end—what drove him, what curled inside him, tight enough that it condensed the feeble metal filaments into an iron bar, and he knew that it was right—was the
unshakeable recognition that if he’d said No, Roy would have stepped back, and smiled, and probably shrugged, and said All right—perhaps another time?

“Yeah,” Ed said.

That wasn’t enough; he sensed something—surely he had some kind of natural inclinations deep down in there, somewhere, towards what to do in a situation where he was sorta-kinda getting laid? Surely his unintentional vested interest in the survival of the species, on a molecular level if not a moral one, had to give him some kind of an edge when he really, really needed it?

He set his jaw, and he looked up into Roy’s gorgeous eyes, and he rolled his hips, long and slow. It was a different maneuver on the one foot, sure, but it still felt… right.

“Go for it,” he said.

Roy’s breath caught, and his eyes widened, and he bit down hard on his bottom lip, and that combination was to die for—but since Ed was apparently lucky enough to keep living anyway, he was gonna do his damnedest to run with this thing as far as it’d go.

“God,” Roy choked out. “You are—just—”

Ed slung both arms around his neck, pulled him in close enough to kiss him, and then—didn’t. Ed counted Roy’s eyelashes, smiled slowly, and breathed lightly against his skin.

“Just what?” he asked.

Roy stared at him.

Then Roy licked his lips, and smirked, and evidently two could play at this game, and Roy was on a winning streak, and Ed—

Was up for the challenge, and ready for the ride of his life.

“Phenomenal,” Roy said, and his fingers curled into the fabric, and he was pushing it down— “And appetizing like no one and nothing I have ever seen.” He leaned in to drag his open mouth up Ed’s throat. “Irresistible,” he said, and he’d slid Ed’s boxers down over his hips, and gravity had a hold on them now, and then—

Roy—

—didn’t.

And the fabric fluttered down past Ed’s ankle and pooled around his foot, and…

That was that. Here they were. Roy shifted back, and Ed kept one arm around his shoulders—more for balance than anything else, although honestly touching him anywhere was the kind of reward that Ed would have walked through fire for.

Roy’s fingertips swept back along his cheekbone, bat ting his hair back en route.

“You all right?” Roy asked, softly.

“Yeah,” Ed said. It was the truth, for once. At least so far. “You?”

Roy smiled. “Rarely better.”
He paused, and then he looked down. He looked back up, meeting Ed’s eyes, and there—at last—was a touch of the caution that he’d come to expect.

It was better than the grimness, though. Or the awkwardness. It was better than just about all of the alternatives, really.

“I don’t want to assume anything,” Roy said. “Do you—need help? I don’t…”

“Want to throw me over your shoulder and haul me around like a sack of potatoes?” Ed asked. “Damn, I was kinda lookin’ forward to that.”

Roy grinned, albeit tentatively. “I’m positive that that can be arranged.”

“Later, maybe,” Ed said, which didn’t exactly do justice to the way that all his guts had done a nice little synchronized shiver at the mere thought of Roy carrying him around. Gross. “I—um—to answer your question. It’s—just let me lean on you a little for now, is good. Unless you wanna see me do my ‘bunny rabbit thing’. Which is probably something we should save for a time we need a mood-killer pronto.”

Roy raised his eyebrows.

“Al called it that,” Ed said before he could ask. “Fuzzy animals and all.”

“I was wondering,” Roy said. He slid his right arm under Ed’s left, wrapping it around to brace it beneath the opposite shoulder. “Is that—?”

“Perfect,” Ed said. “It’s like a three-legged race, okay? Or like—draggin’ your drunk friend around.”

Roy grimaced. “The latter I’ve done more recently.”

Ed held his breath and eased some weight onto Roy, and then he leveraged Roy’s shoulder and swung his body forward, and—

This was super fucking weird to do when you were both ass-naked. Lots of other things swung, too.

“Just like that,” he said, trying to force some fake cheer through his voice. It was what he figured Al or Winry would’ve done, and they seemed to be a hell of a lot more successful, by and large, at dodging awkward situations than he was. He’d always suspected that barreling straight ahead even when you saw the embarrassment lurking in the shadows was part of the secret. If you hesitated instead, it got a chance to sink its teeth in, and then you were fucked. “Hey, aren’t you glad now that you live in a small place?”

“I’m glad for a lot of small things,” Roy said evenly.

Ed stared at him.

Roy grinned.

Then he reached out and held the shower door open with his free hand.

“Make sure the water’s all right?” he said.

“The hotter the better,” Ed said. “Like my men.”

“Oh, dear,” Roy said.
Ed stretched to put his hand in under the spray. “I dunno. Does it go any hotter? Or are you gonna have to keep me warm?”

He snuck a glance, and Roy was grinning as broadly as was possible while still biting one’s lip. “That can also be arranged.” He paused, and moved forward carefully, and helped draw Ed one more jump-step with him. “In fact,” he said, “I doubt it can be avoided, given the square footage we have to work with, but as long as you don’t mind—”

“You realize most people would literally kill to get to do this, right?” Ed asked.

Roy frowned. “Kill who?”

“Not sure,” Ed said. “Hopefully someone who deserves it. Well, hopefully no one, since I cut in line here like a motherfucker, and you’re currently accounted for in the murder-worthy combo-shower department.”

The frown dissolved into an expression of such pure delight that Ed’s stomach acid did an immensely disturbing overall ripple thing.

“That was a beautiful sentence,” Roy said, so at least he’d realized that he had to explain himself when he started making faces like that. He then shuffled his toes right up to the tile edge of the shower floor, and tightened his grip around Ed’s waist, and raised his eyebrows. “After you.”

Nothing for it except to jump-step his way up into the shower, which was a bit of a bitch, frankly, since get traction on wet tile with one foot was his among his least fucking favorite games in the entire spectrum of coordination challenges—

And then Roy was right there with him, hands against the backs of his shoulders to steady him, nudging the shower door shut with that incomparable ass.

Was it too soon to ask Can I sign the other side?

“Is that all right?” Roy asked. It seemed to be his favorite sentence right now, and… Ed wished he minded. He really did. He wished it was annoying, or overbearing, or cutesy, or… something. Something offensive. He wished it didn’t make him feel cared for and fucking safe, because that was cheesy as hell, and Roy was supposed to have the market cornered on the cheese thing.

Didn’t they have, like, entire shops with just cheese? At least in Europe. Cheese stores. Cheeseries. Cheese boutiques.

They probably had those in France, and Roy probably knew exactly what they were called, and Ed was going to ask him as soon as they had completed the current objective, which was much more important than the correct term for cheesemporiums.

“Oh,” Roy was saying as Ed contemplated the mysteries of linguistics. It was the sort of tone that caught your attention, whether you liked it or not—light, faint, ever so slightly… rough. Roy was reaching up and guiding Ed’s hair back behind his ear as the water started to soak in and saturate it. “Oh.”

“Funny,” Ed managed. His brain forced his body to hesitate, even though it knew exactly what it wanted—and that was to lift both hands and lay them on Roy’s chest and watch the rivulets of water dripping down his gorgeous neck, over his gorgeous shoulders, to pour down and sluice through Ed’s fingers where he’d spread them on Roy’s skin. “That’s the same thing I was gonna say.”

Roy swallowed—hard.
“Fancy that,” he said. “We’re already finishing each other’s sentences.”

“Gross,” Ed said.

“Very,” Roy said.

Then he leaned in and kissed the grin right off of Ed’s face, which was probably for the better, because this was extremely serious business, after all; you couldn’t get the giggles while embarking on literally-steammy makeout sessions with your drop-dead-gorgeous boyfriend, or they’d revoke your relationship card, and—

And then Roy twined his fingers tightly into the hair he’d caught up in his hand and tugged a little, and several of Ed’s nerve endings exploded into sparkly dust, never to be seen again.

Roy’s body mostly blocked the spray, but enough water was running over both of them—and streaming from the sharp angles of Roy’s bones, pouring onto Ed—that they were both well and truly wet by now, and it was cold and warm at the same time, and the contrast of Roy’s chest against his and the tile at his back made him shiver, which only pushed them closer, and—

Hell. Why hadn’t he thought of this fucking ages ago?

It felt better than just good—Roy’s weight against him; the splash of the water not quite drowning out the soft, satisfied noise Roy made in the back of his throat, which resonated out through the center of his chest. It felt… right. It felt—sustainable. A stable molecular system; a balanced equation; a settling of fragments of the universe into a configuration that they’d been searching for. Maybe for a long time. Puzzle pieces cut into just the right jagged shapes, and the edges finally matched, and it was a small thing, sure, but it felt significant.

It was definitely good, too, though. Holy shit, was it good, too. Roy used the leverage of the hand in Ed’s hair to tilt his head back, and he tasted just about every fucking centimeter of the inside of Roy’s mouth, some of it garnished with shower water and some served up plain. He heard himself make a sound that started out as a sigh and twisted itself into a whimper—not giving up, exactly, so much as giving in.

“God,” Roy said when he pulled back, after how long Ed had no fucking clue. They hadn’t run out of hot water yet, so it couldn’t have been quite as long as Ed’s resurrected inner romantic would have liked to tell the muses, given half the chance. “I—right. Okay. If… can I wash your hair? If I just… if we keep doing that, I don’t think we’ll ever get out of here.”

Ed had to cough into the back of his hand to clear his throat. “Turn into raisins.”

“Yes,” Roy said. “Perilous.”

“Yeah,” Ed said.

They stared at each other.

Ed lifted his hand to run it through Roy’s wet hair, pushing it back from his face.

“Fuck,” he said. “You… are so…”

“Insatiable?” Roy asked.

“Fucking hot,” Ed said.
Roy grinned. “Takes one to know one.”

“Throwback Saturday,” Ed said. “Did you pick up any comebacks since the second grade? All your shit’s like that.”

“I’ve learned a few things in the interim,” Roy said.

“Like the word ‘interim’,” Ed said.

“Among others,” Roy said. “Such as this.”

A part of Ed knew from the glimmer in Roy’s eyes alone that he was about to get two very smooth, very wet, very talented hands sliding over his shoulders and down his back to cup his ass on both sides and squeeze.

The rest of him suspected nothing, because the rest of him was divided, firstly between preoccupation with keeping his footing and not falling into the eyes in question; and secondly between its full-time job of being a colossal idiot. The surprised part mustered what was probably a very impressive gasp, followed by an equally impressive groan, although the latter he was halfway able to bite back and swallow before it completely undermined twenty years’ effort to maintain a tiny shred of dignity.

“Well,” Roy said, “now I can die happy.”

“Shut up,” Ed managed with the feeble remnants of his breath.

“Wait,” Roy said.

He clutched a little harder—hard enough it almost hurt; hard enough that the sensation lit all of Ed’s nerve endings like sparklers on the Fourth of July and then flung them into a cloud of pure oxygen and blew the place the fuck up; hard enough he started to lift Ed off the floor, leaning in to press his face into the side of Ed’s neck as he did, sliding him upward against the slick tile—

As Roy lowered him again, Ed tried not to betray in his expression that he was scrambling to make sure his foot found purchase on the floor, because otherwise this was going to end in broken noses, bloody tile, and tears.

Roy didn’t seem to notice, though, because he was too busy releasing a deep, thick, utterly contented sigh that set his eyelashes to fluttering for good measure.

What a drama queen.

“All right,” Roy said. “Now I can die happy.”

“Fuck you,” Ed said, but the endorphins had gained the upper hand by now, and he had to bite down viciously on the inside of his lip to stop himself from laughing. “It’s not that great.”

“It is,” Roy said. “It is a work of art, and I would like to purchase a lifetime membership to the museum no matter the cost.”

Ed snorted.

Roy kissed him.

Roy’s hands were still roaming around in the area of his ass and lower back—which should’ve unsettled him, considering how close that brought those clever fingers to all sorts of things that made
his spine curl in a way he didn’t like just yet. Maybe it was the water; maybe it was the kiss; maybe it was the gathering heat of the steam or the way Roy smiled every time he pulled away, but…

Trust was a terrifying leap of faith, but he’d been in the air before he noticed that his foot had left the ground. Too late now.

“Oh, God,” Roy said. “Your hair. I’m going to wash your hair. Before we start to resemble dried fruit.”

“Are you setting up a shitty ‘fruity’ joke?” Ed asked.

“No,” Roy said. He paused. “Would you laugh if I did?”

“Depends,” Ed said.

“Okay,” Roy said. “Schrödinger’s shitty joke until I decide where I’m headed with it. Meanwhile —”

The incomprehensibly good-torturous fingers found their way into his hair again, forging deeper by the second, and then Roy scraped his nails along Ed’s scalp, and something in his brain fritzed right the fuck out.

He made a noise like “Gghh,” followed by “Hnnh,” and then something in the language center screamed in agony until he managed, “S’nice.”

“Hang on,” Roy said, and Ed had almost emerged from the pleasure-coma enough to open his eyes when an increasingly familiar fruit-flower-something smell wafted up around him, and then…

Roy was massaging it into his hair, and the truly remarkable thing was that there wasn’t already a religion dedicated to the pursuit of this. Surely someone had to have noticed that there was nothing on this miserable Earth comparable in quality to this experience; surely someone had picked up on the fact that Roy shampooing one’s hair, slowly and thoroughly and lovingly, with his perfect fingers and his perfect nails and his soft breath and the shower water running everywhere, was vastly superior to anything else ever described as some kind of heaven.

“Fuck,” Ed heard his traitor voice choke out, all light and breathy and desperate. “C’n you wash my fuckin’ hair every fuckin’ day?”

“If you let me,” Roy said, “I would.”

The problem with transcendent bliss was that one moment tended to blend into another, which made tracking time impossible, which meant that the feeling wriggled through your fingers and disappeared faster even than most others. Ed supposed that was life in a nutshell; maybe everything in a nutshell. The more you wanted it, the sooner it slipped away. The bright light in the center of your chest was fleeting, and you had to cup it carefully, because if you closed your hands around it, you’d put the candle out—and the dark around you was just waiting for that.

He could save the tragic philosophy for a time when Roy wasn’t dragging both hands slowly, slowly, slowly and deliciously through the length of his hair, though.

“Close your eyes, love,” Roy said.

If Ed had needed further proof that instructions were anathema to his asshole brain, that would have offered some—his eyes, heretofore mostly closed and sort of hazily half-focused on Roy’s collarbones, snapped open instantly.
But it must have been that he’d heard wrong, because Roy didn’t look like a man who had just dropped a world-shattering, heart-stopping, gut-flipping revelation in the middle of a shower.

Was he hearing things? The ambient splashing was a bit disorienting, and his ears were also occupied with the task of fighting for his balance every other damn second, so maybe—

Or maybe it was a Casanova trick. Maybe Roy was deliberately playing it off as normal because—

Or maybe Roy hadn’t taken note of it at all. Maybe it was normal. Maybe that was something normal people said to other normal people that they were dating, in a normal way, and normally nobody made a big old abnormal fuss about it.

Somehow an explanation where Ed was the anomaly sounded much more convincing than any of the alternatives.

In the nick of time, he flailed his way free of the brain mess enough to remember that Roy had iterated a suggestion before he tipped the universe off of its access and kicked it through some goalposts—Ed managed to shut his eyes again just before Roy shifted aside to let the shower water pour over him, and also spray him in the face.

Presumably Roy had been anticipating more of an issue with the suds running from Ed’s hair down his visage, and the spray-in-the-face thing was a problem that freakishly tall people didn’t have with this particular shower-head, but the bottom line was that it was a good thing that Roy had said something. Even if what he’d said was a nightmare-conundrum that Ed would now be rehashing in his head for the next week or so at least.

Roy was smoothing his hair back and wiping water off of his face and out of his eyes before he knew it, though, and the really fascinating thing was that the gentleness of his hands made Ed’s blood pound just as fast—maybe faster—than when they were quick and strong and possessive and fixed on semi-erogenous zones like the meat of his ass. That was interesting, from a purely scientific perspective as well as insofar as Ed’s breath was sticking in his throat again, and he felt and probably looked like a moon-eyed moron. It made him want to study this shit, properly, from the molecular level—it made him want to understand the rational reason that it felt like he couldn’t pry his gaze loose from Roy’s if he’d wanted to; and why the wall of water around them insulated him so much that his inhibitions started to dissolve; and why every time his heart leapt into the back of his throat, his mouth started to tremble. The beauty of things multiplied when you broke them down into atoms and electrons. Their magnificence fragmented and projected like colors from a prism, and they deepened and expanded right before your eyes, and there was nothing as sublime as understanding precisely how you fit into the cosmic whirling of the larger universe at any given second.

…not that Ed partly appreciated it because, on a universal scale, the difference between his size and that of a guy who was six-five and muscled like an action hero in blockbuster season was negligible, or anything. That was just a happy coincidence.

“How was that?” Roy asked when he’d presumably washed most of the shampoo out of Ed’s hair and was now just sort of playing with it and moving it around.

“You and your fucking magic-hands,” Ed said with the paltry remnants of his voice, “know exactly how it was.”

Roy grinned. “My what? No, we don’t. Please, elaborate.”

Ed made a serious effort to glare at him, which was very difficult amidst the lingering haze of beautiful scalp-tingly bliss.
“God,” Roy said. “You’re so cute.”

“Listen,” Ed said. “If you think I’m above givin’ you a rain check for a kick in the balls until I get my other foot back on, you are in for a wild ride.”

Roy opened his mouth—to offer some commentary about the rather limited selection of things that he thought Ed was above, most likely—and then wisely shut it again.

“You’re still cute,” he said instead, after a considered pause.

Ed bared his teeth.

Roy cooed.

“Forget the kick,” Ed said. “I’m gonna castrate you, you fuckin’—”

Roy was laughing, and catching both hands in Ed’s hair, and kissing him, and the laughter poured right into the kiss, and Ed fought it, but it ran down his throat like liquid moonlight and tickled the bottoms of his lungs, and before he knew it—

Roy was such a bastard. And a cheat. And an amazing fucking kisser.

He was also wrapping one arm around Ed again and stepping forward to press their wet bodies together, and Ed had been so distracted by the hair-washing treatment that he’d forgotten to be turned on, but evidently… Evidently that was easy to change.

Roy nudged his hips forward, and he had definitely not forgotten, and the pressure of his dick against Ed’s hip—

Well.

Well.

“Lord,” Roy said. “I just love looking at you so much that I keep forgetting why we’re here.”

Ed blinked. The water went right back into his eyes after the fact, but the gesture itself had to count for something. He hesitated for a second, because it was still incomprehensibly strange to think that he was permitted and encouraged to get his hands all over the likes of Roy, and then he spread his palm on Roy’s back, off-center from the spine, just under the lowest rib. “Is this not why we’re here?”

“Well,” Roy said, and he circled his hips in a vastly unambiguous way—his dick rubbed right over Ed’s, which brought it abruptly from uncertain-but-intrigued to fully-at-attention—and then leaned back a little, like he was trying to revel properly in Ed’s touch. “Yes. But—I mean, you also actually wanted to take a shower. Didn’t you?”

Ed tried to think back to a time before he’d been cozied up with a wet Roy who was favoring his hair and making little brain-spark-summoning noises from deep in his chest. “…I… think so. Yeah.”

“Right,” Roy said. He didn’t sound overly committed to it, but he managed to reach back without disturbing their position, and a few seconds of grasping blindly for the niche on the wall brought the bar of soap into his hand. “Allow me.”

Ed blinked again, harder this time, though it didn’t do a whole hell of a lot to clear either the water or
his head. To be fair, there was a vociferous southerly demand on a significant portion of the blood that usually supplied his brain. “Allow you t—"

Roy lathered up both of his beautiful hands and then started stroking them over Ed’s shoulders, and down his arms, and across his chest, and—


“Wonderful,” Roy said, without slowing down for a fraction of a second. He was scrubbing pretty good at Ed’s shoulders, and his collarbones, and—holy shit, another guy’s fingertips, soap-slicked, sliding across your nipple was weird and great and startling as hell and made Ed’s skeleton feel like it’d shrunk a size. Which wasn’t helping matters, but those matters could wait, because this—

“What about you?” Ed managed. “You’ve gotta be dirtier’n I am.”

“I think popular opinion is pretty clear on that point,” Roy said. “But I usually shower in the mornings, so—”

“I knew there had to be something wrong with you,” Ed said.

Roy’s grin looked much more proud than penitent. “Alas,” he said. “My tragically bad shower habits are here to stay.”

“Mornings’re too fuckin’ short,” Ed said. Assembling words out of the jumbled syllables in his brain kept getting progressively more troublesome as Roy’s hands migrated, slowly but surely and oh-so intently, down his frame. “Why cram in anything else you don’t have to? Plus then you don’t have to wash your sheets as much, ’cause you’re not trackin’ dirt in ’em.”

“Mornings are exceedingly difficult,” Roy said. The hand smoothing itself in maddeningly serene circles on Ed’s back swooped low and grazed his ass again, and he had to bite his lip on the breath that tried to tear itself out of him. “But that’s part of the reason—it helps me wake up and start the miserable day feeling clean, if nothing else.”

“Eh,” Ed said. Roy’s other hand was stroking three fingers up and down his sternum, then dragging the tips down to his navel and then—past it, but just an inch; and then, on the next pass, two inches, and—fuck. “Guess—I mean—guess that…but how d’you know what your hair’s gonna look like once it dries?”

“I have a blow-dryer,” Roy said. The smirk was terrible and ineluctable and absolutely self-aware. “As you may have noticed, I greatly enjoy blowing all kinds of things.”

“I fuckin’ bet you do,” Ed said. “But—”

Roy’s fingers curled around his dick and started stroking that instead. The bastard’s free hand settled on his ass again, following the curve, fingertips pressing in just gently underneath, and—

Fucking—

Christ—

Ed swallowed, swallowed, and swallowed again. He sucked in a breath, caught some water, coughed feebly, and stared up into that center-of-the-sun fucking smirk.

“Shit,” he said.
Somehow—mysteries of the universe would apparently never cease—the smirk got worse.

“Based on tone and body language,” Roy said, “I’m electing to take that as a compliment. Thank you.”

“Fucker,” Ed got out.

“That, too,” Roy said.

There was a gorgeous, pearlescent white light gathering in the pit of Ed’s stomach, epicenter low
between his hips, swelling now to fill the whole of his body, shimmering outward towards his toes
and his scalp and his fingertips—

But two could play at this game—one of the oldest in human history, that was; and still one of the
best.

Ed had to give his brain a good proverbial smack and force it to focus, but once he’d shaken it
awake, he had just enough hand-eye coordination left in him to draw his fingers slowly and faux-idly
down Roy’s chest to return the favor.

There was a lot of ground to cover on his way, and all of it was so damn gorgeous that it deserved
more attention than he was giving it just now, as a means to get to something else. Maybe—later.
Maybe another time. Maybe one of these days, he’d strip Roy naked and just… appreciate him.
Centimeter by centimeter, properly, with his hands and his mouth and the softest sounds that he
could muster—

Judging by the low groan that wrung itself out of Roy’s throat when Ed’s hand cupped his balls,
though, it could definitely wait, and this was more than sufficient for right now.

“Let me guess,” Roy said, sounding slightly breathless, and Ed liked that; Ed wanted him like that all
the time, or at least a hell of a lot more often; “this is another thing you’ve never done before and are
going to be brilliant at nonetheless.”

“Dunno yet,” Ed said. Roy’s tunneled hand was still shifting on the shaft of his dick, which kept
making words bubble up in his head and then burst before he could identify them. “C’n give you a
survey after if you want.”

Roy was grinning as he leaned in to breathe against Ed’s cheek— “Only if that’s a euphemism for
something.” And then he was kissing Ed’s jaw, and his free hand skinned up Ed’s spine again
while the other tightened around his dick.

Ed made a soft noise, and Roy met it with a matching one, and their mouths sealed together—like it
was inevitable; like they were drawn to it; like they were made and meant to fall together like this,
again and again and again. Like in a thousand worlds, a million lives, a billion permutations—

Like they’d always been linked, and always would. Like their blood remembered something that
they’d never known.

Kissing Roy was magnificent in and of itself, but like this—like this, Ed was overdosing on
sensation, and he didn’t think he’d ever want to stop. A fraction of the shower water made it past
Roy’s shoulders, spraying warmth; Roy’s body on his was impossibly hot and slippery where their
chests and collarbones kept colliding; their arms moved across each other; every time he parted his
eyelids, he got to marvel all over again at Roy with half-closed eyes and soaked, dripping hair—

Not to mention the obvious nerve fireworks going off in his nether regions as Roy’s incomparable
hand squeezed up and down his dick, firmly but smoothly—faster for a few seconds, and then he’d slow down; he’d let out a breath against Ed’s lips and start to smirk, and Ed would start to growl, and he’d half-pout like a scolded kid and then grin so wicked that Ed’s knee went weak—

Ed had to put one hand out against the wall to keep himself balanced, which was a terrible fucking shame, because he wanted both of them on Roy. He wanted to cover as much surface area as he was capable of; he wanted to be touching the maximum possible amount of Roy that physics permitted at any given time.

Apparently he just had to increase the bang he was getting for his buck with the one remaining hand—which narrowed his options to several choices, all of which were fucking wonderful.

He flattened his palm on Roy’s chest again, biting back a long, low groan at the way Roy had just leaned in closer, pressing him back harder against the wall—he had no idea whether it was to steady him, or just because Roy agreed with the premise that the more skin-on-skin contact they could get, the better, no questions asked; and he didn’t particularly care. Ed dragged his hand up slow, trying to appreciate every single dip and rise of muscle, every protrusion of bone, every rivulet of water easing the progress of his fingertips.

It still felt strange—that he could do this at all, let alone slowly and thoroughly in the fucking shower. It still felt bizarre to be touching Roy in the first place; to be allowed, let alone desired; for Roy to be so damn close and so damn tangible, when only a handful of weeks ago, he’d been a gorgeous stranger that Ed fantasized about in the last few weakened minutes right before he finally succumbed to sleep. Ed had literally dreamed about this kind of shit. It had been a fond abstraction at best; it had been the sort of distant flitter of imagination that you laughed at yourself about, because it was impossible; it had seemed so stupid at the time, because there’d never been a fragment of a chance of any of it coming true—

He ran his fingertips up the line of Roy’s jaw and then back down, sweeping them around over his chin, and then—tentatively—touched his mouth. It was so fucking perfect that he couldn’t help himself. The shape of it—the weight of Roy’s lips, the soft-sardonic curl at the corners, its expressiveness, the hundred-thousand several-syllable words it always wrapped itself around—

Roy nipped at his fingertips.

At the way Ed’s eyes widened, and he jerked his hand back, Roy laughed, lightly, and then darted in to try to kiss at the place he’d play-bitten, and Ed was laughing, too—faintly, with the remnants of something like a breath, because Roy hadn’t let up on the handjob while Ed was cataloguing his face.

“Showers always this eventful at your place?” Ed managed.

“Usually not,” Roy said. “Which is really a pity, because—” Ed decided it was time to give back as good as he was getting. Besides, Roy’s dick wouldn’t pretend to bite his fingers just for fun. “Because of—precisely that—actually,” Roy choked out. “That’s—perfect.”

At least Ed had marginally more of an edge on this one than he had on oral—he knew, from personal experience, albeit personal experience from a different angle of view, what probably felt good.

Also, what Roy was doing to him felt like the most exquisite possible form of torment—the most excruciatingly delicious kind of hell; a beautiful purgatory he simultaneously craved the pinnacle of and never, ever wanted to leave.

Roy’s unoccupied hand made its merry way down to his ass again and started massaging—gently at
first, and then a little harder, and then his fingertips drummed lightly in odd little rhythms, and all the
while Ed was clenching his jaw against the impulse to just—

All the while, the heat building in the pit of his stomach and trembling in his guts had long since
doused enough synapses in pure pleasure that he could have come at any fucking second, except that
he didn’t want this to end.

Roy was pumping harder, and he followed suit half on instinct, and Roy tilted his head back—the
hair slid off of his forehead, swept back by the water, and he closed his eyes and dragged in a deep
breath—

One of those talented fingers rubbed itself at the base of Ed’s tailbone, tantalizingly close to the cleft
of his ass, and Roy’s hips jerked forward involuntarily, and Ed tightened his grip on instinct, partly
just trying not to let them crush his damn hand in between their bodies, because he had enough
trouble making up for the lack of a leg—

Roy breathed “Ed—” towards the ceiling, haloed by the silvered spray, and came hot and wet and
sudden against Ed’s hip—and on his shifting hand, obviously, and it was running down his thigh,
and—

He risked abandoning his leverage against the wall to fling that arm around Roy’s shoulders so that
he could bury his face in Roy’s chest and grit his teeth and just—let the walls down, let the too-bright
light swell, let it consume him, let it drown him, let go—

It felt like spinning, and falling, and shattering sunlight—like splitting atoms and releasing a breath
he’d held for far too long.

He blinked his way back to something like a world he recognized, and Roy was stroking at his hair.
That endeavor presented a bit more of a challenge when it was wet and only getting wetter.

“You need that survey?” Ed mumbled into his chest.

“Spectacular,” Roy said. “Wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Gotta say,” Ed said. “I’m a fan of the cleanup doin’ it this way.”

Roy laughed again, softly, and wrapped both arms around him, and Ed hadn’t felt this steady on one
foot in a long, long, long damn time.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

THIS IS IT, GUYS! AT LONG LAST! Thank you all so much for sticking with it – and for sticking with me, larger-scale. You guys are the reason I do the thing; this fandom – particularly the fandom for this ship – has treated me so well that it is staggering, and I am grateful for every single one of you. Thank you for being here! ♥

(And if you're going to either SacAnime or Katsucon, please keep an eye out for me and say hi! ♥)

Ed supposed that, when he really thought about it, it wasn’t that much of a surprise that Roy seemed to revel in long periods of time spent lying in bed doing basically nothing. Currently, they were staring at each other across the pillows while they waited to be tired enough to sleep, since the combination of sex and the shower had perked both of them up a bit—so to speak.

In any case, it seemed like one of the potentially cataclysmic things that he and Roy had in common was a tendency to run themselves ragged attempting to accomplish as much as humanly possible in the limited quantity of hours granted in each day. Roy, however, had learned how to carve out time for breaks where he deliberately did not do a single thing except gazing across the bed and smiling slightly.

After what was apparently a revitalizing stretch of that, he reached out and brushed his knuckles along Ed’s cheek.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Ed said. Winry was so worried about Resting Bitch Face—maybe he had Resting Discontented Face; people were always asking him that. “You?”

Roy blinked at him. “Me?”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “I mean, sure, you’re Mister Sex God and whatever shit—” His sleep-mongering brain was such a delightful place. He was going to kick himself for that so hard tomorrow that it would leave existential bruises. “—but it’s… y’know. What you said about how it’s kinda rough for you when things aren’t goin’ perfect. I don’t do perfect so well.”

Roy smiled again. The bastard. His cheek was squished against the pillow, and his eyes were opening and closing very slowly, and he looked like he’d climbed straight out of some of the dumbest, schmoopiest domestic fantasies Ed had ever had. “No? I thought that was pretty perfect.”

Perhaps he had forgotten the part where they’d embarked on another awkward three-legged race adventure to get out of the shower, and then had to fumble around negotiating towels, and… well, sure, they’d laughed an awful lot in the process, but perfect was not the word that came to mind.

Except—

Maybe—

Maybe that was. Maybe that was the point—that perfect didn’t come in neat little packages bound
up with bows; that it didn’t look anything like you expected. Al was perfect, after all, at least in Ed’s understanding of the universe. The little demonic tendencies woven into the angel soul were part of what made him perfect, even though other people might’ve argued that they detracted from his personality. Ed loved him weird and a tiny bit evil; Ed loved him sick or well, pouting or beaming, upside-down or sideways or from any imaginable angle.

Maybe that was the point here, too.

Maybe stumbling out of the bathroom leaning on each other, dropping towels left and right, laughing helplessly because it was ridiculous, and you were ridiculous, and you were getting a chance to be ridiculous together, was its own kind of perfect. Maybe the idiosyncratic element of it was the best part.

Ed looked at Roy, who was still watching him with a funny little half-smile—like maybe he was thinking something along the same lines.

“I guess you’re right,” Ed said.

“As long as you enjoyed it,” Roy said, “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Not even the part where you got soap in your eye?” Ed asked.

“Ah,” Roy said. “Well—consider that we can only truly understand happiness in contrast to something, so in order for us to have fully appreciated that experience, there had to be some aspect of sufferi—”

“You’re a dork,” Ed said.

Roy grinned. “Guilty as charged.”

“I must be a dork, too,” Ed said, rolling onto his back and directing a slightly imploring gaze towards the ceiling, “because I fuckin’ like it.”

“What a shame,” Roy said brightly. “I suppose we dorks will have to stick together.”

Ed had to bite his lip hard to hold back a grin. “Guess so.”

They stared at each other for another minute. It was a good damn thing Roy had such a good damn face, or this would’ve been boring. It probably should have been anyway, but somehow…

Even in a warm bed, though, it was a cold fucking world, and sometimes you couldn’t stop the tendrils of ice from wriggling in. Sometimes you couldn’t keep the rest of it at bay no matter how much you wanted this moment to stay simple, and silent, and kind.

“Hey,” Ed said, like an idiot—but at least like an idiot who was letting it out now instead of trying to swallow it and ending up with a stomach full of knives. “So—what happens after finals?”

Roy blinked. It looked serene enough, at a surface level, but Ed was picking up on his cues better now, and the way Roy’s eyes sharpened subtly meant he was paying more attention. “To us, you mean?”

“Yeah,” Ed said. “Just—I guess that’s a stupid question. I was just—thinking. I dunno.”

Roy smiled in that obnoxiously unrevealing way he had. “It’s not stupid. It’s a perfectly valid question.” He paused, and caught his bottom lip between his teeth, and ruined Ed’s life a little more
with how staggeringly gorgeous that was on him. “I’m… not sure I have an answer, though. I… unless you’re taking another of my classes, then… I suppose we—carry on, if you still want to. More openly.” He shifted, suddenly enough that Ed almost drew back on instinct, but it turned out he was only trying to get one elbow under himself so that he could prop his head up on his hand and grin. “We could do unspeakably scandalous things like hold hands in public.”

“Whoa,” Ed said. “Slow down. I dunno if we’re ready for that kind of physical contact.”

Roy raised an eyebrow.

Ed smirked.

“I’ll show you ‘physical contact’,” Roy said.

“Oh, yeah?” Ed said. “You’re gonna have to catch me f—”

Roy was awfully fast for somebody who spent most of his time lazing around coffee shops staring at a laptop screen. He also had the advantage of possessing one limb more than Ed did, so if anyone asked, Ed was going to say that that was the reason Roy managed to pin him to the bed and kiss him breathless so quick.

“Hey, Ed!” Ling said when he let himself back into their dorm room the next morning—gingerly, all too aware that it looked like yet another walk of shame thing, even though he’d stayed late enough for a gloriously long, slow, lazy breakfast this time around.

He’d almost been stupid enough to hope that maybe Ling and Lan Fan would have gone out for brunch if he waited long enough, and then been… too preoccupied debating the ideal level of bacon crispiness to remember to interrogate him, or something. Most of him had known better, but he’d still found himself clinging to a tiny modicum of optimism that he could get out of this without the awkward questions.

“Hi,” he said.

“Yo,” Lan Fan said.

“Is everything okay?” Ling asked. It sounded like he was genuinely concerned, which might very well have meant that Ed busting his ass to be a decent friend all this time had spectacularly backfired, because now Ling cared about him too much. “You’ve been… out a lot. Not that that’s a problem! If you’re having fun, it’s great! I just hope it’s for a good reason, rather than that you’ve been studying so hard you’ve been passing out at the library and sleeping under a desk.”

“They don’t let you,” Ed said, sidling in and setting down his bag on his way towards his bed. You couldn’t tell from a glance that it was full of all of his toiletries and everything, and if he waited until they left or stopped paying attention to unpack, maybe he’d get away without—

“Are you getting action?” Lan Fan asked calmly.

Ed tripped.

Fortunately, Ed had fallen once or twice before over the course of his life, and he managed to avoid
eating either wooden bedframe or gnarly old carpet.

“What?” he said from where he’d barely caught himself on his arms before he ended up Frenching the floor. “Why would you… why would I be—do I—”

Do I look like I’m getting action? was not, as he realized in the nick of time, the most convincing way to complete that sentence. Nor was Do I have sex hair?, which was the other way that probably would have ended.

“I dunno,” Lan Fan said, which he supposed was merciful. “Just wondering.”

“Oh, my gosh,” Ling said. “Are you and Winry finally—is it finally happening? Are you guys finally hooking up, after all these years of trying so hard to be just besties even though you have so much tension that it’s radiating off of you every time that you’re together?” He actually gasped. “Has the friend-marriage been consummated at long last?”

Maybe Ed would just stay here on the floor for a while. It was nice down here. He didn’t have to look at Ling right now, for starters.

“Um,” he said. “Y’know… funny story about that.”

Ling gasped again. “Is there a funny story? I love funny love stories. What do they call them—rom-coms? I love those! We would go see more of them if they didn’t make Lan Fan gag.”

“They call them chick flicks,” Lan Fan said. “I call them ‘torture’.”

“Why does it always have to rhyme?” Ling asked. “Well—anyway. Ed! Tell us your funny love story!”

Ed maneuvered his leg into a manageable position and sat up. He swallowed. He looked at Lan Fan, who was watching him with a half-wince expression that he was pretty sure was supposed to be supportive-slash-sympathetic. Then he looked at Ling, whose face had lit up like he was about to open the biggest present under the Christmas tree.


Ling’s face fell. “Oh. Well—oh. Well—why not?”

“He’s already told you why not,” Lan Fan said. “Remember? About how he’s a big nerd, and… whatever else it was they were saying at dinner that one time.”

Ed was going to tell her one of these days how much he appreciated that.

But not right now, because he had a bullet to bite, and a cat to let out of the bag.

And a self to let out of the closet.

“Yeah,” he said. He breathed in deep, braced himself, and—“Also ’cause I’m…” Fuck. Fuck. Why was it always so fucking hard to say it? “…y’know.”

Ling blinked twice. “Not into blondes?”

“Gay,” Ed said.

Ling blinked three times. “That’s ridiculous. I know lots of blondes who aren’t g—”
Silence.

Ed held his most recent breath until it was starting to simmer inside his lungs.

Ling was just—staring at him. Just staring, and all three of them were waiting for—what? Some kind of fucking miracle? A huge rainbow to arc in through the window and spill a Pride flag onto Ed’s idiot face?

“Are you sure?” Ling asked.

Lan Fan hit him. _Hard._

“Hey!” Ling said. “It’s a perfectly reasonable question!”

“Uh,” Ed said, helplessly, hoping to stave off additional violence. “I’m—yeah. I’m sure. Um. Th… anks.”

“Huh,” Ling said. He actually went to the trouble of arranging his thumb and forefinger into a V underneath his chin. Ed had _never_ seen anyone do that in real life. “I guess that explains why you and Winry aren’t married with a house and a dog.”

“Guess so,” Ed managed.

Ling leaned forward from his perch on the bed, beaming again without warning. “Well, that’s great! You can be her gay best friend and give her fashion advice an—ow! Why are you doing that?”

Lan Fan smiled, prettily, and lowered her hand. “You know exactly why, asshole.”

Ling rubbed his arm, pouting now. “Okay. Fine.” He turned to Ed, looking more or less sincere. “Sorry. I just got excited.”

“It’s okay,” Ed said.

Ling ricocheted right back to the beaming part. “So do you have a hot boyfriend?”

Every square centimeter of Ed’s face caught fire at once. “Uh—I—sort of. I mean—yeah.”

Ling was blinking again. Weren’t his eyelids getting tired? “What does ‘sort of’ mean? Sort of hot? Sort of boyfriend? Sort of have?”

Ed had always appreciated the vast array of swear word opportunities afforded by the English language—bolstered by a significant quantity that it had borrowed or stolen or rented from dozens of others—but, occasionally, a situation arose where even his favorite segment of his own vocabulary fell woefully short.

…insufficient. Woefully insufficient. Fuck language anyway.

“It means,” he attempted, taking it one cautious syllable at a time, “that I have… a… hot boyfriend, but… we’re… kinda on the downlow. For right now. For reasons. Good reasons. That’s all.”

“Cool,” Lan Fan said. “I’m happy for you.”

“What reasons?” Ling asked.

Lan Fan elbowed him—with no less force, but at least that bruise would probably be smaller, because the point of her elbow was more concentrated than the flat of her hand.
“I mean,” Ling said, “I’m happy for you, too.”

“Glad we sorted that out,” Lan Fan said. “Any other truth bombs you wanna drop on us while you’ve got our attention?”

Ed’s heart shuddered, jittered, and jammed itself up his throat to settle in the back of his mouth.


They were both openly staring at him now, but it was too late to back out, and that was the trick, sometimes. Sometimes you had to put yourself into a position that forced you to do something that you couldn’t find the guts for on your own. Sometimes you had to risk incineration and hurl yourself out into the sunlight just so that you couldn’t hide in the darkness forever.

Ed dragged his phone out of his pocket and smacked the corner sharply on his shin, which summoned a crisp, loud, unmistakable plastic-on-plastic noise.

“It’s fake,” he said into the towering silence. If he focused very intently on cinching up the leg of his jeans, he didn’t have to look at them, and that made it a little bit easier. “I got hit by a car when I was a kid.” This silence wasn’t a whole lot better, or kinder, or softer, so he rapped his knuckles on his mostly hollow calf for good measure. “I… guess I should’ve… mentioned, but it’s… it weirds people out sometimes.”

“I hate that phrase,” Lan Fan said.

Ed couldn’t help glancing up at her—maybe a little too sharply, but what the hell was she talking about? What had he said wrong this time?

“I mean,” she went on, “sure, yeah, there are legitimate things that are so weird they mess your head up—like some of the stuff in the deep ocean, okay, if that gives you the creeps, I understand—but something like this shouldn’t weird people out. If they can’t handle it, they need to grow the fuck up or get the fuck out.”

At least it was Ed’s turn to stare. He could see out of the corner of his eye that Ling was trying to upstage him, though.

“What?” Lan Fan said. “That’s what I think. Life’s weird. If you can’t handle the heat, stay out of the kitchen. Shaming people for stuff they can’t control is fucked up.”

“I think I love you,” Ed said.

Lan Fan hopped up, climbed halfway onto Ling’s desk, and reached across it and down to give Ed a high-five.

“I give up,” Paninya said. “What’s the point of any of it? Sure, if we regurgitate the information properly on these tests, we get approbatory ink-marks on our transcripts, and then we can say our numbers were higher than the person interviewing before us, and—so what? How is any of this a
measure of a human being?"

“You’re right,” Winry said without looking up from her textbook. “But I’m still not getting frozen yogurt with you until after this chapter.”

Paninya collapsed on the floor and made a sad-dying dinosaur sort of noise.

After she’d rolled around for a minute or two, she fixed her attention on Ed, which meant that he’d probably squandered his last chance to make a break for the door.

“Hey,” she said. “We could get boba.”

“I’m still on the fence about the tapioca things,” Ed said, which was the honest truth.

“I can’t believe you, of all people,” Paninya said, “would turn down sucking some balls.”

Ed choked on his own spit so hard that Winry had to leap up from her desk and come over to where he was sitting leaned up against her bed to pound on his back.

“Are you alive?” Paninya asked after he’d started wheezing air in again in something like a healthy rhythm.

He managed a shrug.

“Cool,” she said.

“Very cool,” Winry said. She patted his shoulder, stood up, planted her hands on her hips, and stalked over to her desk again. “Back to work.”

“Jesus,” Paninya said. “No wonder you two got so many goddamn scholarships; when you say you’re ‘studying for finals’, you actually mean it.”

“Inconceivable,” Winry said.

“I don’t think that word means what you think it means,” Paninya said. She unleashed another terrible grin on Ed, who was trying, very avidly, to focus on his notes, thank you. “So how’s the tapioca going? Wink wink, nudge nudge.”

“Fine,” Ed said.

“Tapioca Boy is pretty fine,” Winry said distractedly. “You seen him?”

Paninya sat up. Ed took a moment to wish, tragically, that anything less than strewing the minutiae of his personal life across Winry’s dorm room could have diverted this girl from the quest for study-break snacks. “No! Jeez, Ed, holding back much? And here I thought we were friends.”

“I didn’t figure you’d appreciate him,” Ed said.

“I can appreciate the aesthetics,” Paninya said. “Besides, how else am I supposed to elbow you in the ribs and waggle my eyebrows and give you bad advice?”

“You’ve been doing that all week,” Ed said.

“Sure,” Paninya said, “but this way I’d have traction.”

Ed had never, in his life, met anyone as determined not to study as Paninya, and he’d gone to a
community college famous for its flocks of migratory stoners.

“Okay,” he said. “Fine.”

Probably it was paranoid, but there was a part of him convinced that the less tangible, court-worthy evidence there was of this whole… thing…, the less likely it was that Roy would get in trouble. As a result, he had a grand total of one oft-viewed, highly-cherished selfie so far. Admittedly, it was a terrible one, both in terms of cheesiness and in terms of its potential to become damning evidence, because Roy had texted it to Ed after taking it at the kitchen table over breakfast last weekend, and it very clearly showed both of their faces. Ed’s was scrunched up as he somewhat weakly attempted to escape from Roy’s arm draped around his shoulders, and Roy was squishing a schmoopy kiss against his cheek.

He flicked over to it, savored his last breath of life before tapioca-themed ridicule, and showed Paninya the screen of his phone.

“Oh, my God,” she said. “That’s so disgusting it almost makes me want to study.”

“Crap,” Winry said. “Ed, quick, how many of those do you have?”

“Uh,” Ed said. “Hang on.”

He tapped over to his text log with Roy and typed in *hey can i ask you for a favor*

Evidently, Roy was working so hard that he was hardly working, because he responded instantly: *Of course. The dirtier the better. Unless that’s not what you meant, although the answer is still of course.*

Ed sent him an eyeroll emoticon, a blushing emoticon, and a scandalized-looking one. That about summed it up. Then he added *i need some super gross cutesy pictures to use to blackmail paninya into actually studying with us hahaha. if you don’t have time it’s totally ok*

He received a row of exclamation points in reply, and then the words *GIVE ME FIVE MINUTES*

“I will have more momentarily,” he said.

“Thank God,” Winry said.

Ed knew he could trust Roy. He did. He knew that Roy would understand what was going on, and send him something funny, not… like… nudes or some shit. He knew that Roy respected his boundaries and his life, and that the whole point of all of this was for both of them to be able to spend time with someone who made them smile more than they would have on their own. He *knew* that.

But knowing it in his head and knowing it in his twisting, curling, cold little guts were two different things, and that was always the kicker.

“Paninya, my dear friend,” Winry said, “can you *pretend* to focus for a minute?”

Paninya gave her such a magnificent shit-eating grin that Ed couldn’t help a surge of admiration. The art of being a small-scale asshole was greatly underrated.

“What’s in it for me?” Paninya asked.

“Froyo,” Winry said. “On me. The minute I’m confident in my ability to knock this bad boy out of
“Froyo is cheap and evanescent,” Paninya said solemnly. “Memories of me annoying the shit out of you during finals are forever.”

Winry’s trying-not-to-laugh face was a masterpiece. “So are grades,” she said. “And the unending shame and relentless mockery from everyone who told me I should just stick to what I was good at.”

“Unrelatedly, fuck those people,” Paninya said. “But—”

“Oh, hey,” Ed said as his text log lit up.

That garnered Paninya’s attention swiftly—but not quite as swiftly as Roy started flinging photos and captions into the message chain.

The first was a picture of himself at the kitchen table again, eyes closed, giving the edge of a fork an exaggerated smooch. The caption read *Me with the last utensil you put into your mouth xoxoxoxoxo wish you were here*

“Holy shit,” Ed said.

“What?” Paninya said, crawling over towards him—but while still mostly lying on her side, expending as little effort as possible, which made it somehow creepy and hilarious and slow all at the same time. “Show me!”

“Hang on,” Ed said, scrolling down.

The next photo showed Roy holding a tissue to the side of his face and rubbing his cheek against it, captioned with: *You sneezed on this before you left; I will cherish it forever, xoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxoxo*

Ed was either laughing or dying, but he had just enough left in him either way to look at the third photo, which—

Depicted Roy Mustang, notorious internet sex machine, lying on his bed shirtless, gazing lovingly at a pillow he’d wrapped his arm around. Safety-pinned to the pillow was a piece of binder paper bearing a very, very bad Sharpie-sketch rendition of human facial features.

*Just practicing, Roy had written. WISH U WERE HERE, CUPECAKE!!! XOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXOXO*

Ed managed, with the last of his strength before he ignominiously expired, to push his phone across the carpet in Paninya’s direction.

“What?” Winry was asking, too, now, and then she was pouncing on the phone before Paninya’s bizarre crawl had dragged her to it. “Oh, my God, Ed.”

“I know,” Ed said.

“Keep him,” Winry said.

“I know,” Ed said.

Paninya pried the phone out of Winry’s hands, scrolled with wide eyes, started to frown, and then looked at him severely.

“What?” he managed.
“This,” Paninya said, pointing at the screen, “is gay.”

“You think?” Ed said.

“Just wanted to make sure we were all on the same page here,” Paninya said.

“We are,” Winry said, snatching the phone out of Paninya’s grip and tossing it back to Ed. “Which is the very first damn page of my textbook. Back to work, dweebs.”

“Now we’re screwed,” Ed said. He’d barely caught the phone. He’d even-more-barely resisted the urge to hug it to his chest, which would have pegged him as a secret schmooplord for life. “You could at least pick an insult that doesn’t start with ‘D’ and end with ‘B’, which are equally unacceptable letter grades to people like us. Bad omen.”

“What do you want me to say?” Winry asked.

“Pat, I’d like to buy a vowel,” Paninya said. “Can I get an ‘A’?”

“Abomination?” Winry said.

It was very difficult for Ed not to clutch the phone to his chest again, this time for protection. “Why the hell is that your first thought?”

“I dunno,” Winry said. “What, you want me to call you an ‘ass’, or what?”

“He’s saving the ass for Tapioca Boy,” Paninya said.

“Stop calling him that,” Ed said. “Besides, he’s, like, twenty-six. He should at least be Tapioca Man.”

“Tapioca Guy?” Winry said.

“Tapioca Dude,” Paninya said.

“Tapioca I’m never studying with you two again,” Ed said.

Winry tucked her legs up and spun her desk chair in one smooth circle before stopping herself on her desk and putting her feet back down on the floor.

“That’s fair,” she said.

Paninya re-spawled on the floor, somehow managing to take up even more space this time. “Can we go get food yet?”

“Why don’t you go get food and bring some back?” Ed asked.

“It’s no fun by yourself,” Paninya said. “Besides, they give you super judgey looks at the donut place if you order a lot late at night, like you’re just gonna sit there and go through the whole box.” She paused. “I mean, I did go through the whole box. Which was my goddamn prerogative. This is a free country, and I can eat a dozen donuts in one sitting if I want.”

Ed took advantage of the awed silence to text Roy back thank you, that was perfect. great rendition of me btw, have any museums contacted you about it yet.

Roy sent back Not as yet, but in the meantime I’ve put it up on my fridge!
“I’ll go with you,” he said to Paninya. “On one condition.”

“If I can’t call him ‘Tapioca Boy’ anymore,” Paninya said, “no deal.”

“That wasn’t it,” Ed said, although in retrospect it probably should have been. “It’s that you actually have to study when we get back.”

“She’s right,” Paninya said. “You’re a dweeb.”

Ed threw his hands up in surrender.

He knew you weren’t supposed to stay up stupid-late when you had an exam. He knew it just jacked up your memory; he knew it never helped; he knew it increased the probability of dumb mistakes, like not remembering to answer all of the questions, by an extraordinary margin; he knew…

But there was just so much, and he was just so terrified of missing something, dropping something, fucking something up—

help, he sent to Roy just this side of too-late-to-be-socially-acceptable the night before his first final. do you have any tips??

First off, Roy wrote back, nearly instantaneously as always, and was it wrong that that made Ed feel so damn appreciated?, take a second and breathe, dear heart.

Ed attempted to follow the instruction—but that left enough spare brainpower to Google search for a nice picture of a deer. A really big one. With huge-ass fucking antlers. So he sent that back.

It was a good thing that he was currently curled up under the covers in bed, with the phone held in his hands between himself and the wall, where Ling wouldn’t be able to see him with a browser window full of deer photos and what was almost certainly a slightly deranged expression.

I wasn’t done! Roy wrote.

i wasn’t deer, Ed wrote back.

But you are incorrigible, Roy sent. The other thing I was going to say -- as someone who has written many an exam question -- most of the time, the point of the final is NOT to trick you. It’s to find out how much you absorbed and retained over the course of the entire term. In your case, you probably knew enough to do very well before you started studying, because you’ve actually been keeping up, care about hw, etc. etc. to a degree that embarrasses many of your colleagues. So please don’t panic! Just review, and brush up on anything important that you still feel a bit shaky on. You do not need to know EVERYTHING.

yes i do, Ed wrote back. how else will i achieve maximum brain-exploding sentience and transcend my mortal meatsuit to become a higher being

Oddly enough, Roy wrote, they didn’t go into much detail on that during my TA training. Have I mentioned that you should try to get some sleep? You should try to get some sleep.

sleep is for the weak and overconfident, Ed wrote.
Usually I would agree, Roy wrote, but I have a vested interest in your survival now, you see. I got you a Christmas present.

is it sex? Ed wrote.

It is now, Roy wrote back. By which I mean -- it is whenever you want it to be. And no sooner. If Christmas is when you want it to be, I will be there with very festive, seasonal bells on. But if it’s not, that’s okay, too, and I will have an object that will have a bow on it for you either way.

you can’t do that, Ed wrote. you can’t get me shit

I’m afraid physics must think otherwise, Roy wrote, given that I already did.

fuck physics, Ed sent.

He stared at his screen.

oh my god, he added. i didn’t mean it, tell physics i’m so sorry, tell physics i still love it, tell physics it’s my one and only

Roy wrote back a single word:

Ouchhhh.

oh my god shut up, Ed wrote, despite the rather pertinent fact that none of this had transpired aloud, so shutting up had never been an option. Language was weird that way. you know what i mean and it’s your own fault because you shouldn’t have gotten me a christmas gift what’s wrong with you

I’m afraid you had to have it, Roy wrote. It was just there, with your name on it, waiting for me to find it. So you see, it’s not my fault at all! It’s the universe’s fault. I wasn’t trying to set up an expectation of a gift exchange or anything like that -- I hope that’s not what you’re thinking now. It just needed to be bought and given to you, by anyone available, and I happened to be there at the time. That’s all!

a likely story, Ed sent. blame it on the universe, what has the universe ever done wrong, it’s not like it’s been shitting on both of us since day one or anything hahaha

Poor universe, Roy wrote. So terribly maligned. I’m sure it’s just misunderstood.

or it’s an infinite spinning pile of crap, Ed wrote.

Or that, Roy wrote back. But it has you in it, so it’s not all bad.

oh barf, Ed wrote.

Roy sent back a flood of blushing smiley emoticons and a cascade of hearts in varying sizes, colors, and configurations.

WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS, Ed wrote, because that was a hell of a lot easier to bear than Please don’t stop, and please don’t change.

Well, Roy wrote, did you forget about finals for a minute there?

Ed stared at the screen again, rifling through the complicated mix of emotions currently tumbling through him. There was a bit of him that felt unsettled, and a rather large bit that was incredulous, and a bit that was offended that he’d been had like this.
Most of him, though, was grateful.

Which was a huge pain in the ass.

you tricky bastard, he wrote—but then his phone autocorrected it to tricksy at the last second because he’d spent so much time over the course of his text-messaging life reminding Al that he was not, in fact, a tricksy Hobbit, and by the time he noticed, he’d already hit the send button, and—

And that sort of figured. And it wasn’t like Roy didn’t already know he was a nerd. And it wasn’t like Roy didn’t have a shelf of dragon-mongering video games.

And it wasn’t like Roy didn’t reply Delighted to be of service! anyway.

This was fine. Everything was fine. Ed had to survive five final exams and find the perfect gift—no, two perfect gifts; one for the birthday, too—for Roy sometime between now and Christmas. Everything was fine and dandy and tip-top, shipshape, and splendid.

Apparently Roy was making the solemn sojourn to SoCal again for Christmas itself, but as with Thanksgiving, he wasn’t planning to stay long. Ed had, unthinkingly, told him that he’d be more than welcome to come up and spend some time at Pinako’s place if he wanted, which was both entirely true and extremely stupid to say regardless of its veracity. Roy had looked very pleased for a second before he got his face under control again, and had mentioned that he wasn’t sure exactly how the break was going to go because he had to be in lab for a few parts of it, and because he was also sworn to the sacred duty of dog-sitting for Riza. Ed had been so deep in the failure-at-conversation hole that he’d just kept digging, which in this particular case involved mentioning that the Rockbells’ dog was wonderful and loved making friends, and that Al would enjoy additional fuzzy animals more than any other part of Christmas.

In the end, he was pretty sure he’d semi-invited his almost-official-boyfriend over for a major holiday. Wasn’t that supposed to be a big, huge, dramatic deal or something?

Whatever. Somehow, he had to find two gifts so good that they negated the fact that he hadn’t really been planning to get anything until Roy had copped to getting something first.

The morning of his first final, Al texted him a swathe of pictures of cats dressed up in tiny cheerleader uniforms—which was hilarious, and would have been even more hilarious if it hadn’t summoned a thrum on a cord in Ed somewhere that was still battling a swirl of guilt about everything that had happened on Halloween.

Good luck, Brother!!! Al had written after the deluge. Not that you’ll need it, because you make your own luck with brilliance and preparedness and don’t need chance and coincidence to be on your side, because you’ll steamroll these puny tests regardless! But just in case! - Love, Al

It was extra amazing because texting back gave Ed something to do while he hoofed it to class—something other than agonize over the possibility that he’d missed something and raggedly rehearse all of the things that he knew that he knew, anyway, which had been his previous agenda.

thank you!!! he sent back. pretty nervous but i studied a lot so hopefully it’ll go ok. and my averages are pretty high so even if i don’t have coincidence on my side i do have the rest of math haha
You’re going to pwn them!! Al sent back. This time he’d somehow dredged up a picture of a tiny duckling wearing a cheerleading uniform. Ed had no idea what bizarre corner of the internet that had come from, and didn’t think it was prudent to ask questions he didn’t want the answers to. Can’t wait to give you a big, huge, celebratory hug when you get back! I’ll ask Granny if she’ll help me make a cake! Winry’s going to be very stressed out too. I bet you guys haven’t been getting enough to eat because you’re stressed, and the stress is also burning more calories than you’re aware of. Maybe we can make TWO cakes!

This was the biggest and most genuinely that Ed had smiled in several days. Boy, if that wasn’t a sad reflection on his stupid life. Maybe he and Winry needed to cycle Paninya into their study sessions periodically just so that she’d make them crack a grin every once in a while; otherwise their facial muscles might atrophy.

i’ll eat as many cakes as you can make haha, he sent back. you’re the best and not just because of cake. everything ok? did your finals go all right?

Yeah!! Al wrote. They were super easy although I wasn’t sure they would be so I studied like they’d be super hard and then was like :/ at myself for wasting my own time, lol. That was a complex emotion that Ed recognized very clearly. Everything is good except that I need you to kick your finals’ butts and come home for Christmas already!!

me too haha, Ed wrote.

Then he remembered the other thing he probably needed to mention.

oh uh. i sort of like. kind of invited roy over at some unspecified time during the break. it just sort of happened in the conversation, because he doesn’t really have a lot of plans and stuff. i dunno if he’s actually going to take me up on it or if he thinks i was just being polite or what but if you don’t want him to come over with all his germs and his weird and shit just let me know and i can talk him out of it or something.

He was hoping Al wouldn’t think that was necessary, because there were awkward conversations, and then there were Awkward Conversations, and something like this would fall into the highly emphasized category.

DON’T YOU DARE TALK HIM OUT OF IT, Al wrote.

So that… answered that. And blew out Ed’s internal monologue’s eardrums a little bit.

I WANT TO GET TO TALK TO HIM PROPERLY!!!! Al added. NOT IN A HOSPITAL!! AND GIVE HIM THE SHOVEL SPEECH! AND FIND OUT WHAT HE’S LIKE! DOES HE HAVE ANY PETS??

not yet but he said he is dog sitting over the break so he might bring the dog, Ed wrote.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHH, Al wrote back.

ok, Ed wrote. your vote has definitely been counted.

Cool!! Al wrote. Okay, you’re probably pretty close now! Good luck with the final!! You’ll be great!! I love you!!

Ed sent him back some heart emojis, some cat emojis, and the little hand giving a peace sign. He wasn’t sure why he’d thrown the last one in, but it seemed like the right thing to do at the time.
The rightest thing to do for the time to come was the same thing it’d always been—the only option there ever was, really, when you kicked away all the faff and the fluff and the nice little things that people said to make each other feel better.

He put his head down and held his chin up, opened his mind, and gathered his wits about him. That was it, at the core. That was all he’d ever had, and all he’d ever done, and it had gotten him this far.

One more step. One more pencil in his hand; one more swirl of heart-pounding intensity as he scrounged through the rubble in his brain. There had to be something beautiful in there somewhere. There had to be a refuge among the rocks. The clock was ticking, and the desk seemed vast and minuscule at the same time, and other students all around him kept coughing and shuffling and flipping between the pages of their exams.

And this was where he thrived—where he fit in, where he melded, where he belonged. It was just him and the math, and the logic, and the rules. Just him and science, bound up and twisting slowly through the echoing void he was trying to build around them both—

The rest of it—the rest of him; the rest of the world; the other poor college saps rubbing their eyes and tapping their feet and gnawing on their erasers—fell away. He wasn’t some kid running scared from his own array of stupid psychological complexes—not now, at least. He wasn’t anyone. He was a receptacle of knowledge, and he was tipping out the parts of it most relevant to this moment and pouring them onto the page. He was a vessel. None of the rest of it mattered. The science was in him; he just had to let it out.

His body was buzzing with the chemical cocktail of caffeine and adrenaline; he could almost swear he could feel his neurons firing, and the lightning darting between them lit him up from the inside.

He slipped into a rhythm—Winry probably would’ve called it the Zone; or, more likely, the Giant Nerdy Science Freak Zone. Everything clicked into place, and settled, and smoothed out around him. He was the space between the stars; he was surface tension; he was electricity—and it was safe here; it was kind; it was charitable; this place knew him, and wanted him, and didn’t care where he’d been or what he’d done or who he’d injured on the way. He was accepted here. All he had to do was disseminate the things he already knew; every time he reached for a fragment of his own thoughts, it dropped into his hand, and he laid it out beneath the heading of the next question, and it sunk in, and he breathed deep and moved on—

He surfaced from the trance and managed to seek the clock on the wall with his bewildered eyes—his vision was blurring slightly; trying to identify things in three dimensions was a hell of a lot harder after so long spent swimming through black marks on a flat page. He had fifteen minutes left. That was time to check all of his answers, and maybe even breathe once or twice.

Sifting through his chicken scratches, clarifying a few of them when he could, solidified what he’d expected—what had landed in that strangely calm place in the core of him, at the center of the hurricane.

He’d killed it. He’d busted his ass, braced himself, built up a store of necessary knowledge, and knocked it out of the goddamn park.

Mom would’ve been pretty proud.

Hell. He was pretty proud. It felt—weird, bright, light, and completely foreign. He was relatively sure this was pride, or satisfaction, or something like it. Or maybe the nerves had gotten to him, and this was just a funky prelude to nausea.
Whatever. As long as he didn’t throw up on his exam book, he didn’t really care.

“I’m dead,” Winry said over coffee before the last final exam slot, which they’d somehow both managed to wind up with a test in.

“You’re much more talkative than the average corpse,” Ed said.

Paninya high-fived him. Apparently she’d had to book her flight home before the finals schedule had been released, so she’d hedged her bets and picked a plane that would let her catch the last couple of test periods, just in case.

“You know what I mean, you jerk,” Winry said.

“It’s cool,” Ed said. “We can have a sleeping contest tomorrow morning. Although if we let Al play, he’ll win.”

“He always does,” Winry said. “I can’t tell if it’s because he’s competitive or because he’s tired.”

“Both,” Ed said.

“Goals,” Paninya said.

Ed’s phone buzzed in his pocket, and he put his coffee down on their table to fish it out. There had been a time that Al had texted him bad news, and he’d started in surprise and fumbled the cup, and—Well. He wasn’t going to invite that sort of calamity again, if he could help it, was the point.

It was Roy, though. It was Roy, and Ed’s heart did a terrible, tragic, embarrassing swoopy thing.

_I hope I’m remembering right that you’re not in the middle of a final -- let me know whenever you and Winry are ready to head for the station! I’m available at any time starting five minutes ago, when I lost my patience with grading and decided that I quit forever._

There were some passive-aggressive flower and sunshine emojis to go with it, which made the whole thing even cuter.

“Win,” Ed said, “you still up to blow this joint about an hour after they set us free?”

“Sure thing,” she said. “I reserve the right to monopolize the conversation in the car so I can interrogate your boyfriend.”

“Rude,” Ed said.

She grinned at him. “It’s like you know me.”

He rolled his eyes and texted back the finals are done at 3 supposedly so does it work for you if we pack up and get our stuff together by about 4?

The really stupid thing was not how adorable and accommodating Roy was—it was the fact that Ed’s heart did another absurd little squooshy-warm thing the instant that he sent the text.
Why had nobody ever warned him that this whole relationship gig was bullshit? It turned you into a sap and mucked with your gastric, cardiac, and respiratory functions in ways he wasn’t sure he wanted to think about. People had probably died from this, and not in the sonnet-misery kind of way; it was just that no one had been able to dig down to the root cause, which was destruction by way of affection, with a side-dish of gooey eyes. There were so many much more badass ways to die.

Then again—he was still kicking so far, and even if it was for a limited time only, he could have done a hell of a lot worse.

Ed’s dorm window was on the courtyard side, because of course it was, because being able to see whether Roy’s car was idling on the curb yet would have been useful, and they couldn’t have that.

He’d really, truly, honestly tried to pack last night, but even with the room to himself now that Ling had left, the looming prospect of the finals homestretch had been so terrifying that he’d ended up trying to cram more information into his brain instead.

It was funny, though, now that he’d had a bit of a chance to breathe—well, breathe once or twice, race back to the dorm, and start hurling the clothes and belongings that he’d need to sustain himself for the better part of a month at home into his suitcase and a duffel bag and his backpack—how normal the final with Roy had been in retrospect. It had just been… a test. Like any other. Except that he’d had one very distracting second right at the start, when Roy had been thumbing through the exam papers to start handing them out, and he’d had his intense eyes on, and the skylight in the exam room momentarily turned him into even more of a fucking god than usual.

Other than that, though, Ed had just fixed his gaze on the questions until he dropped into Giant Nerdy Science Freak Zone and disappeared without a trace, and after that it was a piece of cake.

…right, cake. Cake he had to get home to eat. Cake that would only be waiting for him, fresh and frosted and delicious, if he packed up his shit and didn’t keep Roy waiting.

One desperate dodge out to the laundry room to peek out the window, permitting a quick scan of the street, helped him relax at least a little bit; it was five minutes to four, but he hadn’t seen Roy yet. He might even be able to make it down there before the bastard’s noble, pun-ready chariot rumbled up to the loading area. All in all—

Christ. All in all, he couldn’t have ended his first semester of big-leagues-college on a higher note if he’d tried, could he?

Sure, he was exhausted, and so strung out on relief that that was probably where part of the glee was coming from, but what difference did it make if he felt it? Happiness was hard to come by. He wasn’t in the habit of examining gift horse’s teeth.

Maybe he’d get to examine Roy’s teeth for a minute before he had to leave, though. With his tongue, that was.

Speaking of Ed’s recent favorite devil, the phone buzzed, and the text preview bore Roy’s name proudly at the top.

*Here whenever you’re ready!* it read. *But no rush -- if a cop happens by I’ll just ease my foot ever so
slightly off the brake and let the car creep forward, because all the sign says is ‘No stopping’.

Ed snatched the phone up and sent back be down in a sec, you know they can arrest you for sass alone right, it’s in the rules

THEY CAN TRY, Roy wrote back. Don’t worry about it! Make sure to pack your toothbrush! I always forget. And I think pants should be optional in your case.

Ed sent back speaking of ways to get arrested… and then went back to cramming things into his luggage as quickly as humanly possible.

When he was about ninety-six percent sure he had everything he would need to survive long enough to get to a store that sold things like toothpaste if his went AWOL, he snatched up his phone again—Roy had sent him a series of emojis that progressed from gleeful down to vaguely questionable, and then one that looked distinctly lascivious in this context—and half-assedly tossed the bedclothes around until the bed looked vaguely made. Theoretically that would make it more inviting when he got back here, right?

The good news was that almost everybody had cleared out of this place over the course of the last few days, as their finals finished up and they hightailed it home as fast as they could find transportation, so he didn’t have to wait for or share the elevator. And then he just had to finagle his shit out the doors without any assistance—which would probably be America’s Funniest Home Videos fodder if they had surveillance cameras set up here—and drag it all around the corner of the building to the street, and…

And there was Roy, looking like a million bucks despite sitting pretty in a car worth substantially fewer of them.

If nothing else, this moment confirmed that Ed was in deep, deep shit: his whole chest warmed up when Roy pushed the fancy sunglasses up into his hair and smiled.

The window was already down by the time he got close, and Roy was already up and out of the car, reaching to help him sling his suitcase into the trunk.

“Hello, gorgeous,” Roy said.

Ed’s whole face was also warming up. “Hello, gorgeous, yourself,” he said, which won zero points for creativity but was marginally better than sputtering incoherently. “You don’t have to…”

“No trouble,” Roy said, heave-hoing, and the process made his biceps stretch the sleeves of his T-shirt, which also rode up a little above his belt, so in the end Ed couldn’t really complain.

Roy just kept on smiling as they secured his suitcase, and Ed tossed his backpack down into the legroom in front of the passenger seat and crammed himself in with it, and he pulled his door shut. Was Roy okay? Was he high? He hadn’t really seemed the type at any point, but maybe there was something to be said for self-medicating some of the issues that he’d talked ab—

“Guess what I did last night,” Roy said.

Ed’s most recent train of thought was not supplying any particularly helpful answers. “Uh… ate… dinner?”

Brilliant yet again. Two and a half steps up from Got super baked?, though.

“I graded your final,” Roy said, “and put your score into the system, once and for all.” He was
grinning still—like the whole night sky at once, and the slowly-fading afternoon sunlight was breathing soft gold across his face. “I no longer have any institutional power whatsoever over you.”

Ed stared at him.

Roy beamed back.

“Jesus,” Ed said.

“Close,” Roy said.

Ed rolled his eyes as hard as he could without feeling like he’d strained his optic nerve. “Roy,” he said.

It was, evidently, somehow possible for Roy to get smugger. “Right on the money.”

“What money?” Ed said.

“Oh,” Roy said. “Never mind. Right on the nose?”

“If you boop me,” Ed said, “I am gonna kill you.”

Roy laughed, bright and loud and utterly relieved, and it felt like Ed’s heart was swelling so big that his ribs could hardly hold it.

“Mea culpa,” Roy said, with more than a hint of the Sex Voice, and he reached across the center console to thread a hand into Ed’s hair, and that felt so delicious it just… “Please forgive me.”

“Good start,” Ed choked out on the tail end of a feeble breath.

Roy stole the rest of it—the rest he’d ever had, it felt like—with one kiss, and then another, and then another; deeper every time but soft still, gentle and unexpectant, and Ed could feel him smiling every time. If ever there had been a kiss like absolution—

Well. This was it.

Somehow they managed to part mouths before any police officers or traffic cops happened by and ticketed them for clogging up the loading zone and/or fogging up the windows.

“Oh!” Roy said. “Your Christmas present.” A little forest-green bag was dredged up from someplace behind the driver’s seat and pressed into Ed’s hands. The white tissue paper inside appeared to be proliferating even as he watched.

“You want me to open it now?” Ed asked.

“Up to you,” Roy said.

Ed eyed him. Gifts were about the reaction, of course; people tried to pretend it was other things, and the thought counted, but the core of present-presenting was to make another person happy or grateful or some combination of the two, and that just wasn’t nearly as satisfying if you couldn’t see their face when they discovered how you’d done it.

But some people got shy about it, too, or scared that maybe they’d missed the mark, or… lots of things. People were variable, and a variable, and the equation was a moving target all the time.

So Ed asked “Now’s okay?”, just in case.
“Sure,” Roy said, and his eyes were on Ed’s hands and the profusion of tissue paper, so it was pretty safe to categorize him as the kind who wanted to witness the results. “It’s not much, but—”

“Shut up,” Ed said. “Thank you.”

Before Roy could protest any further, he dug into it, and turned up—

“Wait,” he said.

In his hands lay a pair of black boxer shorts with writing and designs all in white. He was currently looking at what had to be the back side, because there was a formula with several blank spaces requesting measurements of—

“Is this to calculate the curve of my ass?” he asked.

Roy looked like he’d just eaten a sunbeam, and it tasted like cotton candy and crack.

“Turn it over,” he said.

The other side was all thermodynamics—exothermic reactions, specifically—except with the word Packing set above it—


He had no idea what word to end that sentence with, and it turned out not to matter, because that was when Roy started laughing, and then Ed started laughing, and then Roy was kissing him again—

“You don’t ever have to wear them,” Roy said into the tiny gap between them, and his eyes were so beautiful this close that it still made Ed’s heart wobble dangerously. “I just felt very strongly that you needed to own them.”

“Joke’s on you,” Ed said, “because I was gonna get you something from this tea shop back home, but now I can change my plans and get revenge instead.”

Roy looked tickled.

Damn it.

“So I hear there’s a dog,” was the first thing Winry said when she hopped into the car.

“Sorry,” Ed said to Roy. “With this crowd, dogs win out over boyfriends every time.”

“That’s my kind of crowd,” Roy said. “It means your priorities are in order.”

“Ed said you might come over,” Winry said. “I think it’s only sporting to warn you that you’re gonna get it from all sides.”

Roy’s smile didn’t falter. “I can handle it.”

“I mean that,” Winry said. “Al’s bad enough—”

“Al’s perfect,” Ed said.
“I know,” Winry said. “But he’d cut a man’s throat for you if he had to. Such as Roy’s, for instance.”

“He would not,” Ed said.

“I’ll get him a Christmas present, too,” Roy said. “Cat-themed, right?”

“Damn,” Winry said. “You are good. My grandma’s going to come after you, too, though. More just for the fun of it than because she’s worried about Ed, but still.”

“I’m very resilient,” Roy said. “And an excellent bullshitter.”

Ed snorted. “I can testify to one of those.”

“Okay,” Winry said. She settled, primly, and a glance confirmed that she’d folded her hands in her lap. “I’m worse than both of them put together.”

Ed eyed her, and she raised her eyebrows and smiled.

Except that all Roy said was, “Interesting,” followed by, “Ah, nearly there. Can you see—what’s the sign say, there, for parking?”

It was a weird thing to be pleased about, wasn’t it? For Roy to be acting like this, brushing it off, taking it in stride.

It was weird to be pleased that Roy was—or at least wanted them to think he was—fearless when it came to this. It was weird to be pleased that Roy was ready to defend this, them, the fuzzy-edged relationship-thing, from anyone he had to.

It was weird to want that.

It was weird to feel precious, in a funny sort of way, just knowing that Roy was prepared to fight for him.

The woman that descended the stairs at the train station with a little black-and-white fox-faced dog in her arms was very, very pretty.

Roy started towards her so immediately that it took Ed’s brain several seconds to register that the bastard had even moved; and by then she was carefully letting the dog down, and the dog was sitting on the floor in an extremely dignified sort of way, and she was adjusting one of the lapels of her leather jacket and tugging upward on the scooping hem of her tank top and giving Roy a tired, relieved sort of smile.

He hugged her—tight enough, by the looks of it, for that to be the reason that she smacked his arm until he let go.

“Sorry to be so late,” she was saying when Ed took a few uncertain steps closer. “We were striking Les Mis, and the barricade decided to strike itself halfway through, and Cosette panicked when it started collapsing and called the fire department.”

“Your timing is perfect, actually,” Roy said. He swept an arm back. “This is Ed. And his friend
Winry. I needed to drop them off, so it worked out just right.”

“Hello, Ed,” Riza said, and the once-over she gave him was so subtle that if he hadn’t been a paranoid, socially-stunted piece of shit, he probably wouldn’t have noticed it at all. “Hello, Winry. Very nice to meet you both.”

“You, too,” Ed said. At least she hadn’t gone for *I’ve heard so much about you*, to which there was absolutely no response that wasn’t a one-way ticket to Awkwardsville.

Winry didn’t say anything at all, which struck Ed as a little weird. Riza turned to Roy and started lecturing him on how he was *not* allowed to give Hayate—presumably that was the dog, though there was no guarantee—an inordinate amount of treats; and how if she returned to discover any newly-learned bad behaviors whatsoever, Roy’s ass was on the line. Roy made a big show of innocence, and Ed turned to Winry.

She looked… vaguely shaken, which was totally bizarre. What had happened to cause—?

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Ed,” Winry said, faintly, “I have a problem.”

He put his hand on her shoulder, blinking, and swallowed the first flitter of concern. “What?”

As subtly as possible, Winry pointed. More specifically, she pointed at Riza. More specifically than that, she pointed at Riza’s cleavage.

“I’m not straight,” she said.

Ed tried not to grin too widely; that would be kind of an asshole move. “Oh,” he said. “Okay. What’s your size?”

She turned to him, eyes wide. “What?”

“Your size,” Ed said. “For your rainbow T-shirt, now that you’ve joined the club.”

She scowled at him. “It’s not—just—” She pushed her hair back with one hand and then started pulling on her bangs. “I just—always assumed—”

He threw his arm around her and dragged her into a half-hug. “I know. Hey, you’re gonna be fine. I promise.”

“I know,” she said. “Got your dumb butt to talk me through it, after all.”

“That’s right,” Ed said. “Actual gay guinea pig Edward Elric.” She brightened up a little bit at that, which was… probably a bad sign, but whatever. “And—y’know. If you don’t want a T-shirt, we could do hats. Or scarves. Or a custom paint job on your car.”

“Very frigging funny,” Winry said.

Ed beamed at her. “I try.”

“All right, all right,” Roy was saying. “I swear on my life that I’ll put his before mine. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Yes,” Riza said. She handed him a little black backpack. “This should be everything.”
Roy shouldered it on, and if Ed was not mistaken, that was the trying-to-look-exasperated-when-he-cared-too-much-about-someone-to-stifle-it face. That was a really good one. “Right. Thank you.” He tried to square his shoulders in what he probably thought was a dashing kind of way, but the backpack had changed the balance a bit. “Do you mind if I walk them to their platform before I drive you to the airport?”

Riza smiled over at Ed and Winry. “Of course not. Take your time.”

She seemed like the kind of person who left herself a three-hour buffer before a flight, so probably she meant it.

“Pop quiz, though,” she said to Roy. “Bring Hayate with you.”

“It wounds me,” he said, “that you assume I don’t pay attention to the important things.” He crouched down and gathered the little dog up into his arms. It appeared to be completely at ease with that situation. Ed sympathized. “Such as,” Roy said, straightening, “the fact that stairs are getting hard on his knees these days.” He shot Riza an offended look and stroked Hayate’s ears. A pink tongue unfurled. Roy looked like he’d won the lottery.

“You pass,” Riza said, looking like she was trying not to laugh. “You’ve earned your dog-sitting privileges. I’m so proud.”

“Me, too,” Roy said.

Riza leaned in and kissed the top of Hayate’s head, earned a face-lick in return, and scratched gently under his chin.

“You should probably see Ed and Winry off before I change my mind and take him with me,” she said.

“Oh, dear,” Roy said. He turned to them, grinning. “You heard the woman.”

Somehow—it was a miraculous adventure that involved Roy managing to secure Hayate in one arm so that he could assist with Ed’s luggage so that Ed could assist with Winry’s so that they could distribute all of it manageably, and Ed wouldn’t fall down the stairs and break his neck—they wrangled everything up to the platform, where they supposedly still had five minutes to wait before their train would arrive.

Ed was so... damn excited to get home to Al, and to spend some time with him that didn’t involve hospital air and mediocre coffee and a pervasive sense of lingering terror, but also—

He was really going to miss the dorkwad currently baby-talking someone else’s dog.

“Hey,” he said, and Roy’s attention snapped back to him. “I—you really... you don’t have to come visit if you don’t... I know it’s a long drive.”

“It isn’t really,” Roy said, smiling at him, “when it comes with the prospect of seeing you.”

“Oh, my God,” Winry said.

Ed glared at her.

“Sorry,” she said. “Carry on.”

Roy laughed. Ed hoped, sincerely, that one of these days he might get to a point like that—where
there wasn’t any shame lurking around in the corners of his own feelings; when effusive sappiness felt just as safe in public as it did behind closed doors. Where he could just revel in it, in this, in feeling good and feeling wanted, without fear of judgment or retribution.

“I’ll keep in touch,” Roy said. “I can’t wait to experience the wrath of your Christmas gift vengeance.”

“Good,” Ed said.

One of Roy’s hands freed itself from cradling the dog, the better to cup itself under the hinge of Ed’s jaw, and they were leaning in, and he was really and truly about to make out with his boyfriend in front of his sorta-sister, and—

And maybe this was the beginning of something, because when Roy’s mouth touched his, he forgot how to care about other people and a world outside of kissing this stupid-gorgeous bastard with everything he had.

Then there was something wet and warm against his chin, and he drew back instinctively, and—

Hayate panted, looking very pleased, and strained up out of Roy’s arms to try to lick Ed’s face again.


Ed hooked a finger behind one of Hayate’s ears and scritched until the tongue was lolling all over again. “Guess you’ve got competition now.”

“Crap,” Roy said. “He’s way cuter than me.”

Ed gave Roy an assessing look. “I dunno. You’re doing all right.”

Roy grinned at him. Ed felt his face heating up.

“You better go,” Ed said. “Riza’ll think you stole her dog.”

“It’s not like I haven’t been tempted,” Roy said. He brushed his knuckles against Ed’s cheek, smile tilting soft and sweet, and added, “Travel safe.”

“You, too,” Ed said, and then Roy was chirping a goodbye to Winry, and making a scandalized Hayate wave a paw, and then—

They’d shoved their luggage into the compartments for it, dropped down into a pair of seats, and were staring at each other as they waited for the all-clear whistle and the start of the rumbling ride home.

“Holy shit,” Winry said. “I can’t believe you’re schmoop-dating Campus Casanova.”

“I can’t believe you’re bi,” Ed said.

Winry pushed her hair back from her face. “Oh, crap. Is that—? Maybe I’m making an exception? Maybe—”

“Jesus,” Ed said. “This was only the first semester. We really went hard, didn’t we?”

Winry threw an arm around him for a half-hug. “We always do.”

“Yup,” Ed said.
“I can’t wait to tell Al you almost had a French-kiss threesome with Riza’s dog,” Winry said.

“I hate you,” Ed said. It wasn’t true, but it didn’t matter, because she was laughing too much to listen.

---

hey Casanova, all i want for christmas is some more sexy stories from you. you think santa will bring me some?

My dear nameless friend,

I believe the prevailing thought on that theme is that that depends on whether you’ve been good this year. And I’m afraid that hanging on my every word is not an especially promising sign, although I could be quite wrong there!

To get past the cutesy semantics and into the specifics, though, here’s the thing:

Life is where you end up when you’re not watching where you’re walking. I suspect that’s why so many significant personal events are described with idioms that involve ‘falling’, because it’s honestly a surprise that more of us don’t take a header into the void on a regular basis, given how little attention we pay to our feet.

I spent a long time wondering if I was ever going to wind up in a place like this, but the wondering left me so bitter that I gave up on the fond little dream of it after a while. And then – so long later, of course, that I’d let my guard down – it caught me completely by surprise. I suppose that tumbling ass over teakettle into it was my just comeuppance for trying to be arch and clever all the time.

The point is – I am standing at a juncture now, and for the first time in a very long time, every direction looks like something good. I think that has less to do with where I’m standing and more to do with the person standing beside me.

Maybe we’ll co-write some little snippets for you! Maybe you’ll get a guest writer who will betray all of my smothered secrets! Maybe I’ll dredge up some undiscovered gems from the old days and beg for help editing them, and try to turn it into a terrible sort of foreplay!

Or maybe – as you might be guessing – this place, as a refuge from reality and a back door out of loneliness, has served its purpose.

My greatest hope is that you will all find someone who will stand with you at the crossroads and hold your hand and shrug their shoulders, because every road that leads away is one that you can walk together, so it doesn’t really matter where you go.

Be safe. Have fun. Take care of each other, and yourselves.

Love,

Casanova x
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!